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The impact of formative feedback strategies on EFL Afghan students' writing skills

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Abstract
The present study investigates the effect of formative feedback strategies on EFL Afghan students' writing skills. The purpose of this study is to explore some formative feedback strategies which are used by Afghan university instructors. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four university instructors of the English Department of Language and Literature faculty at Herat University, Afghanistan. The results show positive attitudes of instructors toward using formative feedback in EFL writing courses. The finding uncovered that formative feedback strategies (constructive written feedback, online feedback, peer feedback) are widely used in the EFL writing courses through which students can improve their writing skills by recognizing their mistakes and revising their written assignments. The data also indicate that although peer feedback is a very useful strategy of formative feedback in the improvement of the writing skills, still, Afghan students cannot trust their peers' feedback. Some implications for instructors were discussed for better implementation of formative feedback strategies.

Keywords: Formative feedback, EFL, strategies, online feedback, peer feedback

Introduction
Feedback is known as one of the most dynamic pedagogical tools in improving and assessing writing skills. According to William (2011) [21], the term feedback has been described as a key factor within the formative assessment as it facilitates the ways learners develop and progress their responsibilities. And formative feedback is defined "as information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behavior to improve learning" (Shute, 2008) [18]. Concerning this, Lundahl (2014) [13] argued that teachers should provide their feedback in a way to empower students to evaluate, investigate, and use that feedback. However he stated that "underlining error in a text will never support the students' progress as writers" (p. 193). Similarly, William (2011) [21] emphasized that teachers' feedback needs to be accurate and helpful.

Unfortunately in the Afghan context, formative feedback is somehow ignored in some schools and universities. Lack of knowledge and unawareness from the effectiveness of formative feedback is one reason for its ignorance in the Afghan EFL writing courses. This is because many teachers are inexperienced and they have not been introduced with new strategies of formative feedback. Another reason is a large number of students which makes teachers overwhelmed with a pile of assignments. Thus, checking many assignments is time-consuming for them. Besides, some Afghan teachers prefer to use summative assessment as a midterm and final exam at the end of the course although formative feedback can be used during the semester and help students to recognize their problems. Moreover, some teachers do not fully distinguish between corrective feedback and formative feedback to encourage their students to evaluate their tasks. For instance, an Afghan teacher's feedback is mostly focusing on correcting grammar and spelling mistakes. For example, some teachers cross over the misspelled words or wrong verb forms and write the correct spelling and verb form. Students can easily fix the mistakes without any further effort however feedback cannot be reduced to error correction (Lundahl, 2014) [13]. According to William (2011) [21], feedback should be given in a way to stimulate students to evaluate his/her work and have the best learning outcome. Also, still, some Afghan teachers are not familiar with modern strategies of formative feedback such as online or peer feedback. They mostly provide feedback on their own to their students.

Providing feedback is important for improving writing skills. It is an essential component of the formative assessment which can be described as the information given by a reader to a

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writer. Based on other studies on the effectiveness of formative feedback, there are many advantages. One advantage as Saliu-Abdulahi (2017) [17] stated is that feedback helps learners find out whether they are performing well or not. Also, Bruno and Santos (2011) [2] noted that if students' performance is not going well, further feedback will help them take corrective action about their writing to develop it and reach an appropriate level of performance. Another advantage of formative feedback relates to EFL students' progression in learning the written language. Finally, feedback is not only proposed to assist students to observe their progress, but also stimulates them to take others' points of view about their writing to make it better.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the strategies that university teachers use to give formative feedback on students' written tasks in EFL writing classrooms, and the reasons behind their chosen strategies. The audience of this study will be all teachers who teach EFL writing courses at Afghan universities or schools. Thus, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Afghan instructors' attitudes towards using formative feedback in writing classes at Herat University?
2. What kind of strategies do Afghan teachers use to provide formative feedback in writing classes?
3. What problems do instructors encounter when they use different formative feedback strategies?

