

The Use of Screencast Feedback to Enhance the Writing Performances: The Case of Second-year Students of English at Tebessa University

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ABSTRACT – Despite being convinced by the power of feedback to promote students' writing abilities as demonstrated by its application in language learning, however, some complaints concerning its use in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms still exist due to the different constraints that usually appear in such a context. Owing to advances in technology, teachers are now able to deal with formative feedback to assess the students' writing skills through the Screencast Feedback (ScF). To this end, this study explores the impact of ScF on students' writing regarding content, organisation, and grammar. A pre-experimental design was conducted with 32 second-year students enrolled in the Department of Literature and the English Language at Tebessa University, whose writing ability were tested before and after the implementation of the ScF. For an in-depth understanding, a structured focus group interview was conducted. Statistics showed an increase in the students' writing abilities. The students considered ScF supportive, much more personal, and a much more motivating tool.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, a wide-ranging discussion concerning feedback in EFL writing classes has gained attention among researchers and practitioners. During official meetings and coordination sessions, many teachers showed their inability to make some revisions to their students' writing due to many extraneous variables, including time constraints, heavy schedules, and overcrowded classrooms. Thus, giving feedback under these conditions may not be an option. Sometimes the given feedback is not accessible and intelligible as most teachers do not produce clear and precise feedback while remaining brief and appropriate for the students (Carless et al., 2011).

As the concept of educational technology has been seen as a necessary and valuable alternative in teaching (Gibson, 2002), it has been used in academic institutions to solve many educational problems (McCombs, 2000). Some problems correlated with the shortage of time to respond to the students' writing (Silva, 2006). Others are related to the enigmatic language used to transfer that feedback. In this tendency of globalisation, we can produce what we aim to say in a short period and in a more conversational way "... that allows for a greater degree of personalisation and subtlety than traditional written feedback" (Séror, 2012, p. 111).

Accordingly, the rationale behind this small-scale study is grounded on different considerations. One consideration is related to the fact that the field of educational technology is still in its early stages in some Algerian Universities (personal information: discussions at conferences).

Correspondingly, this study sheds some light on the feasibility of Screencast Feedback (ScF) in EFL writing classes. Accordingly, two research questions were addressed:

- (1) Does the ScF have a positive impact on the development of second-year students of English writing abilities?
- (2) How do second- year university students of English perceive ScF as a helping tool to receive teacher feedback?

Based on the above-stated questions, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

There will be significant differences in the students' paragraphs with regard to content, organisation, and grammar before and after the integration of ScF.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing

One of the skills associated with good language learners is to write proficiently in the target language. It is through writing that the students can achieve the different academic assignments (e.g., examinations, quizzes, projects, and homework assignments). The nature of writing falls within the tenets of both lower-order and higher-order skills. The former is related to acquiring some basic components such as handwriting, punctuation, and spelling. The latter, however, are related to different stages, including sequencing, planning, and expressing abstract ideas. This nature denotes that writing is a process and not a product; it requires several stages. Basically, there are four stages: prewriting, planning, writing, and revising drafts. Each of the four stages has different steps. The prewriting stage, for example, includes

choosing and narrowing a topic and brainstorming with its different techniques (listing, clustering, and freewriting). The second stage, planning (outlining), includes various steps, such as making sublists, writing the topic sentence (in case of paragraph writing) or a thesis statement (in case of essay writing), and a formal planning. The third and the fourth stages are concerned with writing and revising drafts: (a) writing the first rough draft, (b) revising the whole text issues that have to do with the meaning; which they can affect the paper as a whole (e.g., content, clarity, organisation, coherence, cohesion, etc.), (c) proofreading the second draft, and then (e) editing the local issues, that have to do with the word level and the sentence level (grammar, punctuation, and spelling). Finally, writing the final copy (Oshima & Hogue, 2006).

Given the above, Nunan (1989) claimed that writing is “an extremely complex, cognitive activity for all which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously” (p. 36). In other words, it is advisable to have a good mastery of the different writing components to produce an acceptable piece of writing.

