

EXPLORING STUDENTS' PREFERENCES ON A TEACHER'S WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN A HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract: Teachers' written feedback is essential due to the complexity of writing rules. However, students are sometimes dissatisfied because they do not fully understand teacher's expectations. This study explores students' preferences regarding the focus and strategy of teachers' written feedback, particularly comparing high and low achievers. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews involving one English teacher and nine third-grade students at a senior high school in Bandung, West Java. The findings showed that students' language ability did not affect their preferences. Both high and low achievers preferred form-focused feedback, especially on grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics, to content-focused feedback. This is mainly because of their grammatical difficulties and the teacher's form-oriented feedback style. In terms of strategy, both groups preferred indirect feedback, such as underlining, symbols, and codes, as these encouraged self-correction and reflective learning. However, some students found the codes difficult to interpret and appreciated direct feedback in certain cases. The study emphasizes the need to balance form- and content-focused feedback and to combine direct and indirect feedback strategies to address diverse students' needs. These findings suggest EFL teachers to design feedback that effectively supports students' writing development

Keywords: teacher written feedback; form-focused; content-focused; direct feedback; indirect feedback; preferences.

Abstrak: Umpan balik tertulis dari guru sangat penting karena kompleksitas aturan dalam menulis. Namun, siswa sering merasa tidak puas karena mereka tidak sepenuhnya memahami harapan guru. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi preferensi siswa terhadap fokus dan strategi umpan balik tertulis dari guru, dengan membandingkan siswa berprestasi tinggi dan rendah. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan data yang diperoleh melalui analisis dokumen dan wawancara semi terstruktur terhadap satu guru bahasa Inggris dan sembilan siswa kelas tiga di salah satu SMA di Bandung, Jawa Barat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan bahasa siswa tidak mempengaruhi preferensi mereka. Siswa berprestasi tinggi dan rendah lebih menyukai umpan balik yang berfokus pada isi. Preferensi ini dipengaruhi oleh kesulitan siswa dalam tata bahasa dan gaya umpan balik guru yang berorientasi pada bentuk. Terkait dengan strategi umpan balik, kedua kelompok lebih menyukai umpan balik tidak langsung seperti garis bawah, simbol, dan kode, karena dapat mendorong koreksi mandiri dan pembelajaran reflektif. Namun, sebagian siswa mengalami kesulitan memahami kode sehingga memilih umpan balik langsung dalam situasi tertentu. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya keseimbangan antara fokus bentuk dan isi serta kombinasi umpan balik langsung dan tidak langsung untuk memenuhi kebutuhan belajar siswa. Umpan balik langsung dan tidak langsung agar sesuai dengan kebutuhan belajar yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: umpan balik tertulis guru; berfokus pada bentuk, berfokus pada isi; umpan balik langsung; umpan balik tidak langsung; preferensi.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is considered to be the most challenging skill to acquire, especially for foreign language students. They tend to make errors because of their "ignorance, nescience, unconsciousness, and unawareness" (Pertiwi & Ashadi, 2024). This may happen since they struggle with complex writing rules, including "rhetorical structures, words, organization, paragraph coherence, punctuation, spelling, and grammar" (Pertiwi & Ashadi, 2024)]. In this regard, students need guidance to produce more meaningful writing.

Therefore, providing teachers' written feedback is one way to help students improve their writing ability since teachers are viewed as "feedback providers" (Widyasari et al., 2021). Feedback itself can be defined as a tool used by teachers in language education and applied linguistics to assist effective language learning and conquering language acquisition (Nakata et al., 2025). Then, written feedback refers to comments and corrections made on a student's written assignment (Maniam & Shah, 2021). This is important as students can learn about their strengths and weaknesses (Putri et al., 2021), recognize their achievements, identify improvement areas, and provide guidance and instructions to develop their writing (Çiçek & Kayaoğlu, 2024). The feedback is important as a scaffolding that encourages students to acquire and assimilate new ideas to connect their current performance and the potential learning outcome that they can attain (Alhumaid, 2023).

There are at least five purposes of giving feedback. These include "providing information for both teacher and student, providing the student with learning advice, providing students with language input, providing motivation, and leading students toward autonomy" (Yunita & Kusuma, 2023).