Literature review
Feedback has been considered as a form of formative assessment in higher education. Researchers have conducted many studies on the role, usage, significance, and influence of formative feedback in EFL writing courses from teachers' and students' perspectives. The common and basic concept of many researches which have been conducted in these areas is focusing on the significance of correct implementation of feedback to improve learning process and learning outcome.

The role of formative feedback in learning
In a study, Shute (2008) [18] reviewed the corpus of research to identify the role and features of formative feedback that are the most effective and proficient in upholding learning. The main purpose of the research was to present results from an extensive literature review of feedback to gain some knowledge of the characteristics, functions, interactions, and its relation to learning. The further attempt of the article was to create a set of guidelines relating to formative feedback by applying the findings from the literature review. The results related to the characteristics or features of the formative feedback showed that it should be non-evaluative, supportive, timely, and specific. The findings also indicated that formative feedback appeared in a variety of types usually presenting as information to a learner in response to some action on the learner's part and it could be managed at various times during the learning process. Ultimately, the results showed several variables (e.g., individual characteristics of the learner and aspects of the task) to interact with the success of formative feedback at supporting learning. The study concluded with guidelines for creating formative feedback.

A further study conducted by Remadna (2016) [14] in Algeria to study the role of formative assessment and formative feedback in enhancing students' writing skills. The main purpose of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of formative feedback in developing learners' composition. It further attempted to find out students' attitudes towards writing skill and the idea of receiving feedback during instruction. The researcher collected the data through a questionnaire and classroom observation from first- year students of English at Biskra University. The findings demonstrated that the students had positive attitudes towards their teachers' formative feedback during instruction. The results also revealed students' awareness of the need and the importance of formative feedback in the development of the writing skills. Additionally, the results of the questionnaire discovered that instructors' emphasis on the significance of feedback to improve their students' writing during the instruction depends on students' needs and aptitudes.

The usage of formative feedback in writing courses
Guadu and Boersma (2018) [7] researched on two main purposes. The first purpose was to assess EFL instructors' beliefs and practices of formative feedback in teaching writing, and the second was to determine the relationship between instructors' beliefs and practices of formative assessment. Their findings revealed that the writing instructors have a positive belief toward the usefulness of feedback as a formative assessment, and they practiced it at a medium level. Similarly, a study done by Chaqmaqchee (2015) [3] investigated the effectiveness of the formative feedback named novel approach (peer and online feedback) over the traditional pedagogy (teacher written feedback) at Salahaddin University in Erbil. The study also aimed to examine how the novel approach can help the academic staff to provide formative feedback for students in their assignments and written drafts. The findings of this study presented that most of the teachers use the old approach which is the teacher written feedback while some instructors use the novel approach even though such types of feedback (peer and online feedback) can be reflective and make the learners critical thinkers. Finally, the results showed that the academic staff may provide the novel feedback to their teaching methods in the future.

In another study, Agbayahoun (2016) [1] explored teachers' feedback on students' writing and learners' perspectives in an EFL teaching context in the Republic of Benin. The main purpose of this study was to identify the nature of the feedback provided by the teachers and to pinpoint their reasons for giving feedback. The study also aimed to investigate learners' opinions about their instructors' feedback. The findings showed that teachers' feedback practices were not satisfactory for the majority of the EFL students, and therefore, they did not use the feedback they received from their teachers since they were only effective for the accuracy of their writing. The study also discovered that students preferred to receive some formative feedback on the content of their paper to enable them to promote the content of their written production. Similarly, Saliu-Abdulahi et al. (2017) [17] carried out a study in Norway on teachers' (formative) feedback practices in writing instruction. The study aimed to explore the use of the feedback practices in EFL writing courses for learning. The findings showed that there was limited use of formative feedback only for language accuracy which did not foster writing development and no resubmission of the students' assignment for a new assessment. The results also revealed that while the use of formative feedback was limited, there

was a need for the more systematic professional development of the teachers.

