Focused Written Feedback on Developing Quality Bachelor's Thesis Proposal

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Abstract: The effectiveness of written feedback in learning is a debatable topic that divides opinion. Many researchers claim that written feedback does not have a significant effect on improving students' learning achievement. However, many other researchers indicate otherwise. This research aimed to analyze the effect of using focused written feedback (FWF) on students' writing skills. This research sample consisted of 10 students taught through practice to write a bachelor's thesis proposal. This research employed the equivalent time-series design. Observations were employed in a four-time series. There are four models for the implementation of focused written feedback: task feedback (FT), process feedback (FP), self-regulation feedback (FR), and self-feedback (FS). Then, there are three major questions: what are the goals? (Feed-up), what progress is being made toward the goal? (Feedback), what activities need to be undertaken to make better progress? (Feed-forward). The instruments of this study were written feedback assessment guidelines, and rubrics for assessing writing skills. The researchers had checked both instruments. The result showed that students' writing skills improved the most in the section where they received the most practice. In conclusion, this study contributed to effective written feedback and provided some implications for lectures.

INTRODUCTION

Scientific writing skills are critical in academic life. Writing is one of the essential values in the academic world. Academic writing or scientific writing can help an academician build comprehensive communication, transfer of knowledge, the transaction of ideas, oral manifestations of social interaction, and exchange of information through academic journals (Dragomir & Niculescu, 2020; Sullivan & Dilek, 1997). In tertiary institutions, the representation of students' development of scientific writing skills is in the final assignment writing guidance activities. Apart from being one of the graduation requirements, this final project is a vehicle for students to display their skills in communicating in writing (Arsyad, 2019; Udari, 2019). Students make the final project as a mirror that reflects their insights.

Furthermore, Dragomir & Niculescu (2020) through the analysis of several theoretical approaches, explains that effective writing skills can only develop "at the intersection" between task-related skills and language. Task-related skills refer to the quality of content, systematics, and suitability of writing styles, coherence in organizing ideas, and accuracy in conveying messages to recipients. Language-related skills describe the writer's language

proficiency, including language awareness, the accuracy of language structures, grammar, syntactic accuracy, spelling accuracy, punctuation accuracy, and many others (Jansson, 2006; Winstone et al., 2016).

The preliminary study revealed the complexity of writing on several proposals proposed by students in the Department of Education. Most of the students' first submitted proposals can be categorized into moderate to low categories. Fundamental writing errors can be found, such as sentence structure, main ideas, punctuation, diction, language settings, errors in conveying content, and many others.

Other information that confirms similar problems was identified from observations and interviews. The guidance process uses an oral and written dialogue approach in the form of general and comprehensive notes. As a result, students often forgot the advisor's explanation after arriving home. They had difficulty translating or associating notes from the advisor. Many students rely on their supervisors to determine the style of writing of their final assignments. If this condition continues, it seems that the hope of producing quality scientific papers worthy of publication in reputable journals is getting farther from reality. A different strategy (new or alternative) is needed to solve the problem, including finding an effective approach in providing feedback on students' final papers (Elliott et al., 2016). Providing feedback can involve peers or lecturers, which the latter is the primary thing (Holmeier et al., 2018; Sia & Cheung, 2017). Several research results indicate that appropriate written feedback contributes to many learning benefits (Biber & Gray, 2011; Elftorp, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Peterson & McClay, 2010).

Effective feedback can help students understand the extent of their abilities and achievements when writing a final assignment proposal. They can

determine steps that can be taken to improve or enhance their performance (Carless & Boud, 2018; Jamalinesari et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2020). Students can use the information in the feedback to confirm, process, reflect, associate, adjust, construct, and even restructure their knowledge (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Taylor et al., 2020).

For lecturers, written feedback is useful to build a dialogue between lecturers and guide students to improve writing quality on an ongoing basis (Hawe & Dixon, 2014; Parr & Timperley, 2010; Wardle & Roozen, 2012). Written feedback is also functional to provide individualized guidance to students in detail (Elliott et al., 2016), including in compiling a final project proposal. Written feedback provides complete information about students' progress in writing proposals (Klute et al., 2017). Thus, written feedback eases the lecturers to identify initial knowledge, encourage reasoning skills, and understand students' basic character by observing how they understand their abilities and ideas (Jansson, 2006; Kyaruzi et al., 2019; Widarsih & Suherdi, 2019; Winstone et al., 2016).

