

# Junior High School Teachers' Feedback Giving and Perceptions of the CSE Writing Scale

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## Abstract

Chinese EFL learners' deficiencies in writing have become increasingly apparent in their secondary education, especially in the originality of ideas and the logic of arguments. However, they may not be made aware of this as many teachers still use traditional feedback such as a single score to mark and report on students' performance. The Writing Scale of China's Standards of English Language Ability (hereinafter referred to as the CSE Writing Scale) released in 2018 provides a framework of reference against which Chinese students' English writing ability can be assessed. It consists of descriptors of writing ability in different contexts and genres. It makes detailed and analytical feedbacking possible and has far-reaching implications for the development of formative assessment in English teaching. Nevertheless, to date, there has been scarce empirical research as to whether teachers actually use the Writing Scale in teaching and whether they are able to utilize it in an effective way.

This study aims to investigate the current situation of feedback giving in junior high school and teachers' views of and attitudes towards the application of the CSE Writing Scale. Through a questionnaire and interviews with the teachers, the study revealed three major findings. Firstly, although teachers were aware of the importance of giving feedback on students' writing, they had problem providing individualized comments on student writing. Secondly, students had difficulty understanding teachers' feedback. Lastly, teachers were generally not familiar with the CSE Writing Scale and concerned whether it could be effectively used in the process of feedback giving. Conclusions are drawn together with implications and recommendations for teachers to resolve the problems identified.

**Key words:** Teacher feedback; Formative assessment; CSE Writing Scale

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Traditional written feedback on English compositions in the form of a single score tends to be abstract, superficial and low in quality, thus causing a range of negative impacts on writers (Yu, Geng, Liu, & Zheng, 2021; Zamel, 1985). In 2018, China's Standards of English Language Ability (hereinafter referred to as the CSE scales) was released and implemented. As an integral component of the CSE, the CSE Writing Scale provides researchers and teachers with a unified standard that is closest to the learning situation of Chinese students. It can be used in a wide range of language teaching, learning, and testing contexts (Zhang & Deng, 2019). More specifically, it is believed to have profound implications for the development of formative assessment in writing considering its significant roles in clarifying the concept of writing ability, deconstructing teaching objectives, refining teaching content, designing teaching tasks and enriching writing feedback.

The prerequisite for formative writing assessment is that teachers should provide timely and feasible feedback for students in the teaching process and actively guide them to develop their self-evaluation and remedial skills. According to Stevens and Levi (2013), "good teachers give frequent feedback to learners and are clear about their expectations and plans, and the use of well-designed assessment scales can achieve both of these purposes" (pp.111-112). In the implementation of formative feedback by using proper writing standards, teachers' attitudes feedback giving and their subsequent teaching procedures can directly affect the effectiveness of their instruction. However, there seem to be misunderstandings or misinterpretations about formative assessment amongst many Chinese teachers (Li, 2020), which is mainly reflected in equating formative assessment with afterschool tests, emphasizing "assessment criteria" rather than "formative" process, simply regarding assessment as a disposable tool and ignoring the holistic and systematic nature of formative strategies. Given the anticipated benefits of the CSE Writing Scale for the implementation of formative assessment in writing, this paper will explore the current status of feedback giving in junior high schools and teachers' attitudes towards the application of the CSE Writing Scale in English writing classes with an aim to promote effective utilization of the CSE Writing Scale.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Formative Assessment and Writing Feedback

Formative assessment is a kind of process assessment closely related to teaching and learning, which mainly refers to the use of regular assessments to detect learning effect in the learning process. It can inform teaching and learning by collecting information about students' performance and outcomes. Through adjusting instructional activities and strategies in the classroom, formative assessment can ultimately achieve the purpose of improving teachers' teaching effectiveness, promoting students' motivation, and enhancing students' learning ability, attitude, and self-efficacy (Lee, 2011; Lee & Coniam, 2013).

Feedback plays a key role in the process of formative assessment. Any teacher assessment that diagnoses student difficulties and provides constructive feedback can have a significant impact on students' learning (Black & William, 1998). Feedback in writing instruction not only provides a way for teachers to evaluate students' writing, but also allows students to take an objective standpoint and gain a clear understanding of their writing development (Lewis, 2007). In addition, feedback allows the student to identify the gap between what he or she has written and what he or she wants to express or is expected to express, so that the student can act on the feedback to improve writing in proper ways.

