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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

EFL College Students' Experiences and Attitudes Towards Teacher-Student Writing Conferences

Chun-Chun Yeh
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A substantial body of research has demonstrated the important role of providing feedback in students' writing development. Among the various feedback methods, the teacher-student writing conference has often been rated by learners as the most beneficial to writing development, but research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions of writing conferences is scant. Aiming to investigate students' experiences and attitudes towards writing conferences, this study collected data through questionnaires and individual interviews with 34 EFL students from 2 college English writing classes. Findings suggested that the students held high expectations and gave high ratings on the helpfulness and success of the conferences that they experienced. Affectively, the questionnaire results indicated a generally positive experience, but the interviews revealed that attending conferences provoked anxiety in some learners. Most significantly, the study found that although students did not openly reject setting and leading the agenda, most were not enthusiastic about taking on the responsibility of establishing the direction of the conference.

Keywords: second language writing, writing conferences, student attitudes, conferencing approaches

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A substantial body of research has demonstrated the important role of providing feedback in students' writing development (Hyland, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Among the various feedback methods, three are perhaps the most frequently adopted in the writing classroom: teacher written feedback, teacher-student conferencing, and peer feedback (Hyland, 2003; Keh, 1990). While peer feedback has been lauded as having various benefits, studies have shown that students generally prefer feedback provided by their teachers (Nelson & Carson, 1998; Zhang, 1995). Although generally considered to contribute to student writing improvement, teacher written feedback has sometimes been found to appear either ambiguous or abstract to learners. To help students benefit from teacher feedback, many writing instructors adopt the conference method to provide one-on-one tutorial assistance.

A writing conference refers to a "private conversation between teacher and student about the student's writing or writing processes" (Sperling, 1991, p. 132). A central concept that informs the practice of writing conferences is zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD refers to the distance between what learners can do independently and what they can with assistance of a more capable person. Thus, the notion of the ZPD indicates two features of human development. First, "learning with assistance or instruction is a normal, common and important feature of human mental development" (Mercer, 1994, p. 102). Second, a person's learning or problem-solving ability can be augmented by "the right kind of cognitive support" (p. 102). This support, which can only be provided by more knowledgeable persons around the learner, is usually referred to as *scaffolding*. Research has confirmed that, for scaffolding to succeed, tutors need to have knowledge of the task and an understanding of the learner's background so that they can provide appropriate feedback (Thompson, 2009). They also need to make ongoing diagnoses to assess the learner's current ability to adjust instructional strategies accordingly (Puntambekar & Hubscher, 2005). Ideally, such scaffolding and ongoing diagnosis can be best enacted through one-on-one teacher-student writing conferences.

Literature Review

Various effective advantages have been claimed for writing conferences.[1] Rose (1982) contended that in a writing conference teachers can push students to think out loud beyond abstract ideas and more deeply into their own arguments. By showing puzzlement as a genuine reader, teachers can help students perceive the real need to explain and clarify their ideas in writing. Teachers, as readers and critics, also benefit from conferencing in the sense that they can better understand student writers' intentions and offer more useful feedback. These one-on-one interactions also offer opportunities for shyer students who may not usually speak up in class to ask questions or express their opinions (Williams, 2005). While these advantages have found enthusiastic advocates who even suggested replacing regular classroom teaching with conferencing (Carnicelli, 1980), not all of the touted benefits have been investigated and verified by empirical research.

A central component in individual writing consultations is instructional strategies, which can be broadly classified as directive and nondirective, the former referring to the teacher giving explicit suggestions as to what learners can or should do to improve the composition, and the latter employing leading questions to help writers formulate their own revision plans (Williams & Severino, 2004). Directive approaches are characterized by telling, teacher authority, and dominance, while nondirective techniques feature questioning, learner agency, and ownership. Therefore, this directiveness dimension includes two aspects: conference interaction (telling or questioning) and agenda control (teacher's or learner's). In terms of conference interaction, writing specialists such as Murray (1985) and Harris (1986) warned against teachers being directive and dominating the conference talk, arguing that a directive approach encouraged students to "become dependent on the teacher for identifying problems and developing solutions" (Murray, 1985, p. 148). Similarly, Duke (1975) maintained that using a nondirective approach can avoid teacher overdirection and

1 Existing research on teacher-student conferences is still limited; therefore, throughout the paper, tutorial research in the writing center will be referred to when its findings and implications are deemed relevant and transferable to the current study context, but it is acknowledged that the two consultation contexts are neither equivalent nor interchangeable.

