

The Impact of Teachers' Written Feedback on the Development of Students' Writing in EFL Classrooms at the University of Basrah

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Abstract:

The current study attempts to examine the importance of written feedback as an essential learning tool for the development of the Iraqi EFL students' writing by studying teachers' perceptions and their real practices of this tool in their classrooms utilizing Lee's (2008a) and Ferris' (1997) models. Two methods of data collection (questionnaire and written feedback analysis) are employed in this study to give descriptive information about the teachers' perceptions and actual ways of using written feedback. Henceforth, it is quantitatively oriented. The data are collected from the teachers who teach English at Department of Translation/ College of Arts, Department of English/College of Arts and Department of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences at Basrah University. The results disclose that most of teachers' perceptions of written feedback are not matched with their practices as some differences were detected between them. The study recommends conducting further studies about the importance of written feedback in the Iraqi context to extend the knowledge about its effectiveness as an essential learning tool in promoting students' writing performance.

Key Words: (Written Feedback, Teachers' Perceptions, Teachers' Practices).

تأثير تعليقات وملاحظات المعلمين المكتوبة في تطوير كتابة الطلاب في فصول اللغة الانكليزية في جامعة البصرة

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الملخص:

تسعى الدراسة الحالية للبحث بشأن أهمية كونتعليقات وملاحظات المعلمين المكتوبة أداة تعليمية مهمة في تحسين مستوى كتابة الطلاب العراقيين من خلال دراسة تصورات المعلمين وممارساتهم لهذه الاداة في صفوفهم باستخدام Lee's (2008) and Ferris' (1997) models. تم استخدام اداتين بحثيتين لجمع البيانات (استبانة و تحليل تعليقات وملاحظات المعلمين المكتوبة) في هذه الدراسة لغرض إعطاء معلومات وصفية حول تصورات المعلمين وممارساتهم الفعلية في كتابة التعليقات والملاحظات المكتوبة. تم جمع البيانات من أساتذة اللغة الإنكليزية في قسم الترجمة في كلية الآداب ,قسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية الآداب وقسم اللغة الانكليزية في كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية بجامعة البصرة. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة ان معظم تصورات المعلمين للتعليقات والملاحظات المكتوبة لا تتوافق مع بعضها البعض حيث تم العثور على عدد من التناقضات بينهما. وأوصت الدراسة بإجراء المزيد من الدراسات حول أهمية التعليقات والملاحظات المكتوبة في السياق التدريسي بالعراق لتوسيع المدارك حول فاعليتها كأداة تعليمية أساسية في تحسين مستوى الطلاب الكتابي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (ملاحظات مكتوبة ، تصورات المعلمين ، ممارسات المعلمين).

1. Introduction

Teachers' written feedback (henceforth TWF) in general terms is defined as “comments or other information that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or tests” from their teachers (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 199). It is considered to be

“a crucial component of classroom assessment” as it provides both students and teachers with useful information about learning and teaching processes (Lee, 2017:4). It provides students, especially EFL students, with opportunities to identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing (Raihany, 2014:91). On the other hand, it helps teachers know what they need to do to improve their teaching practices and ensure the teaching effect (p.91). Accordingly, both students and teachers value written feedback (henceforth WF) and consider it as an important pedagogical tool for developing students’ writing skills.

The present study tries to shed light on the importance of WF by exploring the Iraqi EFL teachers’ perceptions of WF and see if these perceptions resemble their real practices in their classrooms. The main problem of the research, purpose and research questions are explained in the subsequent subsections.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

WF is an important learning tool teachers use to provide students with sufficient information about their writing and promote their learning performance. This topic is quite common in L2 writing and has attracted the attention of a large number of researchers in different contexts such as (Ferris, 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Hattie & Timperely, 2007; Lee, 2008a; Lee, 2008b). However, this topic has gone unnoticed in the Iraqi context,

especially at the university level. As such, the present study tries to study this topic by exploring the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and actual practices of WF to offer some information about the ways teachers employ in responding to students' writing.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the present study is to examine the perceptions of the Iraqi EFL teachers concerning the effectiveness of providing students with WF and compare these perceptions with their real practices in their classrooms to identify the similarities and differences between them.