However, implementing written feedback in learning is also not easy. Recent reviews found that there have been few studies regarding effective written feedback in improving scientific writing skills (Rittle-Johnson et al., 2011). Research that provides comprehensive guidelines and effective feedback models is rare (Elliott et al., 2016). Conversely, many other researchers propose that written feedback does not significantly improve long-term learning outcomes (Truscott & Hsu, 2008), and only has a short-term effect on grammar accuracy.

Abalkheel & Brandenburg (2020) through a meta-analysis study, concluded that oral and written feedbacks given in a comprehensive and general way often produce harmful effects on students from time to time. As a result of providing

general and comprehensive feedback, students cannot concentrate on a particular error point. Therefore, this research offers an alternative approach in providing written feedback, namely focused written feedback. The concept of focused written feedback refers to providing written feedback to students' writing in timing, setting, and a load of feedback.

METHOD

This study employed the equivalent time-series design. The research process was carried out through the final project proposal guidance activity to 10 students of the Biology Education Study Program at UIN Raden Intan Lampung.

The research's operational steps are described as follows: first, students (N = 10) assigned as participants were asked to compile a research proposal based on the theme or topic of interest. Second, the researcher distributed self-assessment sheets containing questions and statements about the content of their proposal (FT), how they found the information to be written in their proposal (FP), how they organize themselves when compiling their proposal (FR), and how they ensure that their research proposal is correct (FS). Third, the researchers confirmed students' responses with the contents and systematics of the proposal. Fourth, the researchers distributed second self-assessment sheets along with the proposal revision notes. The second self-assessment was in the form of a review

question, namely, have your expectations of the written proposal been achieved? (Feed-up), is your process relevant to your goals? (Feedback), and what actions would you take to improve the quality or improve your writing? (Feed-forward).

The strategy of focusing the written feedback was the time-line guidance mapped based on aspects and the focus (chapters) of the proposal. At the first meeting, the guidance of chapter I was focused on content aspects. The second meeting was focused on the systematic aspects, the third meeting was focused on the writing aspects, and the fourth meeting was focused on review and improvement.

The fifth meeting of the second chapter guidance of proposal was focused on the content aspects. The sixth meeting was focused on systematic, the seventh meeting was focused on writing aspects, and the eighth meeting was focused on review and improvement. The cycle was repeated in other chapters.

Referring to the results of the written-focused feedback, the students were allowed to understand the meaning of the comments to be the basis for revising their proposals. This process was repeated until the students compiled their first to third chapters of their proposal and research instruments.

Furthermore, any changes or developments in their proposals on an ongoing basis in each aspect had been evaluated. In brief, the research design is illustrated in Figure 1.
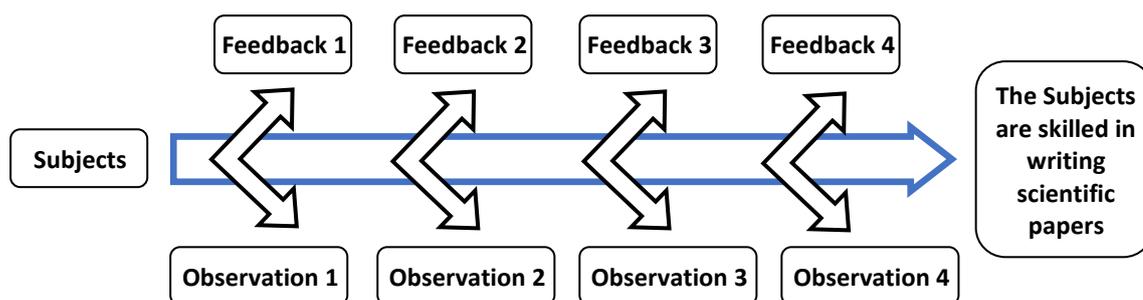
Figure 1. The Research Procedure

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researchers tried to improve students' writing scientific papers in the form of final project proposals using the focused written feedback approach. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Results of the Research