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encourage learners to think for themselves and accept responsibility for the writing process. Going a step further, Brooks (1991) proposed a "minimalist tutoring" approach in which tutors pose as "an interested outsider" (p. 4) and have students read their papers aloud to find usage errors, awkward wording, and even logic problems without teacher intervention. While this collaborative stance places due emphasis on students' ownership over their writing, doubt has been raised about the fit between nondirective approaches and L2 students. To begin with, L2 students may be obliged to play roles that they are not prepared for or feel comfortable with (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). For example, they may be expected to assume an active role and set the agenda for the conferencing session, when instead they are most accustomed to listening passively to teacher lecturing. Powers (1993) further pointed out that L2 students and native-speaking students seeking conferencing may have different study backgrounds and learning needs. While native speakers can usually locate their own problems through reading aloud, L2 writers, typically "more familiar with written than with spoken English" (p. 239), are seldom capable of "hearing" the language correctly. Also, while native-speaking writers may only be seeking to have their self-confidence boosted, L2 writers seeking conferencing may be "struggling with an unfamiliar culture, audience, and rhetoric" (p. 241). Therefore, the nondirective approach that usually serves native speakers well may not meet the needs of L2 writers. This claim is supported by a study of L2 learners' tutorials (Williams, 2004), where nondirective tutoring on some occasions resulted in "almost absurdly circuitous interactions, in which the writer engaged in a sort of guessing game" (p. 195).

A second aspect of the directiveness dimension is the teacher's or learner's control of the agenda. Teachers have often been cautioned against controlling the agenda, on the premise that the success of a writing conference hinges on whether learners are allowed to set the agenda. For example, Duke (1975) emphasized that students should be encouraged "to talk about [their] writing problems and in the process assume the initiative for establishing the direction of the conference" (p. 45). Walker (1992) also observed that conferences rated as successful by both tutors and students are those in which the student "owns the agenda and thus decides, in a fundamental way, what the talk in the conference will be about" (p. 79).

Such conferences are successful, Walker further explained, because only when it is the students' agendas, topics, and concerns will they be "truly listening" and "ready to learn" from answers provided by teachers to "questions [students] themselves are asking at this moment about their own writing" (p. 80). However, it should also be noted that not all learners are keen to be in control or find agenda setting vital to their learning in the writing conference. For example, Weigle and Nelson (2004) found that learners without specific goals for writing improvement may still find tutorials successful even when tutors had rather tight control of the session agenda. They further observed that these learners actually chose to let the tutor or teacher set the agenda, which not only allowed the tutorial to be conducted more efficiently but also met learners' need for L2 information.

While the amount of research on writing conferences remains relatively low (Ferris, 2003), studies focusing on student views of the practice are even rarer. Most of the existing research on student views of conferencing actually compare various feedback methods in the writing classroom, instead of investigating the conference method itself. These studies generally found that teacher oral feedback in writing conferences was perceived favorably. For example, Saito (1994) surveyed 39 adult ESL learners and found that most students preferred teacher feedback—oral feedback in particular—to either peer-correction or self-correction. Warner's (1998) investigation of student beliefs about writing feedback found tutorials rated as the most beneficial, followed by use of the multiple-draft system and peer review. Curtis (as cited in Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998) similarly reported that among the four investigated teacher-centered feedback methods (teacher, oral, one-to-one; teacher, written; teacher, oral, small group; teacher, oral, whole group), one-to-one teacher oral feedback was ranked the highest. ESL graduate students in Silva, Reichelt, and Lax-Farr's (1994) study also considered conferences to be the most important part of their academic writing course.