However, sometimes, there is an issue when students are dissatisfied with the written feedback because they do not comprehend what the teachers are expecting of them (Aridah et al., 2017). Students, sometimes, do not view the teachers' written feedback beliefs and practices as helpful and effective (Aridah et al., 2017).

Thus, it is beneficial to gain an understanding of students' preferences on teachers' written feedback practices by considering students' characteristics and needs (Ramadhani et al., 2021), especially for the focus and strategy of giving the feedback. This might allow teachers to select suitable "appropriate feedback delivering strategies and material reinforcement" (Susilawati et al., 2024). Therefore, the students will perceive feedback as a meaningful strategy to improve their writing. They will be motivated to correct their mistakes, which promotes independent learning (Adrefiza & Habizar, 2023).

There are many studies investigating students' preferences towards teachers' written feedback. The findings of (Westmacott, 2017)'s study indicated that the students preferred indirect feedback because it leads to "deeper cognitive processing and learning" and perceived grammatical knowledge as the most effective focus of feedback. Ramadhani et al. (2021) argued that students' most preferred type of written corrective feedback was direct corrective feedback, and the most preferred type of error that should be corrected by the students is grammatical error.

A study conducted by Jinowat & Wiboolyasarin (2022) revealed that direct feedback was the most preferred strategy of giving feedback, and grammatical errors were the most preferred focus of written feedback. Then, of the study conducted by Mamad & Vigh (2024) showed the students' preferences on written feedback in the higher education context. The results indicated that students showed a big preference for receiving written corrective feedback. The students consider the feedback to be valuable and important. Furthermore, a study by Almanea (2025) was conducted to find out EFL learners' preferences and perceptions of their teacher's written corrective feedback in a university context. This study was done by using a mixed-method approach. Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. This research unveiled that the students believed that teacher feedback was valuable and had a vital role in the students' writing development. The students mostly chose comprehensive feedback that related to aspects of writing like language, content, organization, and overall quality. The students picked a combination of direct and indirect feedback methods.

Lastly, Farangi et al. (2025) conducted mixed-method research about EFL students' preferences for written feedback at two universities. The students wanted their errors to be corrected. The students were Field Independence and Field Dependence (FI/FD). FI students valued indirect feedback with autonomy, and FD students chose explicit corrections.

However, none of these studies investigates the low and high achievers' preferences on the focus and strategies of teachers' written feedback. As stated by Pertiwi & Ashadi (2024), different language learning abilities may have an impact on the students' preferences for the written feedback. Therefore, this study aims to explore both high and low achievers' preferences on a teacher's written feedback in a high school context at one senior high school in Bandung, West Java. Specifically, this study intends to answer the following research questions:

- a. What are the students' preferences for the focus of the teacher's written feedback?
- b. What are the students' preferences for the strategies of the teacher's written feedback?

RESEARCHMETHOD

Research Design

The research employed a qualitative approach as it allowed for an in-depth examination of the students' meanings, perspectives, and experiences participating in the research. Besides, as the research required a thorough understanding of students' preferences for written feedback from the teacher, the qualitative approach was more appropriate for structured evaluation of variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). More specifically, a case study design was used because of its ability to provide a comprehensive analysis of a phenomenon within a specific context and timeframe, as had been done in this research. Moreover, the research was done in one high school in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, for two reasons. First, it was conducted at a senior high school that was significant to the research context. Second, the site was easily accessible, making data gathering easier. Because of those reasons, the qualitative case study was appropriate and beneficial for comprehending environments, such as the high school context in Bandung, West Java.

Participants

The research involved one English teacher and nine third-grade students from her class, for 10 participants. Those participants were selected through purposive sampling, as they were deemed suitable to provide significant data and information. Then, given that the research focused on writing and the syllabus mandated student writing, the examination of the teacher's written feedback was relevant. The teacher was chosen because she provided written feedback on the students' compositions. After that, the nine students were selected for their involvement, restricted from the teacher's provision of written feedback related to the study's focus, so they supplied the necessary information for the research. They were classified as high or low achievers according to their grammar scores on the TOEFL test. Five students who attained scores between 53 and 56 were classified as high achievers, and the other four students who attained scores ranging from 44 to 50 were classified as low achievers.