1.4 Research Questions

On the basis of the study aims, two research questions are formulated:

1. What are the perceptions of the Iraqi EFL teachers concerning providing written feedback to their students' writing?
2. To what extent do teachers' perceptions of written feedback coincide with their actual practices in their classrooms?

2. Theoretical Framework

TWF is an important pedagogic practice teachers do to improve the poor writing skills of their students and has been perceived positively by several researchers such as (Lillis & Swann, 2003;Hyland &Hyland, 2006a;Hattie & Timperley, 2007).It may take various forms including selective feedback, comprehensive feedback, form-focused feedback, content-organization focused feedback, direct feedback (henceforth DF), indirect feedback (henceforth IF) and written comments (statements, questions, praises, criticisms, suggestions, within text or general comments). Providing students with effective WF is part of teachers' responsibility. As Harmer (2001:262) puts it, the teachers are the major feedback providers and their role is essential to the process of teaching students how to write. The role of teachers as feedback providers is important in the sense that their roles can be varied into: readers, writing teachers and language experts. Chitravellu et al. (1995), as cited in Ismail, Maulan and Hasan (2008:46), mention that the teachers are readers who react to the content of students' writing by showing interest to tell the students how the text appears to them. For example, identifying what cannot be understood in students' writing. The teachers are writing teachers who read students' writing with an aim to assist them with the skills that help them in improving their writing as a whole such as "working on text organization and dealing with coherence". Finally, the teachers play the role of the language experts who

help students identify their grammar, spelling errors and provide them with correction to avoid these errors in their writing (Chitravellu et al., 1995, as cited in Ismail, Maulan& Hasan,2008:46). Teachers use different strategies when they respond to students' writing and their strategies tend to be influenced by their perceptions which serve as guides to their practices in the classrooms (Borg, 2001: 186). Yet, as a result of some factors (e.g.their attitudes towards the content of students' writing, students' motivation, their lack of training in the era of feedback, time constraints, class sizes), these perceptions do not always coincide with their practices (Borg, 2003: 94; Goldstein, 2004: 67; Lee, 2008a: 81). Accordingly, the current study aims to understand teachers' perceptions of WF and see if these perceptions are matched with their real practices.

2.1 Lee's (2008a) and Ferris' (1997) Models for the Analysis of Teachers' Written Feedback

As noted previously, the WF teachers provide on students' writing is considered to be one of the major components in L2 writing as teachers offer the individualized attention that is often ignored in the classrooms (Hyland, 2003: 177). Since many students look up to their teachers as feedback providers, examining teachers' practices of WF would offer useful information about the writing aspects teachers like to focus on when they provide WF, the type

of strategies they tend to apply when responding to students' writing and the type of comments they prefer to use. Adopting Lee's model in this study can be justified by that Lee offers a detailed analysis of teachers' practices of WF in her paper, *Understanding Teachers' Written Feedback Practices in Hong Kong Secondary Classrooms*. This model examines teachers' practices of WF by analysing the focus of their WF (form, content and organization), the type of the WF strategies they use (selective and comprehensive, direct and indirect) and the function of their written comments (praise, criticism and suggestion). Though Lee offers a detailed analysis of teachers' practices of WF, her model analyses teachers' comments only in terms of their functions (praise, criticism and suggestion).

Therefore, some categories of Ferris' (1997) model are employed in this study to provide a clear and comprehensible picture of teachers' practices of WF. These categories include request, form of teachers' written comments (question, statement, imperative and exclamation) and text-specific comments (general and specific comments). These categories, as Treglia (2009: 72) states, offer specific details about the way teachers employ their written comments. Accordingly, the first three categories are adopted from Lee's (2008a) model, while the final categories are adopted from Ferris' (1997) model.

2.2 Review of Related Studies

With regards to the studygoals which are to examine the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of WF, this review examines some of the studies that explore teachers' perceptions and practices of WF in various contexts around the world. These studies are presented in a chronological sequence in the next pages.