While these studies compared students' preferences among various methods of feedback, Liu's (2009) research focused exclusively on learners' expectations and perceptions of the writing conference. Liu obtained data through a questionnaire and interviews with ESL and American students in a U.S. university, and her results indicated that receiving teacher

suggestions on how to improve writing was identified by both groups of students as the primary goal of the writing conference. However, compared with American students, more ESL students expected the instructor to point out all grammar errors in their drafts, and they also wanted to ask the instructor about the requirements of the essay. Furthermore, ESL students expected the instructor to directly tell them what to do, rather than telling the instructor their own intentions. In other words, they appeared less inclined to take an active role in conferencing interactions. Finally, while all students perceived writing conferences positively, some ESL learners experienced anxiety because they were unfamiliar with the practice and nervous about talking with the teacher in English.

These findings suggest that to evaluate and assess the influence of writing conferences on L2 student learning, more research is needed on factors such as learner expectations, affective feelings, and attitudes towards writing conferences. For instance, while Liu's (2009) study delineated ESL students' expectations for writing conferences, we still do not know whether those expectations are shared by learners studying in EFL contexts, where teacher and students often share the same first language. Second, studies have attempted to identify factors influencing student evaluation of conferencing success, but they rarely asked students to report why they evaluated a conference as either successful or unsuccessful. Furthermore, not much is known about learners' affective experiences with participating in writing conferences except that conferencing was thought to afford shyer students an opportunity to ask questions in private. Finally, while learner control of the agenda is often identified as a key to successful conferences, little research has explored students' attitudes towards agenda setting. This paper thus attempts to explore student experiences and attitudes towards teacher-student writing conferences in an EFL setting by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are EFL college students' expectations for teacher-student writing conferences?
2. How do students perceive the helpfulness and success of writing conferences?
3. What are students' affective experiences with participating in

writing conferences?

4. What are students' attitudes towards setting the agenda in the writing conference?

Methods

Participants

This study recruited two teachers and 34 undergraduate students (5 male and 29 female) from two college-level English writing classes in two different national universities in southern Taiwan. Class A students (n = 13) were attending a second-year writing course, all with some conferencing experience in the previous year (one conference per semester). Class B students (n = 21) were in their first year of college study and had no prior conferencing experience. Notwithstanding this difference in conferencing experience, both groups of students were included in the current study because they shared similar educational backgrounds in many aspects, including institutional context (public universities), major (English language and literature), and class type (required writing classes offered to English majors).

The two teachers teaching the two classes were specialized in English literature and linguistics respectively, and neither had received formal training in writing instruction. The Class A teacher had been teaching college-level writing almost every year for nearly 20 years. He assigned single-draft writing, but students were given the option of submitting a revised draft for a possible higher grade. When marking essays, he identified and corrected all the student errors in addition to writing lengthy electronic comments as needed. He recalled that at the beginning of his teaching career, he was not familiar with the conference method although he occasionally held brief writing consultations with individual students in the classroom. He later realized that conferencing seemed to be a common practice among his colleagues teaching composition and started to hold regular writing conferences outside the classroom. He reported using conferences to help with individual students' problems so as not to embarrass students in front of their classmates. He also noted that in conferences he mainly dealt with students' language problems because

higher-order concerns such as organization had been covered in classroom teaching. He did not require students to prepare for the writing conferences partly because they were not given opportunities to see their marked essays beforehand.

As for the Class B teacher, this was only her second time teaching composition. She required three drafts for each of the composition assignments during the semester. Nevertheless, instead of reading student essays herself, she had a trained teaching assistant correct errors, make comments, and grade student writing. She would scan through the assistant's comments and perhaps circle errors that the assistant had missed. She recalled that when she began teaching writing, she modeled her syllabus after that of an experienced writing instructor colleague, including the practice of conferencing with individual students. She identified rapport building as the principal advantage of the conference method. These one-on-one conferences, she explained, tended to shorten the distance between teacher and students, resulting in students' greater willingness to approach the teacher for assistance after the scheduled writing conferences. She also noted that to foster active learning she required students to read comments in advance and initiate questions during conferences. However, student questions in the conferences were varied, ranging from those specific to the drafts being discussed to more general questions such as ways to improve writing abilities or tips for preparing for TOEFL writing tests.