FEEDBACK IN WRITING CLASSES

Controlling the different writing aspects sometimes requires some external instructions to refine what is produced. These external instructions are referred to as “feedback”. Feedback refers to any information that comes as a reaction to one’s performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This reaction can come from different readers (teachers, peers, or others), it may come in different modes (oral or written), and it may be conveyed into different forms: a simple statement, an imperative, a question, and hedging (Ferris, 1997). These forms are used to spotlight the existing problem. The following examples (personal examples used during in-class instructions) better exemplify the previous forms:

A statement: e.g., “The supporting sentences are not well developed.” or “The supporting sentences are not directly related to the topic sentence.”

An imperative: e.g., “...add more details over here...” or “Change the verb tense here.”

A question: e.g., “What do you exactly mean by *this*?” (In this case, *this* refers to the problem which has been circled/underlined) or “Do you think that the given example fit well with your supporting sentence?”

Hedging: e.g., “I think that the concluding sentence is neither a restatement of the topic sentence nor a summary of the different points discussed in the supporting sentences.” or “I think in your second supporting sentence, the verb and the subject do not agree.”

An important point to mention is that the process of feedback not only enables the feedback provider and the feedback receiver to learn from each other, but it can also help them discover the social nature of writing (Williams, 2003). In feedback, all that matters is social interaction which can break the monotony of writing classes, in which most often the tasks are achieved individually to save time and space (personal information: discussion at conferences). Usually, during this kind of social interaction activity, students often receive different perspectives and viewpoints. According to the received output, the feedback receiver is supposed to meet the feedback providers’ commentaries (especially when the nature of the existing problem is thoroughly explained).

As far as the feedback modes are concerned, oral and written, they seem to have the same function, but they still have some differences, especially at the level of time (the time when the feedback is given and the time taken to convey it). First, oral feedback is often given during a particular task “in the teachable moment,” and it does not require too much time as it is delivered in brief. Written feedback, however, invests too much time (Zamel, 1985); because it is neither given on the spot nor in a sketchy way (personal information: discussions at conferences). Ice et al. (2007) found that the mean time required of marginal¹ feedback takes approximately 13.43 (say 14 minutes) minutes per paper, which is a great deal of time, especially in large classrooms and EFL contexts.

SCREENCAST FEEDBACK IN EFL WRITING CLASSES

With the advent of technology, it is common to leverage the technology use in teaching and learning in developing EFL students’ writing skills. Therefore, feedback can be provided through screen-capture technology (e.g., ScF). Screencasting is “a method of capturing the actions performed on a computer (...). Using online screencasting tools, the video can be shared via e-mail attachment or a web link, or be uploaded to a server for continual use” (Carr & Ly, 2009, p. 409). ScF is also explained as a “... digital recording of users’ computer screen combined by voice narration to be submitted via electronic format (Word document, text file, Power Point presentation, Excel spread sheet, website, or video)” (Desouky Ali, 2016, p. 108). This kind of feedback encompasses visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic effects. These effects reflect the different learners’ dimensions, visual learners, auditory learners, and kinaesthetic learners (Rogers, 2000), where;

Visual learners are those who learn best through use of their visual sense and appear to be influenced by [colour], graphics and movement. Auditory learners learn best by hearing the material; while [kinaesthetic] learners best learn by activity or “doing” things related to the educational activity (Hoyer, 2004, p. 2).

From the above claims, the concept of ScF can be something of a stretch as it has a “dual-channel assumption” (Mayer & Moreno, 2003, p.43). This means that the information is passed through both the ears and the eyes to foster meaningful

¹ Marginal feedback is any feedback that is written in the page margin. This type of feedback is often given by the teacher.

learning (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). Therefore, the students can link between what they hear and see to decipher their teachers' comments.

ScF proves to be more useful than written feedback (Ghosn-Chelala & Al-Chibani, 2018). Desouky Ali (2016) carried out a mixed-methods approach to investigate the effect of ScF on developing the students' writing performances. She found that the ScF proved effective in improving students' essay writing skills with due regard to content, organisation, structure, and accuracy. Students as well have positively perceived the concept of ScF for being "clear, personal, specific, supportive, multimodal, constructive, and engaging" (Desouky Ali, p. 106). Other studies showed that this type of feedback contributed to support individualised, supportive, caring, clear detailed, unambiguous, promoting reflection, and constructive feedback (Henderson & Philips, 2015).