No	Sub-ject	Aspects	O1	O2	O3	O4	Final Score	N-Gain	Mean N-Gain	Category
1	A1	Content	15	35	60	62	75	0.71	0.72	High
		Systematics	35	65	70	85	80	0.70		
		Writing	20	45	46	70	82	0.78		
2	A2	Content	35	60	78	80	85	0.77	0.71	High
		Systematic	20	70	70	70	75	0.69		
		Writing	45	50	75	80	85	0.73		
3	A3	Content	10	15	15	45	55	0.50	0.63	Moderate
		Systematic	40	80	85	85	75	0.58		
		Writing	50	75	80	85	90	0.80		
4	A4	Content	10	40	45	70	78	0.76	0.77	High
		Systematic	20	65	70	75	80	0, 75		
		Writing	50	65	70	75	90	0.80		
5	A5	Content	25	40	65	80	88	0.84	0.84	High
		Systematic	35	65	75	75	85	0.77		
		Writing	60	80	80	90	95	0.88		
6	A6	Content	10	40	45	68	70	0.67	0.68	Moderate
		Systematic	60	70	75	75	90	0.75		
		Writing	10	20	40	45	65	0.61		
7	A7	Content	45	60	80	85	100	1.00	0.72	High
		Systematic	40	75	75	80	75	0, 58		
		Writing	65	70	80	80	85	0.57		
8	A8	Content	15	40	50	75	80	0.76	0.74	High
		Systematic	55	70	70	85	90	0.78		
		Writing	35	48	60	75	80	0.69		
9	A9	Content	10	15	45	65	80	0.78	0.73	High
		Systematic	25	70	75	70	80	0.73		
		Writing	25	45	60	65	75	0.67		
10	A10	Content	40	65	70	75	78	0.63	0.62	Moderate
		Systematic	15	65	70	85	75	0.71		
		Writing	25	30	45	60	65	0.53		
		Average	**31.2**				**80.2**	**0.72**	**0.72**	**High**

Table 1 is a profile of students' scientific writing skills after being given focused-written feedback treatment. From the point of view of students' initial skills in writing proposals, it is known that they are in a low category (mean 31.2), while their final ability increases in high positions (average 80.2).

Furthermore, the pattern of improving student skills during treatment using written feedback can be seen in Figure 2.
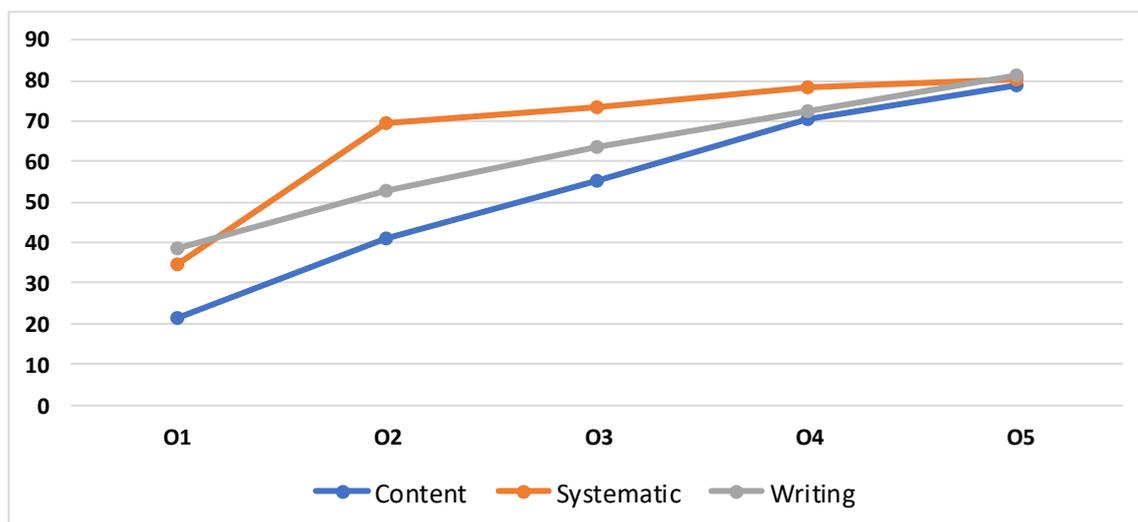
Figure 2. The Improvement of the Writing Skills

Figure 2 displays the information on the writing skills improvement pattern in each aspect. Generally, students' scientific writing skills improved over time in all aspects, from low to high.