The impact of formative feedback on the writing skills

A study conducted by Imen (2020) [9] on the impact of formative assessment on EFL students' writing skills. The study aimed to identify the role of formative assessment in promoting the writing skill of first- year master students at Abdel Elhamid Ibn Badis University in Mostaganem. Both teachers and students' questionnaires illustrated a lack of formative feedback implementation in the writing classes though the data revealed that if the formative feedback were used for assessing students' writing, their writing skills would be improved. The study recommended some methods through which the writing teachers could decrease students' difficulties.

Besides, Wingate (2010) [22] studied a topic that focused on the impact of formative feedback that was provided as part of a writing intervention in a first-year undergraduate program. The main purpose of the study was to find evidence of the use of formative feedback and its resulting improvements. It also aimed to shed light on students' feelings to use feedback. The findings revealed that the students who had applied the feedback enhanced in the areas they had received comments while others who had paid little attention to the received formative feedback remained the same. The results uncovered the reasons for students' engagement or non-engagement with the feedback. The reasons related to scholars' high or low motivation which they had toward the degree program and their self-perceptions of their aptitude as writers. This study argued that to motivate students with self-perception to utilize from formative feedback, more attention needed to be paid to tone, style, and amount of feedback.

Although researchers have conducted many studies on the impact of formative feedback assessment around the world, yet few studies have been done on this topic in the context of Afghanistan. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the strategies that Afghan university instructors use to give formative feedback on students' written texts in EFL writing classrooms.

Method

This study has a qualitative design. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from four EFL university instructors labeled Teacher A-- Teacher D (TA-TD). All participants had the experience of 1-9 years of teaching English at Herat University, Afghanistan. The interview questions were sent through email to eight instructors who were inside the country and abroad. Out of the eight selected participants, four replied. Among these participants, one of them is in India, studying his Ph.D., one is in Malesia doing his graduate studies. The two other instructors are with MA in TESOL studied in the United States.

The data were analyzed and interpreted qualitatively based on major categorization. Since the interview questions were sent by email, three participants answered them by text. Only one participant recorded his voice and sent it through messenger. The researcher transcribed the answers and based on a careful and repeated reading of all interview transcriptions, meaningful ideas were designated. The resulting categories were later gathered with expressive and evocative participants' quotes. Three major categories came out of the data analysis: 1) teachers' attitudes toward using formative feedback, 2) Formative feedback strategies (online feedback, peer feedback, constructive feedback), and 3) challenges related to formative feedback in writing classes. These categories shed light on the three research questions.

Results

This section presents the analysis of the interviews, starting with the first research question regarding Afghan teachers' attitudes toward using formative feedback continuing with the second research question about formative feedback strategies used by university instructors in their EFL writing classes and finishing with the last research question regarding the obstacles teachers encounter while providing formative feedback for EFL students.

Teachers' attitudes toward using formative feedback

In general, all participants use formative feedback in their writing classrooms. The data reveals the enhancement of students' awareness of their weak points and eradicating those issues through formative feedback. In support of this idea, TC believed that "formative feedback allows students to learn from their mistakes." He reported that "It has washback and it allows them to eradicate their mistakes over time". He added that by the end of the semester, students could avoid doing mistakes they usually made due to receiving a lot of feedback during the semester. Besides, TA said, "In order for the formative assessment to be successful, teachers have to regularly check and follow-up their comments and see if the students have understood them and/or eradicated the issues". Moreover, the majority of participants believed that formative feedback improves students' writing skills and lets teachers know students' shortcomings. Similarly, TC stated "…the more students receive feedback in their writing, the better skill they will have". Furthermore, TB reported that formative feedback allows him to identify his students' writing drawbacks and it helps him fill those learning gaps. Therefore, teachers use formative feedback as a process during the semester to enable students to identify their mistakes and eliminate them to a minimum.