Lee (2008a) examined the WF offered by 26 Hong Kong secondary English teachers to 174 students' writing using feedback analysis and a follow-up interview with 6 teachers to see if their practices of WF matched their perceptions. She noticed that teachers' perceptions were not reflected into their practices. The majority of TWF points (94%) were focused on the form of students' writing rather than organization and content because they were instructed by the school's policy and examination culture to focus more on form. The teachers also applied comprehensive and DF rather than selective and IF because their beliefs contrast the school's policy that required them to apply comprehensive and DF. While the teachers believed that they should focus on students' strengths and weaknesses, they focused more on their weaknesses due to the form-focused approach they employed in responding to students' errors. The teachers also reported that the limited training in the era of feedback affected

their practices as the only training they received was from the experienced teachers within the school. Lee came to a conclusion that the inconsistencies between teachers' perceptions and practices of WF were caused by several factors (e.g. lack of training, examination culture and school's policy).

Al-Bakri (2016), in another study, attempted to explore Omani EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of WF using feedback analysis and semi-structured interview. The results of the study showed a number of mismatches between teachers' perceptions and practices of WF. For example, the teachers were unable to offer comprehensive feedback on students' papers due to some contextual factors (e.g. time and class size) which were considered to be one of greatest difficulties teachers had when they responded to students' writing. In addition, the teachers preferred IF and global errors but they offered DF and corrected students' local errors based on students' needs.

Sakrak-Ekin and Blacikanli (2019) undertook another study in Turkish EFL context to understand whether teachers' perceptions of WF were reflected into their practices utilizing a questionnaire, semi-structured interview and feedback analysis. The researchers found some discrepancies between teachers' perceptions and practices of WF. The teachers stated that they were in favour of selective feedback, IF and global errors but they provided

comprehensive feedback, DF and corrected students' local errors. The researchers clarified that teachers' practices of comprehensive feedback were influenced by their students, especially low proficient students, as they were unable to deal with selective feedback as well as not having enough time to respond to each student's paper. As for DF, teachers' practices of this strategy were due to students' proficiency levels since low proficient students were incapable of identifying and correcting their errors by themselves. Besides, the teachers focused on students' local errors based on the requirements of the institutional's general policy.

In another recent study, Golpour, Ahour and Ahangari (2020) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' (less experienced and more experienced) perceptions and practices of WF via questionnaire and feedback analysis. They collected their data from the teachers who teach English at various universities in Iran. In line with the aforementioned studies, the results of their study disclosed some inconsistencies between teachers' perceptions and practices of WF. Though both teachers (less and more experienced) believed in the effectiveness of correcting specific students' errors, they corrected all students' errors because they were required by the institutional's policy, students and their parents to provide a detailed correction for all errors and they might be criticized if they do not do so. Also, less experienced teachers believed in the

effectiveness of uncoded IF, while more experienced teachers believed in the effectiveness of providing grammatical explanation alone without correction. Conversely, the results of their WF practices showed that both teachers indicated and corrected students' errors based on their students' needs who wanted them to indicate and correct all their errors. Furthermore, less experienced teachers preferred to focus on the organization of their students' writing, whereas more experienced teachers preferred to focus on the form. However, the results of their WF practices demonstrated that both teachers offered WF on form, organization and content because they were requested by their students to focus on all these aspects to identify their weaknesses.

Reviewing the research studies shows that the relationship between teachers' perceptions and practices of WF has been studied in various contexts around the world. But, there is no study that examines teachers' perceptions and practices of WF in the Iraqi context, at least at Basrah University. To bridge this gap, the present study tries to explore the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of WF and identify the similar and different parts between them.

3.Methodology of the Study

This study is quantitatively oriented. It employs two quantitative data collection methods which are a closed-ended questionnaire

and WF analysis. The data obtained from these two tools are used to provide descriptive information about teachers' perceptions and the actual WF they provide in their classrooms. Hence, descriptive research design is utilized in the current study. This design allows the researchers to offer description of the phenomena under investigation by answering the questions relating to the "who?", "what?", "when?", "where?" and "how" (Houser, 2008, as cited in Offredy & Vickers, 2010: 48). The closed-ended questionnaire is used to gather information about teachers' perceptions of WF, whereas the WF analysis is used to obtain information about their actual WF practices. The data gathered from these two tools will be compared together to answer the research questions of this study.