METHOD

Research Design

As stated earlier, the objective of this study was to explore the effect of the ScF on students' writing. Thus, we opted for a one-group pre-test–post-test design, where just one group was under investigation. The present research paper followed the explanatory sequential design of the mixed-methods approach. This design is concerned with collecting the qualitative data (the focus group interview) after the quantitative data (the pre-test and the post-test) (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

PARTICIPANTS

In an attempt to explore the effect of ScF on students' writing, 32 second-year university students (25 female and seven male) registered in the Department of Literature and the English language at Tebessa University (Algeria) have participated in the study. The rationale behind choosing these students was twofold. During the first term of the second-year, students are supposed to deal with paragraph writing before being introduced to essay writing in the second term. Hence, it would be feasible to acquire the basic skills or the fundamental units in academic writing to develop the paragraph writing before proceeding with essay writing. Besides, these students showed a high competency in the handling of technology (personal information: discussion in the classroom).

As far as the sampling technique is concerned, the convenient sampling technique was used due to the availability and easy access to the participants who belonged to an intact group (an already existing group).

INSTRUMENTS

This study used two main tools to collect data. As for the quantitative data, a pre-test and a post-test are set. The researchers designed the tests that were about writing argumentative paragraphs of no more than 10 lines about forced marriage and the struggles that the students in the USA may face. Students were allotted 60 minutes to write the assigned paragraphs. Both tests emphasised the three main writing aspects: content, organisation, and grammar. The tests were out of 15 (a full mark), that is, each writing aspect was scored out of five points and rated up to four levels (0-1: poor to fair, 1.25-2: fair to average, 2.25-3: average to good, 4: excellent).

After collecting and analysing the quantitative data, the researchers designed the required qualitative data. Hence, a structured focus group interview that comprised four questions was conducted with 10 students from the sample and it lasted for 40 minutes. The students' answers were recorded by the researcher's Smartphone and transcribed later on. We opted for the number ($N=10$) as it is recommended because of its practicality and appropriateness (Isaac & Michael, 1995; Hill, 1998). The rationale behind using a focus group interview was to further confirm the numerical data. Also, to better understand the way the participants have perceived the experience of the ScF, especially that during such interviews the information will be gathered from different perspectives and in an interactive atmosphere (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

PROCEDURES

The present study was achieved during one month (the students took three progress tests that were achieved in ordinary sessions) and through three phases. In Phase One, the students' pieces of writing were submitted electronically via email. In Phase Two, with the help of Jing Software (Figure 1), the teacher (the researcher herself) provided the necessary feedback concerning the writing areas that needed correction or reconsideration. In Phase Three, a link that contains the recorded video is sent via emails to each student. Once the link is clicked, a web browser will open and display the video.



Figure 1. A screenshot of the Jing software.

We were motivated to work with Jing Software (<https://www.screencast.com>) due to its low-cost, free to download, and practicality as we can instantly share our video-based commentaries with our students from our desktop to anywhere they are. It is, then, “a good alternative for those who want to experiment with video creation, but don’t want to invest a lot of money upfront and/or spend many hours learning a new piece of software” (Graham, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, this software limits the recording time to five minutes (as shown in Figure 2) which is seen as a reasonable time. This feature suggests that screencasting videos that exceed 10 minutes are usually considered too long (Dunne & Rodway-Dyer, 2009). The given time can help the feedback providers to focus only on the essential points that need further revision in a fast-paced online conversation.