Data Collection Techniques and Instrument Development

Two data collection techniques were used to explore the students' references to their teacher's written feedback. The document analysis was utilized to ascertain the teacher's principal focus and strategies for delivering written feedback on the students' writing (See Figure 1) (Leavy, 2017). The students were asked to write discussion texts about a controversial topic, and they were also told that they could choose what they wrote about. The subject must be both familiar and engaging to them. The teacher indicated that selecting an engaging topic would motivate the students to seek out sources. They were permitted to create their compositions grounded in their concepts.



Figure 1. Document Analysis Development

Second, semi-structured interviews were utilized as they facilitated the comparison of participants' responses while also permitting flexibility for deeper exploration based on the interview's line (See Figure 2.) (Garaika & Darmanah, 2019; Alamri, 2019). The teacher and nine students were interviewed. The teacher was asked thirteen questions. The first three were meant to get general information about her thoughts and experiences teaching English at the research site. The teacher then asked two questions about how she generally feels about giving feedback. Additionally, eight questions were posed to gather insights regarding her feedback emphasis, written feedback methodologies, and her anticipations for the students concerning the written feedback practices.

Twelve questions were asked to elucidate and thoroughly investigate students' preferences regarding the focus and strategies of the teacher's written feedback. The interviews began with two main questions to get the students' general thoughts on learning English. Then, there were two questions about how important the teacher's written feedback was to them. Additionally, eight other inquiries were made to elucidate the emphasis and methodologies of the teacher's written feedback from the students' perspectives, encompassing their preferences regarding the focus and strategies utilized by the teacher and their expectations for the teacher's written feedback practices. Every interview lasted for a minimum of 15 minutes. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* to enable participants to articulate their explanations in their native language. The interview data were presented verbatim as well. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, summarized, and translated into English to address the research questions that can be seen in Figure 2 below:

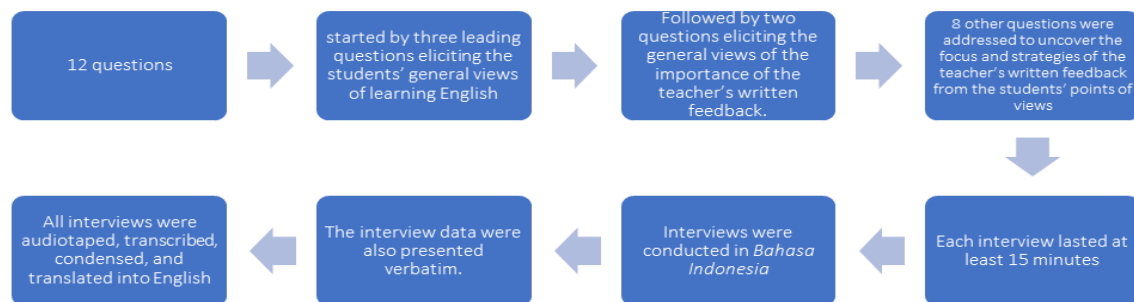


Figure 2. Interview Procedures

Moreover, the interview questions are presented in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2. Interview Questions

Interview Questions
<p>General information about English</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you like learning English? Why? 2. Is writing difficult for you? Why? <p>General information about feedback</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. In your opinion, is the written feedback given by your teacher important? If yes, what are the advantages of the written feedback on your writing? 4. In your opinion, what are your teacher's purposes on giving the written feedback on your writing? <p>Content-focused feedback:</p> <p>Organization</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. What did your teacher do when giving the written feedback on the organization of your writing? <p>Content</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. What did your teacher do when giving written feedback on the information or ideas in your writing? <p>Form-focused feedback:</p> <p>Grammar</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. What did your teacher do when giving written feedback on the grammar in your writing? <p>Vocabulary</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. What did your teacher do when giving written feedback on the vocabulary in your writing? <p>Mechanics</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. What did your teacher do when giving written feedback on the punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in your writing? <p>Teacher's written feedback focus</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. In your opinion, which of these aspects did your teacher paid great attention to? <p>Teacher's preference for the written feedback focuses and strategies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. In your opinion, which kind of feedback is very helpful for your writing improvement? <p>Students' expectation for the teacher's written feedback</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Apa harapanmu terhadap gurumu dalam memberikan feedback tertulis terhadap karanganmu? (What are your expectations for your teacher's written feedback on your writing?)