Empirical studies have revealed encouraging results regarding feedback in formative assessment of writing. Wingate (2010) found that students who had utilized their feedback comments improved in areas which were previously criticized. Bader, Burner, Iversen and Varga (2019) indicated that students perceived teacher feedback positively and highlighted the significance of teacher praise. Through the use of portfolio including multiple drafting they benefited from more opportunities to revise and resubmit their work. It is worth noting that the benefit of formative assessment may maximise when the learning objectives and assessment criteria are made explicit to both teachers and students (Li, 2019).

Language teachers' beliefs about writing instruction exert influence on classroom practices. Their perceptions of the role of feedback generally influences the approaches, the amount of the detail, and the time and effort expended on giving feedback. Despite the many advantages associated with formative feedback, researchers have found problems in the process of giving feedback on formative assessment of writing. For example, written feedback in formative assessment tends to serve summative functions (Lee, 2007). Many teachers tend to adopt a traditional and authoritative position in giving feedback while neglecting students' dominant position in the writing process. Students may find teacher feedback difficult to follow up and lack of teacher support and modelling (Burner, 2015), which may have an intimidating and discouraging impact on the students. Thus, it is important to improve the effectiveness of teachers' feedback and to increase the possibility that students understand the feedback by viewing feedback as a dialogue rather than just a transfer of information. When providing feedback, teachers should provide more opportunities for learners to reflect on the learning process. As emphasised by Burner (2015), teachers' and students' mutual understanding of assessment is vital for making formative assessment a fully beneficial tool for learning.

Nevertheless, formative assessment feedback in EFL writing has remained an under-researched area so far. There has been no consensus as to what formative feedback actually consists of and how it is incorporated into regular classroom teaching. Moreover, formative assessment is often misunderstood in reality, and teachers encounter a range of difficulties in implementing formative assessment in teaching writing, particularly in the EFL context in China.

## 2.2 The Writing Scales of China's Standards of English Language Ability

The CSE aims to create a bridge between learning, teaching and evaluation across different stages of education, and the CSE Writing Scale plays an important role in this respect. By investigating the pedagogical value of CSE from the perspective of language economics, He and Zhang (2017) confirmed that teachers can take advantage of its characteristics of comprehensiveness and representativeness in the establishment of consistent indicators for feedback giving, and scientifically describe the various levels of English ability during each learning stage and set objectives that should be attained.

According to Zhao (2009), the scoring criteria of writing feedback should be based on the idea of language proficiency or syllabus. They should also follow the principles of practicality so that teachers can grasp the characteristics of students' composition, in which the most important content is checked, with relatively quantitative indicators or dimensions. The CSE Writing Scale is a scientific and operational scale, which is a source of feedback for teaching writing. Teachers are advised to understand the main dimensions of language writing ability in the context of communication purpose, organize the relevant descriptors, extract the quality descriptors and the main writing performance from the Writing Scale, and then combine them with the typical characteristics of writing tasks. Based on the above points, teachers can form a multidimensional evaluation criterion for giving feedback so that students' writing skills can be comprehensively enhanced through the application of the Writing Scale.

Since the introduction of the Scale, domestic scholars in China have been actively studying the application of the sub-scale in English writing teaching and research. For example, He and Xiao (2019) explored the application of the scale in the establishment of teaching objectives, the design of writing tasks, the monitoring of writing process strategies and the multidimensional evaluation of writing compositions. Liang (2020) further explored the practical measures of dovetailing the scale with English writing teaching. Wang (2021) made an institutional application of the written expression strategies described in the scale to the teaching of outline writing of texts in order to provide university students with writing strategies and develop their writing skill. An and Wu (2020) have also employed the scale as a measuring instrument to investigate the English writing ability of senior high school students. Comparatively, less attention has been paid to its practical application into the compulsory education stage.

## 3. METHODS

Based on the research gaps identified in literature review, this study aims at investigating junior high school teachers' practices in the process of formative assessment of English writing and their attitudes toward the CSE Writing Scale during its implementation. To this end, it attempts to address the following research questions (RQs).

RQ1 What kind of feedback do junior high school teachers give when assessing English writing?

RQ2 What do teachers think of the effect of the feedback they provide on students' writing?

RQ3 What are teachers' perceptions of and attitudes toward the application of the CSE Writing Scale into giving feedback in writing assessment?