Teachers' formative feedback strategies

The study shows some different types of strategies that are used by Afghan university instructors to provide formative feedback for students' written assignments. *Constructive feedback* is one common type of strategy used by participants of this study. The reason why they use this type of feedback is to avoid corrective feedback. They believe that students should be capable to revise their own papers considering the formative feedback they receive on the content, grammar, and organization of their papers. For instance, the TA said that he avoided giving explicit feedback. What he did instead was providing implicit feedback. He used such type of feedback because he believed that "students' knowledge and understanding should be challenged to encourage critical thinking and learning ultimately". Similarly, TB explained that he tried posing constructive feedback by which students learn what the problem was, how it happened, and how to solve it.

Peer feedback is another strategy introduced by interviewees. Nearly all instructors believed in the effectiveness of peer feedback. However one of the

participants reported that peer feedback is not much beneficial for the Afghan context since students rarely trust their peers' comments. He added that students reacted negatively and aggressively to critical comments they received from their peers. The data illustrates the significance of peer feedback as a way that provides the opportunity for students to learn from each other (TB and TC). For instance, TB mentioned that peer feedback can be an effective way of assessing students' writing in case it is purposefully structured. He argued that teachers should provide "a hand-out rubric which consists several questions about the writing piece, its content, organization, rhetorical appeals, purposes, sensory descriptions, and so forth". The reason why he suggested a rubric was that a teacher should act as a facilitator to monitor students' peer feedback process and support them where necessary. Also, as peer feedback is beneficial for teachers and students, "it is both beneficial for the mentor and the mentee" (TD). He explained that students could act as mentors and mentees. He added that this process could be useful for mentors because they had the chance to practice what they had learned in the class. At the same time, it was beneficial for the mentees because they could receive double feedback: one from the mentor and one from the instructor. Thus, the strategy of peer feedback is highly appreciated and used in the English Department of Herat University.

A further strategy presented by participants of this study is *online feedback*. Three of the interviewees reported that online feedback was beneficial. They agreed to use online feedback to improve and assess students' writing skills. According to TB, "Online feedback can be effective". He added that "Both teachers and students can provide and receive feedback anywhere anytime beyond classroom's walls". However, one of the participants argued that online feedback would not be effective unless teachers did not follow up and encourage students. Otherwise many students may not even read the online feedback.

As the interview data shows, the instructors use different forms of online feedback. For example, TC uses the Telegram social media and the Grammarly Website for checking his students' assignments in his writing class. He made a Telegram group for the whole class. Students shared their written papers such as paragraphs or essays in the group. Then they provided feedback on each other's papers. At the same time, they could receive their instructor's feedback through that group. Besides, he used Grammarly Website for checking students' assignments. He said that Grammarly was a website "where students can upload their work and they get feedback or they check if they have problems with plagiarism with their papers or problems with mechanics of the language".

Moreover, TB uses another tool for online feedback named Google docs. He stated that Google docs have made collaborative writing possible. Through this, "both teacher and students are on the same page, doing their shares in fulfilling the project". He added that Google docs could provide ease for teachers to assign writing projects, monitor progress, and evaluate students' work. In addition, he mentioned that by using Google docs, "the students divide tasks, accomplish them, provide peer feedback and receive teacher's feedback, apply multiple revisions based on the feedback and then present the final draft". Therefore, online feedback is considered as an effective strategy which is used in EFL writing classrooms of Herat University.