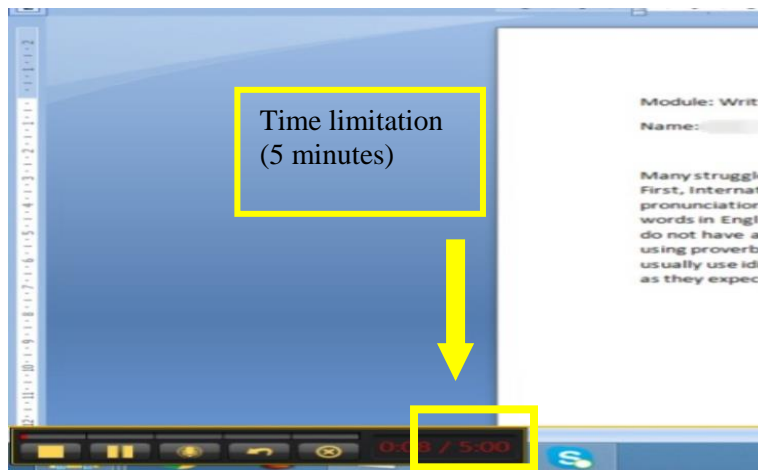


Figure 2. The Jing software time limitation.

To develop concise and precise screencasting videos, the researchers followed Whitehurst’s 2014 framework. Therefore, four steps (Figure 3) have been taken into account to create video-based feedback. The first step was devoted to greeting and thanking the students for sharing their papers to be reviewed. This was done to show the students that the screencast videos were made specifically for them to acknowledge their efforts and raise their motivation. The second step was concerned with commenting on the students’ writing. The emphasis was placed on content, organisation, and grammar². In this step, the errors committed have been highlighted with some possible improvements. In the third step, some useful resources that might help the students to overcome their deficiencies are also provided. Finally, in the fourth step, some “general closing remarks [were provided. They] usually include gratitude for sharing his or her writing” (Whitehurst, 2014, Para. 5).

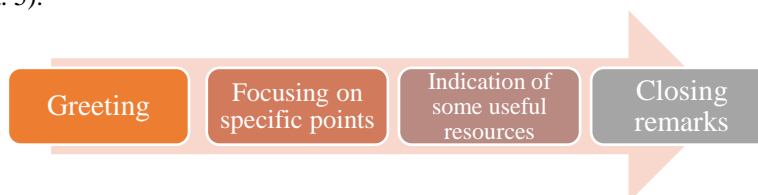


Figure 3. Steps of Providing Screencast Feedback
Source: Whitehurst, 2014.

² These aspects have been highlighted after interviewing the participants before the intervention application.

As far as providing feedback is concerned, we used a multidimensional representation of feedback. Figure 4 clearly shows that we have not only relied on the voice-based feature while screencasting our comments, but we have also coloured the problematic components to further insist on and attract our students' attention to the desired areas. Some comments have also been inserted to emphasise and make the comments straightforward and clear enough.