The thematic analysis model approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to discuss the research results. The approach consisted of three strategies. First, use a deductive approach to identify the nature of student interaction in response to any written feedback. Empirically detailed orientation and elaboration make it possible to trace student actions' changes in exploring the material and revising the proposals (Damsa, 2014; Damsa & Ludvigsen, 2016). Orientation is seen when students discuss comments on their final assignment proposal. This process enabled the researchers to identify students' initial understanding of the written feedback's content. Elaboration emphasizes how students follow up on the written feedback, for example, when they revise their proposals. It can reveal how students gradually experience knowledge improvement in presenting their research proposals.

Based on the information in Table 1, it is known that students' initial ability (O1) in compiling a research proposal was low in all aspects. The basic and most common mistakes could be found in the content aspect, especially the lack of criticality in analyzing problems and the weak ability to describe ideas according to theory, reason, and clear evidence. Also, there were many errors found in the writing aspects. They wrote many difficult to understand diction and ineffective sentence construction. Based on students' initial ability, the focused written feedback had been provided with the following frameworks.

Table 2. The Scientific Writing Skills' Assessment Framework

No	Examined Aspects	Criteria
1	Systematics	Systematics of complete and sequential scientific writing (title page, introduction, background, problem formulation, objectives, benefits, theoretical basis, research methods, systematic proposal writing, and bibliography).
2	Criticality in analyzing problems	The problem is analyzed in detail, starting from the cause of the problem, the real situation, concrete evidence, solution accompanied by explanations and opinions, and useful input.
3	Content feasibility	The idea is relevant to the problem, supported by theory, reason, and clear evidence. The solution given is relevant to the

| No	Examined Aspects	Criteria
		topic of the problem.
4	Spelling	Spelling errors are less than five words, including accuracy in using foreign languages.
5	Language use	Using proper and easy to understand diction as well as effective sentence formulation.
6	Citation writing ability	The citations are written according to correct citation rules.
7	Bibliography writing ability	The bibliography is written according to the correct bibliography writing rules.
8	Awareness of the proposal writing format	Font and layout settings are following the guidelines.
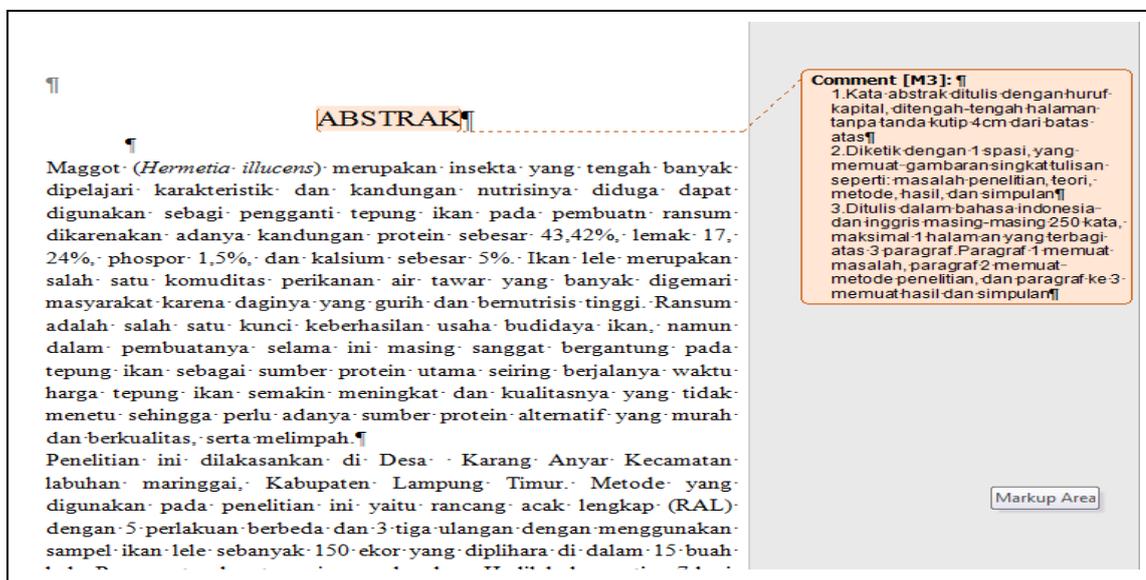
Figure 3. Examples of Feedback