## 3.1 Subjects

A total of 68 English teachers from two local schools in Yancheng participated in the study, including 43 females (63%) and 25 males (37%). Approximately 40% of the participants were aged between 31 to 40, while 20% of them came from the 21-30, 41-50 and 50+ groups respectively. Around 30% of them had worked in the education sector for 6 to 10 years, followed by 11 to 15 years (25%), 1 to 5 years (22%), 16 to 20 years (19%), and over 21 years (4%). Among them, 40% were teaching Junior Year 1, 32% Year 2 and 28% Year 3 when the study was conducted. After the completion of the questionnaire, three teachers from the same school were invited to participate in the follow-up in-depth interview.

## 3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was developed to address the aforementioned research questions. The first part of the questionnaire elicited subjects' demographic information such as gender, age, years of teaching, and the grade they were teaching. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 10 questions and statements, which were divided into three groups (see Table 1). The first set of questions aimed to find out what kind of feedback junior high school teachers give when assessing English writing (Questions 1 to 4). The second set of questions aimed to understand teachers' attitudes toward the effect of their writing feedback (Questions 5 to 7). English teachers' attitudes toward applying the Writing Scale and the main factors they perceive as influencing their implementation formed the third set of questions (questions 8 to 10).

## Table 1Questions used in questionnaire

No.	Item
1	I find writing to be the most difficult language skill to assess. (RQ1)
2	I give each student in the classroom feedback on their writing. (RQ1)
3	I have standardized criteria when giving feedback. (RQ1)
4	I only focus on grammar and structure issues when giving feedback on students' writing. (RQ1)
5	My assessment feedback will have a positive impact students' writing skills. (RQ2)
6	My students took on the role of "listeners" during the feedback session in the writing classroom. (RQ2)
7	My students will be confused about the results of feedback on English writing tasks. (RQ2)
8	Are you familiar with the CSE Writing Scale? Have you received any training in this area? (RQ3)
9	What do you think are the positive effects of a multidimensional evaluation scale such as the CSE Writing Scale? (RQ3)
10	What obstacles do you think will be encountered in the implementation of CSE-based assessment of English writing? (RQ3)

A five-point Likert scale was used to rate the level of agreement (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree) in Questions 1 to 7. The third set of questions was designed to elicit open-ended answers in order to understand teachers' perceptions about the application of scale evaluation. All of the questions, options and the content of the interview were conducted in Chinese. The questionnaire data were analyzed with MS Excel software to calculate the frequency and proportions of the responses to each question.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers selected from the same group of subjects of the questionnaire in an attempt to obtain more indepth teacher perceptions about the prospect of applying the Writing Scale in the area of evaluative feedback. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and face to face with the teachers respectively. Each interview was transcribed for further content analysis and used to support the results of the questionnaire.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Teachers' Feedback on Students' Writing

The first four questions in the questionnaire are used to answer RQ1. The results of Q1 in Figure 1 show that the majority of teachers believed that writing was one of the most difficult language skills to assess and over 20% of teachers remained undecided about this question. Meanwhile, 51.48% of teachers agreed and 11.76% of teachers strongly agreed that they gave feedback on each student's writing in their regular assessment. From Q3 and Q4, we can see that more than 75% of the teachers who gave feedback on writing preferred the language correctness criterion, and these teachers consistently reported that they had fixed criteria when scoring different writings. These results were in line with teachers' comments in the interviews.



#### Figure 1 Teachers' feedback on students' writing

Teacher A: "Writing is the last part of a unit and also the presentation for the entire unit. The first goal I have to ensure in this stage is that students should master the important grammar and vocabulary of the unit. I also repeatedly emphasized the important sentences in the presentation section of the classroom inter-assessment. For most students, if they can write the sentences correctly, they are considered to have reached my standard."

Teacher B: "It is not possible to mark students' written work every time, because some students are weak in their English foundation, coupled with their worse handwriting, and there are so many exercise books that cannot be read or marked each time they are handed in."

These comments indicate although teachers regarded writing as a basic language ability, they tended to give homogeneous feedback to students' compositions because of time constraints and heavy workload.