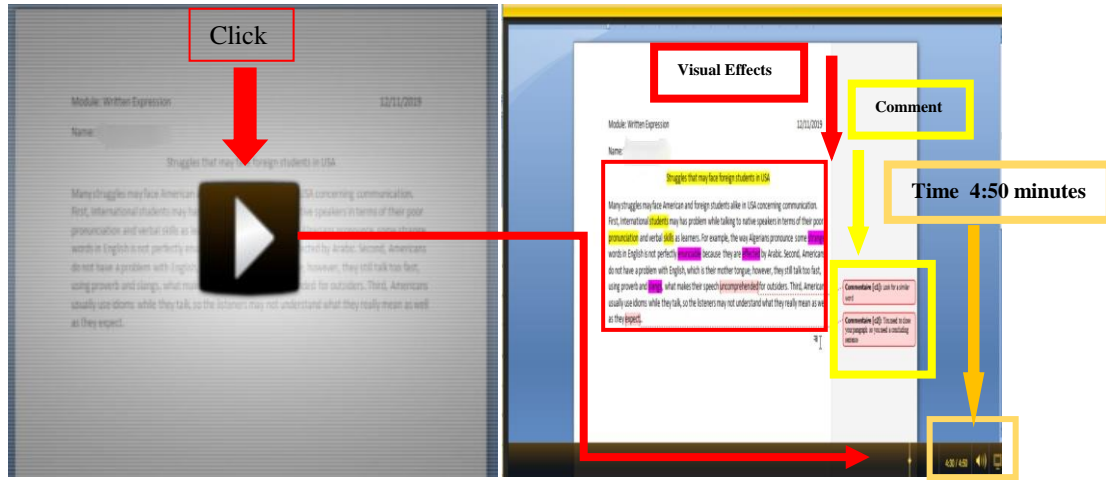


Figure 4. A screenshot of the teacher's video-based feedback to a student's paragraph in the Jing.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from the pre-test and the post-test were basically analysed using inferential statistical methods, including the mean scores, the Standard Deviation (SD), and the paired sample t-test "to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means [...] for pre-post comparisons" (Fraenkel et al., 2012, p. G-9). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 was used to analyse the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Data

After obtaining the students' scores (both of the pre-test and the post-test), the average mean scores are calculated. The average mean score of the pre-test is 8.53 with a SD of 1.792, while the mean score of the post-test is 11.77 with a SD of 2.265 (Table 1). The statistical data denote that the two mean scores are not similar as there is a noticeable difference (3.24) between them. The difference indicates that the students' writing have developed on the set of the mentioned components after the intervention.

Table 1. A difference in the students' means scores of the pre-test and the post-test.

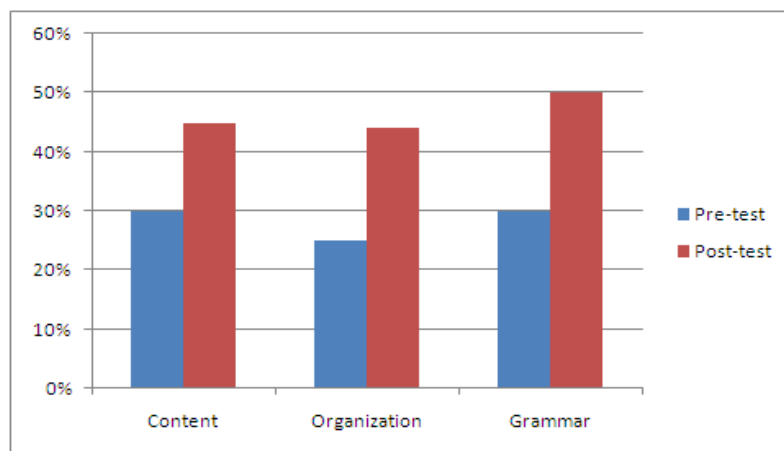
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. ErrorMean
Pretest	32	8.53	1.729	.306
Posttest	32	11.77	2.265	.400

As the two mean scores were obtained from the same group of participants, a paired sample t-test was seen as appropriate due to its feasibility as these scores cannot be independent of each other (Pallant, 2007; Kinnear & Gray, 2012; Larson-Hall, 2016). So, as mentioned above, a paired sample t-test was run to further confirm if there is a statistical difference between the pre-test and the post-test results. Table 2 shows that the t-value is (-6.224) with a degree of freedom of (31). This latter is correlated to a small value (0.000), which is less than the p-value (0.05). Based on these findings, we can answer the first question stated earlier. Hence, ScF has a positive impact on the second-year students of English writing as the difference between the two mean scores is statistically significant, and thus, screencast videos prove well in writing classes.

Table 2. Paired Sample Test.

	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest – posttest	-3.234	2.940	.520	-4.294	-2.175	-6,224	31	,000

Using the SPSS Version 23, a comparison between the mean scores of the different writing aspects has been made. Their mean scores are converted into percentages with a simple mathematical equation. The difference between the pre-test and the post-test on the set of the aspects is shown in Figure 5. This figure shows that the students' writing performances have been improved in almost the target writing aspects. It can be seen that after the intervention, the students' paragraphs are more grammatically correct, as they have recorded a high improvement in that writing aspect compared to content and organisation. This result denotes that both writing aspects (content and organisation) require a long period to be developed (personal information: discussion at conferences). This difference put us in a position upon which we confirm the validity of the hypothesis stated earlier.