The research utilized inductive analysis, a methodological approach that identified categories and patterns directly from the collected data. It showed that the categories or patterns were not set up before the data was collected; they came up naturally during the analysis. Edmonds & Kennedy (2017) assert that inductive analysis facilitates attaining results that authentically correspond with field data, rather than enforcing a pre-established framework. The main data source came from the texts of discussions that students wrote. The teacher had previously provided written feedback on these texts. The students' revisions were examined to identify their preferences regarding the focus areas and emphasized several aspects by the teacher, such as grammar, structure, and content. The teacher also emphasized the feedback strategies, in which the methods employed by the teacher included direct corrections or general comments. The analysis elucidated the aspects of the teacher's feedback that the students favored and its impact on their revisions. The secondary data source was derived from interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed for more detailed analysis. Then the transcribed data were classified based on students' preferences regarding the emphasis and methods utilized by the teacher in providing written feedback. The categorization process aims to gain insights into students' perceptions of the feedback they receive and identify what they consider most and least beneficial.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Preferences for the Focus of Teacher's Written Feedback

The main result from the document analysis and interviews revealed the same answer that both high and low achievers prefer form-focused feedback to content-focused feedback. The results of their revisions showed that the students directly corrected their errors when the teacher gave feedback on form, as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Examples of Students' Revisions after Receiving Form-focused Feedback

No.	Before receiving written feedback	The teacher's written feedback focus	After receiving written feedback	Comments
1.	<i>This also become reference for the government to...</i>	<i>This also become reference for the government to</i>	<i>This also become ^{the} reference for the government to...</i>	<i>the</i> was directly added after the teacher gave form-focused feedback
2.	<i>If their children got a lower score,...</i>	<i>If their children ^T got a lower score,...</i>	<i>If their children get a lower score,...</i>	<i>got</i> (past tense) was directly changed into <i>get</i> (present tense)

In the first example, the student added article *the* after the teacher gave feedback by writing *the* before the word *reference*. Similarly, in the second example, the student also directly changed *got* into *get* after the teacher wrote the code *T* (tense) above the verb *got* written by the student.

Conversely, when the teacher gave feedback on content, some of the students failed to revise the content of their compositions as intended by the teacher. For example, when one student wrote *Moreover, games on FB usually addicted the players. So it can waste their time and money*, the teacher provided content-focused feedback by writing *Do you have supporting data from other source to support your arguments*. However, in the second draft, the student did not include the supporting data although the teacher asked her to strengthen her arguments.

Moreover, the results of the data from interviews revealed that both high and low achievers believed that form-focused feedback was more beneficial for facilitating their writing skill development, as can be seen from the interview answers below.

- S #1 : I prefer feedback on vocabulary because as a student, I sometimes did not carefully think the words I used. In fact, there is a rule on the word usage. This word is suitable for this context (high achiever)
- S #2 : The accurate word usage
e.g., fix & repair (high achiever)

- S # 8 :Feedback on correction of the inappropriate use of mechanics and grammar, but it is easy to understand (low achiever)
- S #3 :The use of grammar and vocabulary... for example, for this writing, there are other words that can be used, except the word that I use now. I prefer the feedback for this aspect (high achiever)

In the first and second excerpts, the students argued that they wanted the teacher to give feedback on *vocabulary*, especially on alternative *word choice*. This may happen because some words may have the same meaning, but they cannot be used in the same context. In the third example, the student expressed her preference for the feedback on *spelling* and *grammar*. Meanwhile, in the last example, the student wanted the teacher to focus on *vocabulary* and *grammar*. These excerpts indicate the students' preference for the form-focused feedback since *vocabulary*, *spelling*, and *grammar* are included in this category.

The students' preferences for the form-focused feedback may have resulted from the difficulties they faced on the grammar issue, as expressed in:

- S #5 : The pronunciation of the English words is different from Indonesian words. Thus, in writing, I doubted whether the grammar I used was correct or not, I was just questioning. 'Does this sentence use past tense or present tense?'

In this excerpt, the student argued that writing was difficult because of the *grammar*, especially in using different tenses. This also validates the teacher's statement, as in:

I have ever talked with the students, then, they argued that grammar was the first difficult aspect of writing. They always told that the difficulty was on the use of the correct tenses.