The findings reveal that although teachers were aware of the importance of cultivating writing skills and the learning differences among students, the tasks assigned to each student were the same. As Tomlinson (2017) has summarized, not every student learns and writes at the same pace or level, and each student has their own preferences related to their interests, learning style, or language ability, to name just a few sources of variation. Therefore, the difficulty with writing assessment, according to the teachers, is that the same writing task and differences among individual students make the feedbacking process difficult for teachers. To make matters worse, teachers tend to use corrective feedback, marking errors all over the writing sheet but rarely think about how to improve students' writing ability. They see this kind of feedback as the most convenient way to reflect on what students have learned in a unit and consolidate that knowledge. Differentiated instruction is one of the strategies that can be used to meet the learning needs of all students, which is crucial, but the value of this is generally not reflected in school writing feedback as discovered in the present study.

## 4.2 Teachers' Perceptions of the Effect of the Feedback on Students' Writing

To answer this question, the results of the analysis of Questions 4, 5, and 6 in Table 1 were used. Teachers agreed that their writing feedback was of benefit to students' writing ability (see Figure 2). However, many teachers overlooked the important fact that motivation is a key factor in writing practices and the driving force it can provide for the development of students' writing ability. Responses to Q6 show that most teachers (57.85%) tended to overlook students' roles in the feedbacking process, but pointed out students' mistakes and shortcomings unilaterally. Teachers' negative feedback can have two effects: feedback which focuses on the accuracy can bring improvement to students, but it also has a detrimental effect on students' initiative and motivation. This can also be seen from the results of Q7, where 30.88% of the teachers perceived that students also had negative reaction towards the results of the feedback.



## Figure 2

#### Teachers' perceptions of the effect of feedback

This is also echoed by the interview data. Teacher A commented: "When students get their worksheets, what they care most about is what grade the teacher wrote this time. If I write an 'A' under everyone's essay someday, they won't care about the essay anymore, and they won't even listen to the teacher-student assessment in class because I won't collect it again. When I find a poorly written essay with relatively more mistakes, I may ask them to rewrite it again."

From the above, it can be found that students' negative attitudes toward teachers' feedback such as disappointment and confusion come from two sources. One was the absence of explicit planning and explanation of feedback given in the assessment process. Teachers ignore the main character of students in formative assessment when setting teaching objectives and activities, and they fail to provide guidance for students to complete self-assessment and revision of their writing independently, thus the most important procedure of formative assessment is neglected. The other is the lack of multidimensional assessment of writing and the difficulty of making students feel selfefficacy through corrective feedback. Multidimensional feedback allows students to take a analytical view of their work and have a clearer perception of their writing ability. Inconsistent and ambiguous writing standards or requirements that are set in the pre-writing session can lead to students' confusion about the reasons behind the teacher's feedback, thus preventing them from discovering the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing.

As this feedback pattern develops, students quickly lose their goals and confidence in writing. This is in line with previous studies. For example, Lee and Coniam (2013) found significant barriers to the implementation and development of assessment for learning in writing. Despite teachers' efforts to implement assessment in writing, they were required to follow certain routines, such as having to respond carefully to students' written errors. This not only caused teacher fatigue but also had an adverse effect on students' motivation and confidence.

## 4.3 Teachers' Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Using CSE Writing Scale

Based on the answers to Q8, the majority of teachers at this school said that they had used the writing assessment scales in their teaching, but they had not received systematic training and were unfamiliar with the CSE. More attention was focused on the teaching of writing. When teachers were asked about the benefits of writing scales, they agreed that the Writing Scales could have positive effects on students. These positive impacts included the application of writing strategies and learning motivations. However, some teachers indicated that the scales used in the classroom were mostly derived from the Internet, which made it impossible to investigate their feasibility, not to mention, these rubrics were detailed and redundant, covering too many aspects, and were demanding with regard to the students' ability in the class. In short, teachers had not possessed sufficient knowledge of the scales and were unable to design scales which were appropriate for the different genres and requirements of the writing tasks and students of different abilities.

In the previous question, teachers expressed support and positive expectations for the implementation of the ability scale in their teaching. However, concerns were also voiced by some teachers. Teacher C thought it would be difficult to apply the descriptors of the scale to a class with a weaker foundation at this stage. Conversely, teacher B considered that the application of the Writing Scale would have to be carried out over a long period of uninterrupted implementation to achieve some results, which would be a challenge for teachers in terms of time and professional capacity.

There are two main points regarding the help teachers would like to receive in using the Writing Scales: the first point is that they can attend more seminars on writing assessment and CSE to gain more practical experience through learning. The second point is to include comprehensible feedback and self-assessment scales for students according to the features of different writing tasks.