As such, the two teachers' feedback and conferencing approaches were strikingly different. Yet, the inclusion of these two teachers in the study was deemed not only appropriate but also informative because their differing teaching approaches represent the variety of experiences that EFL students may encounter in the writing classroom. Studying how learners' expectations and attitudes may be affected by these two contrasting approaches can thus provide a realistic insight into EFL writing instruction.

The Writing Classes and Conferences

Both Class A and Class B were structured around their adopted textbooks, which were organized by rhetorical patterns, such as process analysis, comparison and contrast, and argumentation. Students in the two classes wrote one essay assignment after finishing one unit of the textbook.

Class A students were given the freedom to choose topics for their essays, but they had to write in the rhetorical patterns featured in individual units. Class B students were assigned specific topics to write on, such as "an unforgettable experience" and "how to make a good impression at a job interview."

The writing conferences of the two classes shared similarities, such as the length of conferences (around 10–15 minutes), format (one-on-one), venue (instructor's office), and language (students' first language, Mandarin Chinese). In the weeks when conferences were held, classes were cancelled and students signed up for appointments to meet individually with the teacher. However, the two classes differed in the number of writing assignments and conferences. Class A students wrote four essays in the semester and had four conferences with the teacher, each held within one week after assignment submission, while Class B students wrote six short compositions and had two conferences with the teacher, the first dealing with the first three compositions and the second the last three writing pieces.

Although conference discourse was outside the scope of the current study, a perusal of the conference data suggested a noticeable contrast in teacher-learner interaction between the two teachers' conferences. Class A teacher usually started the conference by giving an evaluative comment (e.g., "Basically, compared with your classmates, you did a rather good job."), followed by explanations and suggestions based on the comments he had already written on student drafts. These conferences typically comprised very long teacher turns interspersed with learner backchanneling. Only on a few occasions did students respond to seek clarification or justify their writing. Class A conferences usually ended with the teacher announcing, "That's it for today." On the other hand, turn-taking in Class B teacher's conferences was frequent. She usually started conferences by inviting students to raise questions. Moreover, she did not often elaborate on her response; instead, she allowed extended wait time for the students to produce more questions. Consequently, almost all of the questions in Teacher B's conferences were initiated by students, and quite a number of conferences ended with learners announcing that they had no more questions.

Finally, it is also worth noting that both teachers adopted Chinese for conferencing interaction as contrasted with English for classroom teaching. Class A teacher explained that Chinese, a shared mother tongue between teacher and students, was more suitable in conferencing because conference talk felt like private conversation rather than classroom discourse. He added that using Chinese could ensure effective communication, a matter of the utmost importance in conducting conferences. Similarly, Class B teacher was concerned that her students may not be able to express themselves freely in English and believed that interacting in Chinese could help reduce anxiety and encourage participation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were collected through questionnaires and individual interviews. While questionnaires can measure attitudes, opinions, and beliefs in an efficient way, accompanying interviews are often recommended to obtain data that can help interpret and understand questionnaire responses (Gillham, 2000). To gauge students' conferencing experiences and attitudes, two questionnaires were written, the first administered around the middle of the semester after the first teacher-student conferences were held, and the second given towards the end of the semester, when Class A students had undergone four writing conferences and Class B two. The first questionnaire collected students' background information and their initial attitudes towards writing conferences, including their expectations and perceived helpfulness of writing conferences. The second questionnaire contained two parts. Part 1 asked the students to evaluate the overall success of the semester's conferences on a scale of 1–10 (1 being *not at all successful* and 10 being *very successful*). Part 2 included eight Likert-scale items probing students' affective experiences and attitudes towards the writing conference. However, only four items (three about affective feelings and one about agenda setting) pertinent to the focus of this paper were selected for analysis.

The students were each interviewed twice, immediately after they had completed the two questionnaires in the middle and end of the semester. These interviews, each lasting between 10 and 15 minutes, were intended to allow the participants to elaborate on their responses to the issues

raised in the questionnaires. They also probed students' experiences and attitudes towards writing conferences through additional questions such as, "What do you think writing conferences are for? How do you compare classroom instruction and conference talk?" In addition, each of the two teacher participants was interviewed for about an hour to understand their teaching philosophies, reasons for adopting the conference method, and actual conferencing practices. All the interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, Mandarin Chinese, to ensure free expression of their experiences and opinions. These interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed to prepare for analysis. The teacher-student conferences of the two classes were also audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. However, due to space constraints, only limited data obtained from this source are reported in the current study.