After providing written feedback on students' research proposals, the researchers evaluated their understanding by discussing the meaning of comments in written feedback and ensuring that they understood what to do. Here, the researcher used an inductive approach to uncover students' topics when discussing comments in written feedback. The topics were summarized and then described comprehensively regarding the profile of the student's ability to respond to feedback. This step required the identification of all resources and subjects involved in the discussion.

Finally, to capture the rhythm of meaning formation, the researchers traced the stages of interaction, content knowledge, and resources identified in the first two steps chronologically for each written feedback comment. This step allowed the researchers to provide a generalized characterization of the focused written feedback and how meaning formulation occurred based on students' interaction and engagement with resources. Regarding the research results, the focused written feedback had been proven to improve students' writing skills to a higher level. These increases occurred for several reasons.

First, the written focused feedback encouraged students to concentrate on achieving goals, generate an ethos on task performance amidst various obstacles, and seek more effective alternatives in completing the research proposal (Bargh et al., 2010). Besides, the students worked systematically and in an orderly. The students were accustomed to working in an organized and gradual manner through the focused written feedback, namely, by mapping their tasks revisions based on content, writing, and systematic aspects.

The feedback is not necessarily comprehensive, but gradually from one chapter to the next.

Second, the students were trained to raise awareness of the proposals they write. This awareness was built through FT, FP, FR, and FS. During the writing process, the students positioned themselves as learning subjects. They actively sought knowledge about what they will write, how to write it, and whether what they write was correct or not. This awareness building had a good impact on creating meaningful guidance processes and had a long-term effect on students' writing skills.

Emphasizing the role of students as subjects in writing research proposals triggered a communication shift toward positive directions. Viewing students as learning subjects (student-centered) can create a horizontal dialogue between the advisor and the mentored (Jiang & Yan, 2019), instead of the vertical dialogue. In horizontal dialogue, students can improve their research proposals' quality based on the understanding that they build themselves, not the understanding indoctrinated directly by the advisor.

Several theories reinforce the review of the research results above and others' research results (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ferris, 2011; Jiang & Yan, 2019; Sheen et al., 2009), which focused on written feedback significantly affects students' learning outcomes. On the contrary, the application of unfocused written feedback has a negative impact. Furthermore, Jiang & Yan (2019) emphasize that giving detailed feedback will ease the students to accept and obey. On the other hand, providing broader and more comprehensive feedback makes the students confused in understanding the feedback's meaning. Also, Sheen et al. (2009) assure that providing focused feedback is more effective than comprehensive because receiving too many notes on many aspects (comprehensive feedback), the students will not be able to effectively process the feedback. They will feel burdened.

In the perspective of information processing theory (Gagne et al., 1997), external factors, such as media, teachers, environment, and many others, can influence information processing effectiveness. In this research, the link between written feedback management and information processing can be indicated by assuming that if an advisor fails to organize the feedback properly, the feedback information processing will be hampered. Unfocused written feedbacks will potentially become a distractor of students' memory.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of cognitive load theory, knowledge (information) is first processed by working memory with a limited capacity and duration before being permanently stored in long-term memory. Thus, organizing the information to be transferred to students needs to be considered. This is related to the advisor's awareness in providing the right portion of information for students and reducing the working memory loads (Zambrano R. et al., 2019). It is at this point that the application of focused written feedback gains a solid foothold. Providing focused written feedback is relevant to the long-term improvement of students' scientific writing skills through cognitive load provision.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the focused written feedback positively affected students' scientific writing skills with a high category in the aspects of content, systematics, and writing. These findings contribute to pedagogy in the form of proper organization to provide focused written feedback to avoid students' cognitive overload.

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