3.1 Instruments, Participants and Analysis Procedures

In this study, two instruments of data collection are employed. They include a questionnaire and WF analysis. The items of teachers' questionnaire (see Appendix A) were borrowed from Jamoom (2016) and adapted to the current study since they were found to be useful and suitable for the study. The data were collected from the teachers who teach English at various departments at Basrah University (n=32). This group of teachers is selected in accordance with the convenience sampling which enables the researcher to elicit the participants that are "willing

and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2012:145). Besides, it is a quick and helpful way to approach “an interested group of people” (Given, 2008: 124). The selection of the teachers who teach English at various departments at Basrah University as a sample for this study is made on the basis that collecting data from a large number of teachers with different teaching experiences and teaching styles would offer more information about the Iraqi EFL teachers’ perceptions and their ways of giving WF to their students. The questionnaire was distributed online to the teachers via Facebook and WhatsApp. All the questions of teachers’ questionnaire (17 items) are closed-ended and they are of two types: multiple choice and Likert scale items. The first part (items 1-3) focuses on teachers’ personal information (e.g. gender, level of education and teaching experience), the second part (item 4) focuses on teachers’ perceptions regarding the usefulness of WF for students’ writing, the third part (item 5) is concerned with the frequency of teachers’ use of WF, the fourth part (item 6-11) examines the types of WF teachers prefer to use when they respond to students’ works and the fifth part (item 12) is concerned with the difficulties teachers encounter in their process of giving WF. As for the sixth part, the focus is laid on the ways (items 13-14) teachers follow in giving WF as well as the factors (items 15-17) that shape these ways. The quantitative data in teachers’ questionnaire were entered to Excel sheets, coded to

numbers and then transformed into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed in analysing the quantitative data of teachers' questionnaire because they offer simple summaries about teachers' responses together with tables and charts (Fink, 2009:78).

As for the second instrument of data collection, an analysis of TWF practices was employed. The data of TWF were collected from an essay written by a fourth-year female student at the Department of English, College of Arts, University of Basrah and handed down to the teachers. Only nine of them responded to the essay and offered their WF on it. The points of TWF were analysed based on two models (Lee's 2008a and Ferris' 1997 models). These WF points were identified, counted and then presented in a form of numbers and percentages under three categories: focus, form and function. The method of numbers and percentages was selected for the analysis of TWF because it is easy, systematic and allows the researcher to identify which type of WF teachers use the most (Razali & Jupri, 2014: 66).

4. Results and Discussion

In response to the first research question concerning teachers' perceptions of WF, the findings of the questionnaire show that all teachers (see Table 1) have the same beliefs concerning the importance of WF as an important pedagogical tool students can

follow in developing their writing skills and they tend to apply it frequently in their classrooms. Moreover, the teachers agree that all written aspects deserve the same focus and attention to improve students' writing performance. As regards to their preferred WF strategies, the findings reveal that the teachers have preferences for both DF and IF strategies. Yet, their preferences for DF are higher than those for IF. Plus, the major part of them report that, when correcting students' writing, they prefer to select specific error types rather than correcting a range of errors, and none of them prefer to use reformulation as a correction strategy. In respect of the types of teachers' comments, the major part of them favour statements and rate them highly than the other forms. Besides, the plurality of teachers agree that the suggestive comments are more effective in developing students' writing skills compared with the negative comments, positive comments and requests. As for the specificity of their comments, the findings exhibit that most teachers consider the comments within the text to be more useful and effective in helping students produce good written texts than those that are given to the whole text.