It contradicts the result of a study conducted by Alhumaid (2023) that the focus of the feedback should consider the students' writing proficiency, in which the feedback on low achievers' writing should focus on form, while the feedback on high achievers' writing should focus on content.

This confirms the finding of previous studies that students preferred form-focused feedback to be pointed out in their compositions as it helps them correct their mistakes and directly contributes to their writing skills (Maniam & Shah, 2021; Çiçek & Kayaoğlu, 2024; Alhumaid, 2023; Ramadhani et al., 2021; Susilawati et al., 2024; Almanea, 2025; Tom et al., 2013; Deng et al., 2022; Rasool et al., 2023; Adzhar & Sazalli, 2024; but in contrast with the former studies which revealed that students preferred content-focused feedback rather than form-focused feedback (Yunita & Kusuma, 2023; Cahyani & Murtafi'ah, 2022).

The preference for grammar may have resulted from the teacher's style and behavior, which focuses on form when giving feedback on the students' writing. In other words, the teacher's emphasis on a particular aspect of writing influenced the students' views on what should be the focus of the feedback (Çiçek & Kayaoğlu, 2024).

Moreover, the students' preferences for form-focused feedback may also be influenced by their views that the teacher is the "best source of help" (Rasool et al., 2023). It can be implied that the teacher's tendency to focus on the formal features of writing seems to fulfill the students' preferences or expectations.

Despite the preference for form-focused feedback, the students also valued the content-focused feedback, especially the *ideas*, as in: *I prefer the feedback that clearly explains how to revise the composition in terms of ideas*. This argument also indicates that the students need content-focused feedback in addition to form-focused feedback. As found in a study conducted by Rasool et al. (2023), the students also want to get content-focused feedback besides the form-focused feedback.

Based on the explanation above, it is important that the students prefer form-focused feedback. However, the students should take into account that writing is not only related to achieving the accuracy of writing, but also its fluency, because writing is much more about how to express ideas (Aridah et al., 2017). Hence, the students need to pay more attention to the content-focused feedback as it contributes to the development of their writing skills.

Students' Preferences for the Strategy of Teacher's Written Feedback

When asked about their preferences for the teacher's strategy in giving the written feedback, both high and low achievers agreed that indirect feedback was the most important strategy for facilitating their writing skill development. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

- S #2 : underlined, question marks are given, then, brackets and cross marks... (high achiever)
S #5 : circled or underlined (high achiever)
S #7 : underlined (high achiever)
S #9 : circled and question marks are given (low achiever)

In these excerpts, the students argued that they preferred indirect feedback, especially for the use of symbols, such as underlining symbols, question marks, brackets, and cross symbols. The interview data reveal two reasons for the preference for indirect feedback. First, it allows students to find the errors themselves, which gives them insight into the area of mistakes, as stated below.

- S #8 : so, first, we can find our mistakes ourselves. If it (feedback) is given directly, we tend to follow it directly, so it is not clear our mistakes in what area.

In the excerpt, the student argued that, by receiving the indirect feedback, she had an opportunity to find out the errors herself. This confirms the findings of previous studies that indirect feedback allows students to get involved in the process of revising their compositions [12].

Second, indirect feedback contributes to the long-term effect of learning, as in:

- S #4 :I will remember for a long time the area of mistakes when I corrected the errors myself

This implies that the indirect feedback gives long-term benefits for the students' writing ability because they are actively involved in "finding, correcting, and eventually avoiding errors" (Pertiwi & Ashadi, 2024).

Thus, the preference for the indirect feedback implies that the students are aware of the advantages of this type of strategy. First, the indirect feedback encourages them to get involved in "guided learning and problem-solving" (Almanea, 2025; Ferris, 2006). Second, the students are encouraged to be self-editors of their own writing (Almanea, 2025; Ferris, 2006). Third, the students are engaged in the process of reflective learning (Ferris, 2006; Ferris, 2011; Almohawes, 2025a) in which they evaluate their own writing (Rasool et al., 2023) by correcting the errors and learning from their mistakes (Ferris, 2011; Almanea, 2025).