**Figure 5.** A comparison between the group's pre-test and post-test on the set of aspects.

QUALITATIVE DATA

After obtaining the qualitative data, a thematic content analysis was applied to transcribe the students' focus group interview answers. We have opted for the thematic content analysis technique due to its wide use and feasibility in social sciences (Given, 2008). This technique allows the researchers to find the common themes across the data set (the data set of this study are the students' excerpts). Therefore, texts tend to be broken into clusters or codes that should be translated into "themes" (Given, 2008). The following items answer the second designed question: *how do second-year university students of English perceive ScF as a helping tool to receive teacher feedback?*

HEARING OVER READING

Reading comments usually requires more time to decipher the intended message as the students find themselves obliged to make a link between what is received in terms of feedback and their input. Students claimed that sometimes it was hard to understand the teachers' codes until they were fed up and stopped revising their work. That is why the interviewees reported that hearing the provided comments was helpful enough. Moreover, the visual effects and highlights in screencasting helped them deal effectively with the previous inability, especially when the researcher captured the cursor movements while emphasising the annotations, as she was scrolling up and down. Their answers denote the importance of non-verbal language (body language, eye contact, gestures, and paralinguistic such as tone and pitch of the voice and facial expressions), which supports and reinforces the feedback providers' output. Most often, non-verbal communication comes to regulate the flow of communication. What the students have reported has successfully confirmed what has been described by previous researchers who believe that students with visual abilities are enjoying the combination of written and spoken feedback (Rogers, 2000; Hoyer, 2004; Desouky Ali, 2016).

PERSONAL LEARNING PACE

The interviewees came to a consensus over the concept of learning at their own pace. They saw that the ScF helped them listening to the provided feedback based on their abilities, unlike the case of listening to the face-to-face oral feedback where the majority are left behind or even lost because they could be absent-minded or even not caring too

much about what is said. Based on what has been reported, the researchers found that the ScF goes well with students of different abilities (e.g., lower-level students, average-level students, and upper-level students), especially those with limited abilities and who do usually take great efforts to refine their works with due regard to the received teacher feedback. The following excerpts³ exemplify the idea.

Excerpt One, Student F:

“Frankly speaking..... I had a kind of self-control over your ScF video since I was able to pause, rewind, uh uh uh replay the video as much as I can in order to go over what I didn't really understand unlike receiving orally your comments [...] where I can't [pause] stop you whenever I want, because I felt afraid when interrupting you, and in case of written feedback sometimes I just uh uh uh uh skip what you wrote because of the ambiguity of your comment or because of my negligence.”

Excerpt Two, Student D:

“.... I consider myself a slow language learner as I usually uh uh uh uh struggle to acquire the learning material [pause] because I don't possess the required uh uh uh uh skills that can help me to uh uh uh let me say decode the received feedback to improve my writing uh uh uh uh uh [...]. But, when I experience the screencasting feedback [pause] everything seems to fit my learning abilities [pause] I make pauses whenever I want, I uh uh uh uh try to go backward and forward [pause] uh uh uh uh you know just in order to grasp what you have provided in the video. That's why; I believe that the screencasting video goes side by side with my own abilities.”

The students' opinions concerning ScF validate some previous researchers' findings. Lee (2017), for instance, claimed that “one advantage of ScF is that students can view the videos as often as they like, pausing at any time [...], and repeating parts that they are not clear about” (p. 131). Thus, pausing and rewinding are two options that could be used in ScF whenever necessary (Cranny, 2016). This means that whenever the students find themselves unable to understand a particular point. They can go over the given feedback repeatedly until they reach a satisfactory version of their pieces of writing.

SELF-DIRECTION

The students reported that they became more self-directed as they pushed themselves to take full charge in deciphering the provided feedback. They claimed that this method has driven them to manage their own learning. By questioning and reasoning, they were able to review their writing according to the received feedback as there was no chance to ask someone else for help as everyone is in charge of his/her own work (as reported by them). The following excerpts further clarify this point.