Table(1): Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Written Feedback

<i>Answers</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Quite useful</i>	15	47%
<i>Useful</i>	17	53%
<i>Total</i>	32	100%

As for the second research question concerning the match and mismatch between teachers' perceptions and real practices of WF, all teachers report that they believe in the effectiveness of WF as an assisting tool students need to promote their skills in writing and they continually use it in their classes. The analysis of their actual practices also shows similar results as all of teachers responded to the student's essay and offered her different WF points. Furtherly, though the teachers state that they are concerned with content, form and organization when they respond to their students' written works, the analysis of their WF indicates different results as only small number of their WF points is given to content and organization, whereas the largest part of their WF is dedicated to the grammatical aspects in the student's essay. A possible interpretation of this mismatch might be that the teachers do not have enough time to respond to each aspect in students' writing, the large numbers of students' errors which are mostly grammatical and the restricted policy in the department that commits them to respond to students writing in certain ways.

Regarding the selectiveness and comprehensiveness of TWF, most teachers express their agreement that selecting specific types of errors to respond to students' writing is more efficacious than correcting all errors. However, these perceptions are not translated

into their actual practices as all of them provide corrections for different types of errors in the student's essay. This conflict might be asserted to different factors like the different types of errors students make in their writing which induce teachers to provide detailed correction, teachers' unawareness of the WF strategies they use due to the limited training opportunities offered for them, the department's policy that requires teachers to use specific WF strategies and their beliefs that, as feedback and knowledge providers, they have the duty of responding to all students' errors. As far as the directness and indirectness of TWF, the compared results of their questionnaire and WF analysis disclose that the teachers hold preferences for both DF and IF strategies, but their preferences for the DF are greater than their preferences for the IF one. This might indicate that the teachers are concerned with students' proficiency levels as DF is more effective for low proficient students than IF.

With regards to the types of their comments, the large part of teachers report that they prefer to apply statements on students' writing more than questions, imperatives and exclamations. The data obtained from their WF analysis also exhibit the same results as the major part of their comments are statements. Also, the teachers give high priority to the suggestive comments and prefer to apply them more in their WF. Yet, the largest part of the comments they offer on the student's essay are negative. This

disagreement could be resulted from the negative nature of teachers' comments that always finds faults in students' writing and teachers' beliefs that they have great responsibility as feedback providers to determine the weak aspects in students' writing by giving them warnings on these weaknesses. The types of students' papers that are filled with grave errors might be another reason for this discrepancy. The majority of teachers also believe that giving students more comments within the text is effective for strengthening their abilities to write perfectly rather than general comments. These findings are matched with their real practices as most of their comments are offered within the text. According to these results, teachers' perceptions do not all the time coincide with their practices. These findings support the researchers' clarifications (Lee, 2008a; Al-Bakri, 2016; Sakrak-Ekin & Blacikanli, 2019; Golpour, Ahour & Ahangari, 2020) in that teachers' practices are not always guided by their perceptions.

5. Conclusion

The recent study intends to inspect the effectiveness of TWF in the Iraqi context by examining the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and real practices of WF and see if there are any similarities and inconsistencies between them. The findings showed that all teachers share the same belief concerning the importance of WF as an effective learning

tool that enhances students' writing performance and estimate it highly. Yet, these beliefs were not translated into the actual WF they offered on the student's essay as many differences were detected between them. The study findings revealed that these discrepancies might be caused by the limited time given in the classes, the lack of the provided opportunities for teachers to participate in training courses, teachers' own beliefs, the repeated numbers of students' errors and the restricted policy followed in the department. This confirms that teachers' practices are not always shaped by their perceptions as these practices may be affected by several challenges teachers encounter in their teaching process, which in turn, obstruct them from practicing their perceptions effectively. The study offers teachers some of the best practices they can follow to improve their WF practices and make them better. Some of these practices are that teachers can depend on students' level of proficiency and error types when using DF or IF. They can use DF with the low proficient students and untreated errors (e.g. word choice) and IF with high proficient students and treated errors (e.g. spelling). They also need to consider all the writing aspects in students' writing instead of one and should not use too much criticisms in their comments and, instead, use suggestions. Their comprehensive strategy of

correcting errors should be replaced with a selective one. The forms of their comments need to be directive and clear for students. They need to be supportive and explain their strategies of giving WF to their students. Lastly, the college heads need to be flexible and allow teachers to practice whatever method they think is effective for developing students' writing performance as well as providing them with a list about the best WF practices. This study also offers some recommendations for further research about WF which are explained as following:

- A. The current study is concerned with only one form of feedback (WF). Thus, it is recommended that further studies need to consider other forms of giving feedback (e.g. oral feedback, peer feedback).
- B. The data collected in analysing teachers' practices of WF included the writing of only one student. Therefore, it is suggested that further research in which researchers gather data from a large number of students would be useful to give an extensive picture of teachers' practices of WF.
- C. This study includes one group of participants (Iraqi EFL teachers). Further studies can include students as another

sample. This would help provide some information about their opinions concerning the efficacy of WF and the types of WF they prefer their teachers to utilize on their written texts.

D. Another similar study about the relation between teachers' perceptions and actual practices of WF in the Iraqi context with a large number of participants need to be conducted. This would contribute in broadening the knowledge about what teachers prefer to follow in responding to their students and how they translate it in their actual practices in their classrooms.

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Appendences

Appendix (A): Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear professors,

You are kindly invited to participate in this study which aims to examine your perceptions concerning your ways of giving written feedback to your students at the Department of English, University of Basrah. You can be assured that all the answers provided in this survey will be kept confidential and used for research purposes alone. Do please give your answerers as sincerely and clearly as possible to ensure the study's success.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Personal Information

Please tick the appropriate response or write additional information in the space provided.

1. Gender Male Female
2. Your level of education MA Ph.D. Ph.D. student
3. Years of teaching English as a foreign language
Less than 5 years From 5 to 10 years More than 10 years

Importance of Written Feedback

Please tick the degree of usefulness according to your view.

4. Teachers' written feedback is

- Quite useful Useful Does not matter Not useful Not useful at all

Frequency of Your Use of Written Feedback

Please tick the choice that best describes the frequency of your use of written feedback.

5. How frequently do you use written feedback to respond to students' writing?
Always Usually Sometimes Occasionally Never

Types of Your Written Feedback

Please select the type of written feedback that suits your way of giving feedback.

6. What writing aspects do you prefer to focus on when you provide written feedback to your students? (You can choose more than one aspect).
Form
Content
Organization
7. When you provide written feedback on students' written works, on what errors do you provide written feedback?
Specific errors (selective feedback)
All errors (comprehensive feedback)
No errors
8. If you write comments on students' errors, what written feedback strategies do you use?(You can tick more than one statement if you use more than one strategy).
Crossing out the error and writing the correct form (direct feedback).

- Crossing out the error and writing the correct form along with explanation at the bottom of the page (direct feedback in addition to grammatical explanation).
 - Underlining or circling the error alone (indirect feedback using simple circling or underlining).
 - Underlining or circling the error along with error code (indirect feedback using error codes).
 - Reformulating a part of students' original texts (reformulation).
9. What forms do your comments take when you provide written feedback to your students?
- Questions
 - Statements
 - Imperatives
 - Exclamations
 - All forms
10. When you provide written feedback to your students, what type of functions do you use?
- Positive function.
 - Negative function.
 - Suggestive function
 - Request function
11. When you provide written feedback to your students, how do you prefer your comments to be?
- Specific comments
 - General comments

Challenges You Face in Giving Written Feedback

Please tick the choice that best describes the challenges you encounter as you provide written feedback to your students. (You can tick more than one answer).

12. What challenges do you encounter as you give written feedback to your students?
- Providing written feedback on students' writing takes a lot of time.
 - There are too many papers to correct.

- Students make many errors.
- Students ignore the feedback provided.
- Students misunderstand the comments and codes.
- All challenges

Your Ways of Giving Written Feedback

Please tick the best choice that describes your agreement or disagreement with these statements.

13. I explain my way of providing written feedback to my students.
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
14. Providing written feedback on students' writing is part of teachers' responsibility.
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
15. I base the practice of my written feedback on my teaching experience.
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
16. I base the practice of my written feedback on the policy of the Department of English, Basrah University.
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree
17. I need some training in the area of feedback expand my knowledge of giving writing feedback.
Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

Thank you very much for your help