The students' preferences for the indirect feedback, in this study, support a large body of research that views indirect feedback as an effective strategy in developing the students' writing skills (Westmacott, 2017); (Kamilia et al., 2020; Chandler, 2003; Lee, 2004; & Ngai, 2009) and reject the view for the effectiveness of the direct feedback (Pertiwi & Ashadi, 2024; Aridah et al., 2017; Ramadhani et al., 2021; Adrefiza & Habizar, 2023; Cahyani & Murtafi'ah, 2022; & Almohawes, 2025).

However, in spite of the students' preferences for the indirect feedback, they also argued for the difficulties in understanding the indirect feedback strategy, especially symbols and codes, as in the following excerpts:

- S#3 : I did not understand the circle given by the teacher, why it was circled. I kept thinking about it.
S#7 : for example, the teachers just gave a circle between the words. We got confused. We wondered whether the intention was to punctuation, further words, or what.
S#2 : I did not understand them (the codes). 'What is WW?' Then, 'What is WS'
S#5 : the most difficult one was the codes. I did have idea on how to correct them (the errors). Sometimes, it was beyond my thought because we thought they were correct

Furthermore, beside the use of the indirect feedback, the students also expressed their positive value on the direct feedback, as in:

- S #6 : It is better directly. If codes are given, there is a possibility to make mistakes. It should be like 'this', but we think differently. So, we make mistakes again. It is better to correct it directly. So, we revise it once, but we will always remember it.

The excerpt shows that the student also preferred the direct feedback as it gave the correct form of the errors she committed. She also argued that direct feedback was useful to prevent her from making the same mistake in future writing. She also emphasized that the use of codes, as an indirect feedback strategy, only gave misunderstanding since she was not sure whether what she thought was the same as the teacher's intention in giving the codes. This indicates that indirect feedback is time-consuming since the students should internalize and interpret the feedback and have to confirm their understanding to the teacher (Susilawati et al., 2024).

The preference for the direct feedback, in this regard, may have resulted from the "untreatable errors" received by the students (Ferris, 2011; Ferris, 2003) in which there is no guideline that can be applied by the students to correct their errors if the indirect feedback is given, particularly on "word choice, word form, and awkward or unidiomatic sentence structure" (Ferris, 2011). In this case, as suggested by Ferris (2003), giving direct correction is more advantageous as it is difficult for them to understand the feedback if it is given indirectly.

Based on the explanation above, it is important that the students prefer the indirect feedback since it engages them in guided learning (Ramadhani et al., 2021; (Lalande, 1982; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), problem-solving (Ferris, 2006); (Lee, 2008), self-editing (Maniam & Shah, 2021; Yunita & Kusuma, 2023; Kamilia et al., 2020), and reflective learning (Ferris, 2006); (Ferris, 2011). However, they sometimes cannot neglect the direct feedback as it also has its own role for coping with the untreatable errors found in their texts (Ferris, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The research examines the teacher's written feedback on high and low achievers' writing, including the teacher's focus and strategies and the students' preferences. Based on the findings, it was found that the teacher prioritized form-focused feedback, particularly grammar, when giving the two groups of students written feedback, while also focusing on content. Then, the teacher used indirect feedback, especially symbols and codes, more often for the two student groups. The findings also show that the teacher was inconsistent in using the codes due to her lack of experience. After that, high and low achievers preferred form-focused feedback over content-focused feedback, especially grammar, which was the teacher's main focus in writing feedback. Bahasa Indonesia's lack of verb tenses confused students, influencing their preference. Lastly, high and low achievers preferred indirect feedback, especially symbols, which matched the teacher's most common written feedback strategy.

Moreover, the research also had several limitations. First, due to the complexity of the analyses, the study had a small sample size. Only nine students who had participated were divided into high and low achievers, which limited inference validity. More participants would be more valid, and the results can be generalized. Second, the lack of peer-reviewed data analyses is another limitation. Due to the teacher's data analysis, the researcher could make mistakes. Multiple analysts' analyses would be more credible.

Finally, there are four suggestions that can be done for future research. First, future research can include a larger and more varied group of participants from different grade levels, schools, and educational backgrounds so that the data will provide a more comprehensive understanding of feedback preferences and enhance the generalizability of the results. Second, more data collection techniques can be done, such as writing tests and questionnaires, to gather more and deeper analysis. Lastly, the mixed-method can also be applied to see the students' perspectives and how the feedback affects their writing texts.

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