Excerpt Three, Student B:

“While watching your feedback in a video-based dimension, uh uh uh uh I felt that I'm the only owner of my learning process as I [pause] was listening to what you said trying to guess what you exactly mean from the tone uh uh uh uh of your voice, uh uh uh uh and from the coloured areas, as I was lonely with only my PC, the effects, and your voice, so I [pause] had no choice to ask someone else for further clarification, and as we were restricted by a deadline to review our work, uh uh uh uh I felt the urge uh uh uh uh to think independently in order to achieve the given assignment.”

Excerpt Four, Student I:

“... When I receive in-class feedback [pause], I usually ask someone of my peers to give me a hand in revising uh uh uh my writing according to my teacher's feedback. However, when I [pause] receive video-based feedback, everything becomes different as uh uh uh uh I find myself obliged to revise my own work without having any external help. I become [pause] more independent, trying to do all the work and organise everything alone. I think any out-class activity can urge us to [pause] let me say direct our own learning as there is no possibility to ask someone else because every one of us is in his comfort zone [...] concerned with his/her own task. So, no one is free.... ”

After being exposed to the intervention, the students under investigation have scored well and have also reported some positive attitudes toward the use of ScF. This implies the usefulness and the feasibility of this method in EFL writing classes. Thus, the addressed questions are answered, and the formulated hypothesis is confirmed.

Drawing on our own experience, we have saved some time to a far extent as we have moved some of the “in-class” feedback to “out-class” feedback, and from oral, and written to video-based feedback. Students' papers are reviewed whenever the teacher-researcher is free. As for the review process, it was developed in a short period of time as opposed to written feedback which usually takes much more time (see above in the section of feedback in writing classes). Indeed, many researchers, including Sérór (2012) considered ScF a “time saving interface” (p. 105).

³ This excerpt was randomly chosen to be presented as a sample of the students' answers (the same thing with Excerpt Two, Three, and Four).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

During the intervention, some challenges occurred. One of the challenges is the slow speed of the internet connectivity, which created a problem of downloading. Saving the recorded videos as an SWF (an Adobe Flash file format used for multimedia) video file was another challenge, as it caused an inability to play these videos. In this case, a Macromedia Flash, a program that creates animated media, should be installed on one's computer. Because some participants did not have this program, I converted the videos to an MP4 format which is likely to be used and opened on different platforms. As far as the slow connectivity is concerned, I shared the created videos using a USB stick.



Figure 6. A screenshot of a saved video.

Based on the limitations that have been identified, some suggestions are provided as follows:

As the concept of generalisability would contribute to the internal validity of any study, further studies might imply an adequate sampling technique that best generalises its findings. Second, the present study could not be fully explored in a long time as it has been conducted in only one month, future researchers can then make a longitudinal study that can better confirm the results of the present study. The researchers have used a free version of Jing software as it was impossible to purchase a paid version of other Software. Camtasia, Open Broadcaster, ScreenToaster, Snagit, Screen-O-Matic, CamStudio, and more are good instances of Pro versions that provide more options and have more altering features. The short videos (say five minutes) sometimes seem insufficient, especially when the submitted assignments are erroneous or long. Future studies can also explore the effectiveness of ScF in developing other skills to validate the feasibility of such a method in all aspects of language learning.

CONCLUSION

The statistical data quantify the change that has been occurred in the students' writing performances with due regard to a set of components before and after the intervention takes place. From the qualitative data, the use of ScF helped the students to improve their writing because of some factors. The auditory-visual function, for instance, enabled the students to listen to the teacher's comments and carefully consider every word in the provided feedback. Again, the auditory function provides the students with an opportunity to listen to the given feedback at their convenience (Excerpt One, Student F and Excerpt Two, Student D). This denotes that the students had enough control over the video pace as they could go forwards and backward. ScF has also helped the students to become more independent to review their work, because once at home they are entirely depending on themselves.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from what has been investigated is that some changes can be now approached in language classrooms; this change can then reshape our perspectives concerning the teacher-student interaction during feedback instructions. However, ScF is not an ultimate solution to the pedagogical issues that we usually face when we produce and give our feedback in writing classes, but it is rather one way of the technology-enhanced feedback that could bridge the gap that was left by previous standard approaches.

Future researchers can build on the contribution of this small-scale study different research papers that could expand the scope of the current investigation.

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