Simple descriptive statistics were calculated on the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires. The students' interview responses were coded to identify which of the two interviews they were receiving (I1 or I2) and whether they were from Class A or Class B (A01 to A13 and B01 to B21). These interview data were analyzed by the researcher using the constant comparison method as described in Glaser and Strauss (1967). They were read and reread to identify keywords that then served as the basis for codes and subcodes. Finally, all coded data were analyzed again to find patterns and discrepancies. Sample coding categories included helpful aspects, unhelpful aspects, understanding of the practice, anxiety, agenda control, and first language use. Three weeks later, the researcher randomly selected and recoded one fourth of the transcripts to determine intra-rater reliability. The Pearson's correlation was used and a reliability of .96 was found.

Results

Student Expectations for Writing Conferences

Table 1 presents, in descending order of frequency, students' reported expectations for writing conferences. The students were allowed to choose multiple answers from four predetermined choices, and the most frequently selected was *expecting the teacher to tell them how to revise essays* (91%),

followed by *asking the teacher about their individual writing problems* (82%) and *discussing their writing with the teacher* (79%).

Table 1

Expectations for the Writing Conference

I expect . . .	Number	Percentage
the teacher to tell me how to revise my essay	31	91
to ask the teacher about my individual writing problems	28	82
to discuss my writing with the teacher	27	79
the teacher to tell me how to get good grades on my essay	14	41

These responses corroborated the findings reported in Liu (2009) and indicated that the students held very high expectations for writing conferences. On one hand, most of them seemed to see the writing conference as a fix-it shop (North, 1984) and expected direct help with the revision of the essay. Their desire to get better grades after revising on the basis of teacher oral feedback also suggested a pragmatic attitude towards writing conferences. On the other hand, they were apparently eager to interact personally and discuss their writing with the instructor. Such a mixture of expectations illustrates well the complex nature of teacher-student writing conferences as delineated in Black (1998).

In the first interviews, the students were asked to describe how they understood the practice of writing conferences. Class A students, having had conferences in their first year of college study, did not hesitate to identify the major element of a writing conference: discussing their writing with the teacher. On the other hand, Class B students' descriptions revealed that these first-year students were still developing their understanding and probing the possibility offered by this educational practice. For example, one Class B student described conferencing as an interview and interpreted it as an oral examination that she would have to pass in order to earn the teacher's regard:

> I used to think it was an exam. It was not until the first interview that I realized that it was all about asking the teacher questions. You're supposed to find your own problems and then, perhaps, ask the teacher for the

> solutions. I haven't still figured out exactly what it is supposed to do. (I1-B04)

Another Class B student similarly found her first conferencing experience puzzling:

> It was my first ever writing conference. I had never had this kind of experience, and I didn't know how to ask questions in a writing conference. I also had no idea what questions to ask. Besides, it was one-on-one. It was rather unnerving. (I1-B05)

Another interview question asked the students to compare classroom instruction and conference talk. Not surprisingly, students pointed out that classroom instruction was whole-class oriented, while conferencing was individually-based. Some students noted the difference in the medium of instruction: English in the classroom and Chinese in the conferences. In addition, students described classroom instruction as "one-way" and conferencing as "two-way" (I1-A08), classroom teaching as theory-based and conferencing as practice-oriented, as evidenced in the following student's comment:

> Classroom teaching focuses on more theoretical stuff, such as rhetorical patterns and sentence patterns. But when we have conferences, we have already practiced and written an essay. So, the teacher's explanations are targeted at my actual writing . . . and easier to understand. (I1-A10)

These accounts suggested that, although students could generally identify the more distinctive elements of the practice such as its personal, interactional, and practical natures, their understanding of writing conferences seemed to vary depending on their experience. If students are new to the practice, they can make erroneous interpretations, which may lead to unnecessary stress for ill-prepared learners. But it should also be noted that experience may not guarantee students' readiness to participate in writing conferences successfully because teachers may have different tutorial styles, as shown in the current study and reported in the literature

(Takaesu, Sudo, & Christianson, 2010).