Obstacles of using formative feedback assessment

All of the interviewees of the present study reported that they encounter some difficulty with students while using formative feedback strategies. One obstacle they normally face is a large number of students in writing classes. Teachers mentioned that it takes too much time to provide formative feedback for each individual student. In order to solve this problem, some teachers use a lot of in-class writing and use peer feedback inside the classroom and decrease the number of assignments (TB & TC). Another problem relates to students' different levels of proficiency regarding writing skills. Thus, "the teacher has difficulty designing writing tasks based on students' ability" (TB). In addition, the instructors' workload is too high. Besides the writing courses, they teach other classes too. Moreover, sometimes, students do not fully trust their peers' feedback which causes the task to fail reaching "its utmost intended results" (TB). Similarly, TA stated that some students hardly accept their classmates/ peers' comments. Moreover, some participants argued that besides providing formative feedback, they also explain their comments to students since some of them cannot understand what the teacher meant with those implicit indications. Hence, they spend too much time providing written and oral formative feedback for their students.

Discussion

The current study aims to explore some formative feedback strategies and their impact on students writing skills from the perspective of Afghan university teachers. In general, the interview data indicate a positive attitude toward using formative feedback and its domination in EFL writing courses at the English Department of Herat University. This domination occurs because formative feedback can be used as a process during the semester and provides some opportunities for students to revise and submit their papers. The current study is consistent with a study done by Susanne (2013) which suggests formative feedback as a while-process. In addition, based on what Sadler (1989 as cited in Saliu-Abdulahi *et al*., 2017) [17] emphasized, the data shows a strength in a systematic follow-up that can "notice the gap" in students' proficiency level and fill it through providing formative feedback. Besides, the finding of this study corresponds with what Cizek (2010) [5] found out about formative assessment. Cizek (2010) [5] reported that formative assessment endeavors to identify learners' level whether high or low, to provide ease for better learning, to enable the students to review and revise their work, to become responsible, to evaluate themselves and to do research by their own.

Moreover, the instructors in this study acknowledged the prominence of formative feedback for learning and developing students' critical thinking since it encourages students to provide more than one draft with a considerable follow-up to hand in revised texts. This finding aligns with a large number of studies (e.g., Gamlem & Munhe, 2014; Havnes *et al*., 2012; Smith, 2011) [6, 8, 19] confirmed the importance of formative feedback regarding the learning and production of well-organized texts with a few or even no mistakes.

Furthermore, the data show that the interviewees used online and peer feedback strategies to assess students' writing skills. Some of the instructors believed that online and peer feedback increase scholars' thinking skills through

discussion and negotiation while editing their peers' assignments. This is corresponding with some studies by other researchers (e.g., Kuyyogsuy, 2019 Ladyshewsky, 2013; Chun & Eric, 2013) [11, 12, 4], that it is necessary to provide a positive atmosphere for discussion and communication between learners with their peers or with their instructors in online situations. Moreover, the data illustrate that peer feedback motivates students to become confident enough to give positive or negative comments while reviewing their peer's papers. Most of the interviewees claimed that peer feedback and online feedback help students become confident and critical thinkers. They also reported that such types of feedback strategies assist their students to provide comments on their peers' assignments very easily. The results were consistent with the study by Chun and Eric (2013) [4] who proclaims that peer feedback supports students to develop their thinking skills and revise their peers' drafts with ease. It is also similar to their study which shows the effectiveness of online and peer feedback related to the development of students' skills in revising and editing peers' drafts through negotiation.

Yet, in contrast, one of the participants of this study argued that peer feedback is not very effective in the writing courses. He stated that some students "rarely trust their peers' feedback" and some believed that peer feedback was wasting their time. The finding is similar to what Rollinson (2005) [15] stated that ideas on the peer feedback have been considered as a waste of time while others consider it as an important learning experience. In addition, the interviewee mentioned that some students disagreed with their peers and they even became aggressive toward peer's feedback. Similarly, Rollinson (2005) [15] said that writers may have a negative and defensive reaction against their peers' critical comments. Therefore, if students do not trust their peers' comments, they may not correct their mistakes.

Finally, with regard to the obstacles, teachers claimed that a large number of students, students' lack of trust in peer's feedback, students' different levels of proficiency, and teachers' workload are the problems that they are facing with. Although it takes a lot of time to provide formative feedback for each student, they reported that they were trying to overcome these difficulties and help students to improve their writing skills.