The results of RQ3 show an increase in the frequency of teachers' use of the Writing Scales compared with the research conducted by Feng and Yan (2018), but the awareness of the writing sub-scale is still inadequate, given that teachers usually end a lesson with a brief presentation of the Writing Scale found online to students and do not continue to utilize the Writing Scale in subsequent sessions. Meanwhile, the scales used in writing class are not contextualized and have little practical value. This is where teachers would like to receive support in gaining more knowledge and experience with the CSE Writing Scale and in designing feedback and self-assessment scales that are appropriate to the students' ability.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

## 5.1 Major Findings

The purpose of this research was to investigate English teachers' perceptions of the effect of their writing feedback and their attitudes toward the Writing Scale of CSE. Through the collected data of both questionnaires and interviews with teachers, the following findings were obtained.

Firstly, teachers' setting of the same writing tasks for students of different writing foundations and their application of corrective feedback with the same writing requirements could increase the difficulty of giving writing feedback.

Secondly, a common issue in teachers' usage of the CSE Writing Scales is to regard the scale as a one-time tool for providing writing feedback, which reveals that the benefits of using the scale in writing feedback to improve students' motivation and increase students' self-awareness of their writing ability are not realized by teachers.

Thirdly, teachers' knowledge and experience with the use of CSE the Writing Scale are inadequate, hence the support they look for is reflected in this inadequacy. In addition, teachers also have many concerns about the implementation of the Writing Scale, such as the excessive energy it would consume, the requirement for continuous guidance to develop students' self-assessment ability and the development of writing learning strategies takes a long time to cultivate.

## 5.2 Implications

Based on the teachers' responses to why they struggle with English writing feedback and instruction, along with the conclusions drawn from them, the following implications and recommendations are made for practitioners.

Firstly, teachers are recommended to use differentiated descriptors in the CSE Writing Scale for students at different levels. CSE classifies English ability into nine levels from low to high, based on the current situation of Chinese English learners' proficiency, where junior high school students are generally at Level Three. Therefore, for students with different levels and abilities, teachers can grade their English writing abilities according to the descriptors set by the Writing Scale and design writing tasks according to students' ability. Only then, in the follow-up feedback, can teachers and students have a clearer understanding of the gap between students' own ability and the goals they should achieve, enabling differentiated instruction to cater for students' needs in a better way.

Secondly, teachers should adhere to "student-centered" writing feedback in formative assessment. For many years, educators have been working to transfer the subject of education from teachers to students. In order to improve students' participation in writing class, both teachers and students can decide their next steps based on the feedback

from the staged writing proficiency assessment form, and teachers can adjust their teaching content accordingly, while students can identify their strengths and weaknesses based on the feedback to determine their own learning plans and learning goals. What is also significant about the scale is that the feedback descriptors are all affirmative and the language is clear and concise, which helps teachers build students' self-confidence when giving feedback and increases students' self-awareness of their writing ability.

Thirdly, more training programmes and CSE-based teaching and assessment resources should be offered for teachers to gain a better understanding of the CSE Writing Scale and utilize it more appropriately and effectively. Due to time constraints and discontinuity of writing classes, it is a challenge to evaluate the multidimensional aspects of students' writing during a particular class session, so teachers can selectively decide which aspect to assess in particular according to the genre and characteristics of the writing tasks and the schedule of the school day, so as to gain more information. Moreover, in the current era with the epidemic as the background, research on the difficulties of integrating online and offline education and the breakthrough path have also become a hot topic of education reform, in which online courses can provide technical support for writing assessment. If CSE-based writing assessment software can be developed in the future, then teachers can receive the data analyzed by the platform and can also provide timely guidance based on the online collection of students' self-assessments, while students can also get clearer and more analytical and detailed feedback, thus reducing the burden on teachers and students.

## 5.3 Limitations

The main limitations of the study are related to the research methods. Firstly, the data analysis is at a relatively superficial level and has some limitations. Secondly, the small number of subjects in this study and the fragmented sample are also insufficient to present a comprehensive picture of the actual situation of teachers in certain areas, so the generalizability of the findings needs to be enhanced. In addition, although this research is geared toward teachers, students' opinions are not fully appreciated by teachers to their full extent and the role of the student in applying the CSE should be taken into account as well. In future research, it would be meaningful to explore how teachers can obtain more training and guidance in applying the CSE Writing Scales.

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