Perceived Helpfulness and Success

The students were also asked to quantify their evaluation of the helpfulness of writing conferences in improving writing ability. Results showed that a majority of the students gave a rating of 7 or higher out of 10, with an average of 7.5. Students in the follow-up interviews gave reasons for their favorable evaluation, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

> I think it's direction and structure. [The teacher] would give me a direction. And, he would give me personalized suggestions for revising. Also, I think the teacher understands what I want to say even when I phrase it incorrectly. (I1-A13)

> If we are given written comments only and no discussion, we may feel confused. We may not understand why a certain correction was made. If we can discuss [this] with [the teacher], she can tell us how to revise it and how to make it right. (I1-B09)

A few students felt doubtful about the helpfulness of writing conferences because of an apparent lack of belief in the long-term effect of teacher feedback:

> I think [English writing] is like Chinese writing. Writing needs practice, a lot of self practice. So, I don't think writing conferences can really improve my writing. (I1-A07)

At the end of the semester, the students were similarly asked to rate the success of the semester's conferences. Findings suggested that in line with their favorable evaluation of the helpfulness, most students rated the semester's conferences as highly successful with 63% giving a rating of 8 or higher out of 10 (M = 7.75). Below are two examples of student statements explaining why they rated the conferences as highly successful:

> Let me use a previous writing assignment as an example. At first, I didn't know how to write it, so there was no organization in the essay. But after conferencing with the teacher, I revised the essay, and it improved a lot.

> (I2-B04)

> I had the teacher's full attention during the conferences. Besides, I was given chance to ask questions on things I don't understand. After the teacher's explanation, I could ask more questions if I still didn't get it. (I2-A01)

On the other hand, three students, all from Class B, gave their conferences a rating of 5 or lower. They explained in the follow-up interviews why they did not find the conferences particularly successful:

> My questions were minor. I just confirmed with the teacher where she had made comments. I didn't have big questions. So, the effect was ok. (I2-B12)

> I did learn something [in the conferences]. . . . But the effect was not very good because I didn't get to ask my questions immediately [after I got my draft back] and later I forgot my questions. So, when I conferenced with the teacher, I didn't know what to ask. (I2-B14)

Overall, we can see that a majority of the students perceived writing conferences as helpful because these conferences could, by providing personalized oral feedback, resolve the problems often associated with teacher written feedback such as misreading student texts and failing to offer specific strategies for revision (Zamel, 1985). Moreover, conferences serving as real-time consultations present an opportunity where students can take an active role and receive individualized instruction by asking all the questions they need for revising and improving writing. Yet, a certain degree of dissatisfaction was also observed among the students who had trouble producing questions for tutorial discussion because of either a lack of ability to identify their own needs or a time lag between when teacher-marked essays were returned and when conferences were held.

Affective Experiences

Table 2, which conflates points 1 and 2 (*strongly disagree* and *disagree*) and 4 and 5 (*agree* and *strongly agree*) on the scale, presents the findings

about students' affective experiences in writing conferences. Although only half of the students reported being praised during the conferences, a very high percentage of students claimed that they had good interaction with the teacher (94%) and that they felt relaxed during the conferences (91%).

Table 2

Students' Affective Experiences in Writing Conferences

Item	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
I was praised by the teacher about my writing.	13	38	50	3.41	0.76
I had good interaction with the teacher.	0	6	94	4.13	0.49
I think the atmosphere was relaxing.	0	9	91	4.28	0.63

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

While questionnaire findings indicated generally positive affective experiences, the interview data revealed that conferencing with the teacher affected students' emotional states in different ways. When asked to describe their feelings during the conferences, some of the students reported feeling "just as normal" because they considered conferences as an extension of classroom instruction and they had no reason for feeling different. A number reported feeling "happy" and even "excited" because "sparks of fire can be generated in these conferences," "the teacher gave me many suggestions" (I1-A08), and "it was a rare chance to talk to a professor one on one" (I1-B04). However, for quite a number of them, these more positive feelings usually came after initial discomfort in the first conferences of the semester. With Class B students, the stress was apparently due to their lack of prior conferencing experience, and they felt nervous because they "did not know what to expect" (I1-B10) before entering the instructor's office for their first writing conferences. One thing that they had not expected was a different language of communication in conferencing. Both teachers in this study adopted English as the medium of class instruction and Chinese as the medium of conferencing. However, uninformed of this policy, some