Conclusion and implications
The results of this qualitative study provided some clear answers to the research questions. The questions were focusing on teachers' attitudes toward using formative feedback, the impact of formative feedback strategies on EFL students' writing skills and the obstacles teachers face while providing formative feedback. The data of the study show that university instructors have a positive outlook toward using formative feedback. The findings indicate that the majority of teachers use some strategies such as constructive written feedback, peer feedback, online feedback, and implicit feedback. They reported these strategies to help students recognize their problems and revise their papers by their own.

In addition, applying the formative feedback strategies avoid students to repeat some mistakes they usually make while writing. The findings illustrate students' authorship and ownership in writing skills. They produce more accurate and well-organized assignments. The data indicated that as

providing peer feedback is time-consuming, online and peer feedback decrease teacher's workload and increase students' sense of responsibility. Concerning the analysis of instructors' interview, it shed light on the importance of formative feedback strategies which empowers students to identify and overcome their difficulties.

However, peer feedback remains one effective part of formative assessment, still, Afghan students hesitate and cannot trust their peers' feedback. Hence, the study discuss some implications for EFL writing instructors. First, teachers should realize that even though some strategies of formative feedback are very operational to be used in the writing courses, yet students are not aware about their efficiency. According to Tang and Liu (2018) [20], there is a need for EFL writing teachers to be aware of the motivational functions of feedback on the development of the students' writing skills. For instance, as the results of current study showed, Afghan students cannot fully trust on the comments they receive from their peers. According to Harris *et al*. (2011), students should be informed about the effectiveness of peer feedback on the development of their writing skills and performance. Furthermore, they argued that teachers need to encourage students to be involved in the activity of giving feedback to their peers. More importantly, to integrate peer feedback into the writing class more efficiently, Sackstein (2017) [16] suggested teachers to create a peaceful and respectful learning atmosphere by working cooperatively with students to promote a student-led learning environment.

Second, teachers need to introduce formative feedback strategies, especially peer feedback, in details at the very beginning of the course. According to Kulprasit (2018) [10], teachers should discuss "the integration of peer feedback inside the classroom activities…at the end of the orientation phase" to recognize "any misunderstanding or problems that need to be dealt with before the students use this strategy" (p. 79). Besides, it is time-consuming for the writing teachers especially in the large classes of EFL writing courses to provide formative feedback for each student. Thus, the study suggests teachers apply peer feedback strategy in the classroom but have a close observation on pairs and groups while carrying out the peer feedback process to build a sense of trust inside students over their peers' feedback. Similarly, Yu *et al*. (2020) [23] stated that teachers should closely and dynamically monitor students' motivation and engagement while implementing any feedback strategy to reduce its negative impact.

Finally, writing teachers are recommended to create criteria-based rubrics to support and engage students with the feedback they receive from their teacher or peers. By rubrics, students can easily check their peer's writing and provide necessary feedback on the content, organization, and grammar of the paper. Harris *et al*. (2011) noted teachers can guide the students to construct the writing rubric by themselves or adapt from the ones in the students' books to establish the writing criteria matching their writing performance.

Therefore, by considering the above-mentioned implications, formative peer feedback can be employed in the classroom to maximize opportunities for learners to collaborate with their peers, and become creative and critical thinkers.

Limitations and further studies

The present study is limited in two notable areas: 1) it is not generalized to the context of Afghanistan since there were a small number of participants in a specific site. Second, all data were collected from the instructors' points of view. Despite the limitations, this study implies further studies. Although instructors' perceptions provide valuable information on the topic, the students may have quite different perceptions toward formative feedback strategies. Hence, future studies combining both teachers' and students' perceptions on larger scales may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the formative feedback strategies' impact. Further research using the reports of both Afghan instructors and students may add new insights into the impact of formative feedback on developing learners' writing skills in the context of Afghanistan.

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