Class B students expected the conferences to be conducted in English as during class sessions, and the thought of holding one-on-one discussion with the teacher in English caused anxiety:

> In the beginning, I thought the teacher would talk to us in English, so I was very nervous. (I1-B03)

But after the first conferences started, these students realized that their worry was unfounded:

> When I entered the teacher's office, she was kind to me. She was not terrifying. She was kind, and she spoke to me in Chinese. (I1-B09)

As suggested in these statements, anxiety of this kind can usually be dissolved with continued conference attendance and a growing familiarization with the practice, but several Class A students, despite some prior experience, reported a similar anxious reaction in their first conferences of the semester:

> In the first conference, I was rather nervous, and I just listened, without daring to pose questions to the teacher. (I2-A07)

> [In the later conferences] I felt more relaxed. But in the beginning, I just didn't have an idea what the teacher would say to me. (I2-A06)

Other than an unfamiliarity with a new practice or a new teacher, the interview data revealed more stress-inducing factors including worry about the quality of their writing, psychological distance with the teacher, and the obligation to initiate and sustain conversation, as illustrated in the following:

> I sometimes felt nervous because I feared I didn't write well. (I1-A11)

> I felt uneasy about being that close with the teacher. I was used to seeing the teacher on the podium, at a distance. (I1-B06)

> I was afraid that I couldn't think of any questions to ask her and we would both sit there feeling embarrassed. (I1-B20)

In summary, it appeared that in both classes the teachers were rather successful in establishing good interaction in writing conferences by adopting the students' first language and creating a relaxing atmosphere. Unlike the ESL students in Liu's study (2009), who reported feeling nervous about talking with the instructor in English, these EFL students were happily exempt from the anxiety of sustaining a conversation in a language that they were still struggling to master. Still, students may experience stress when given little information about the aims and implementation of writing conferences. While it may be assumed that students can infer what will happen and what is expected of them after attending one or two conference sessions, some learner training should provide a sense of security and help focus students on expected outcomes. In contrast, lack of relevant information, though seemingly insignificant, can be intimidating obstacles to learners who are new to the practice (Duke, 1975).

Attitudes Towards Agenda Setting in the Writing Conference

Finally, the students were asked whether they would prefer to decide the agenda for the writing conference. Slightly over one third of the students (38%) responded positively, arguing that if students were not allowed to decide the agenda, conferencing would be no different from regular classroom instruction. The other students (62%) chose the middle option and remained neutral on this issue. However, a closer look into students' response revealed that as high as 85% of Class A students did not express a clear preference on this issue. Follow-up interviews revealed that they took an undecided stand on this question for different reasons. Some of them actually preferred the teacher to decide the agenda apparently because they lacked confidence in themselves:

> The teacher should control the agenda because I myself do not know where I have problems. (I2-A05)

> I would prefer the teacher to talk first. If I have additional problems, I can

> ask him. (I2-A01)

Another saw the conferences as an opportunity to receive input for improvement from a more knowledgeable reader. She would rather leave the floor open for more feedback:

> When I write, I have already had a fixed idea. So, what I need is different opinions and some stimulation to help me improve. That's why I think I prefer input from someone else. (I2-A06)

Still another observed that the conferences' implementation context had already predetermined how the agenda would be decided:

> The teacher had marked up our essays before holding conferences with us. When we read his comments, we would know what may be the focus of the discussion in the conferences. So, the teacher's written comments had in effect set the agenda of the conference. (I2-A02)

While the above excerpts indicated that Class A students generally did not mind their teacher's tight control of the agenda, further analysis suggested that some students may have actually grown dependent on the teacher's verbal suggestions or explanations in conferences. In the following excerpt, the student gave a positive response when asked to comment on her overall conferencing experience, but she also revealed her puzzlement and disappointment that the teacher stopped telling and explaining in the later conferences of the semester.

A06	It's just that in the later conferences, the teacher was like, he was kind of not interested in talking to me about my writing. It seemed that he did not have anything to say to me. He was like, "Okay, so, anything else? Do you have any other questions?" So, it was like, I was supposed to ask him questions.
R	I see. So you would prefer the teacher to talk more?
A06	[I would prefer] the teacher to tell me where I should revise, that kind of thing. But about the latest essays, he

	just said, "So, do you have any other questions?"
R	Really?
A06	Yeah. So, I had no choice but to read the teachers' comments. Then, when I saw something I was not sure of, I raised it for discussion. Yeah, it was like that in the later conferences. So, I would rather the teacher, like, tell me another way to phrase my sentences or some different writing techniques.

This excerpt suggested that Class A teacher may have been trying to be less directive by engaging students' participation in the conference. However, the student was apparently not prepared for the change of the approach, nor did she understand the philosophy behind it. Therefore, she interpreted it as the teacher becoming uninterested in tutoring her and helping her improve writing. Furthermore, this student's grumble about having to find her own problems and ask questions suggested that she did not think she was qualified to evaluate her own writing or responsible for formulating her own revision plan.

In contrast to the Class A teacher, the Class B teacher almost never initiated topics in her conferences. Instead, the students were told to prepare questions and were given the responsibility to set and lead the agenda, which may account for a relatively high percentage of agreement with this questionnaire item (53%). However, among these students who indicated a preference for deciding the agenda, a student admitted in the interview that she actually preferred the teacher to initiate questions or take over the control when she could not sustain the conversation:

> In fact, I would rather the teacher initiate questions. Perhaps it's just me. My classmates may have different opinions. They may have questions for the teacher. But when we can't produce questions, I think the teacher can raise questions. Perhaps we can't answer those questions. But we would spend time thinking over her questions. (I2-B12)

Therefore, despite its intuitive appeal, agenda setting could be unnerving to students who were used to teacher dominance but given full control of the

agenda in writing conferences.

Discussion

This study employed follow-up interviews to gauge the student participants' interpretations of the survey questions, giving clearer insight into students' experiences and attitudes towards writing conferences. In line with previous research (Saito, 1994; Silva et al., 1994; Warner, 1998), this study found that a majority of participants reported favorable experiences in teacher-student writing conferences. Results indicated that students tended to expect teachers to provide direction, explicit suggestions, detailed explanations, immediate answers to writing problems, and perhaps a secret formula for better writing. Affectively, the questionnaire results suggested a generally positive experience; however, the interviews revealed learners' anxiety caused by a multiplicity of factors including unfamiliarity with the conference method, teacher evaluation, and the pressure of having to take the initiative. Most significantly, the study found that although students did not openly reject setting and leading the agenda, most were not enthusiastic about taking on the responsibility of establishing the direction of the conference.

Acknowledging the possibility of other factors such as student motivation and teacher-student relationship, it appeared that student experiences and attitudes were to a great extent shaped by the two teachers' conferencing behaviors and strategies. As evidenced by lengthy teacher turns and very few student-initiated questions, Class A teacher apparently exercised tight control of the agenda and adopted a more dominant role in his conferences. On the other hand, Class B teacher seldom initiated questions, and her students were given control of the agenda. If measured on a directiveness continuum, Class A teacher would be located toward the directive end and Class B teacher toward the nondirective, although it should be duly noted that the latter did not actively use questioning to help writers formulate their own revision plans as typically suggested in the literature on nondirective approaches (Williams & Severino, 2004). Influenced by the teacher's directive approach, Class A students appeared inclined to feel anxious about teacher evaluation, but they were largely

exempt from the pressure and the corresponding responsibility of taking control of the agenda. On the other hand, Class B students were relatively free from teacher evaluation, but they had to be responsible for deciding the agenda and "keeping the conversation going." Furthermore, while Class A students may appreciate the direction provided through the teacher's telling and explaining, Class B students were allowed more opportunities to explore other writing issues or problems than the immediate student texts. In terms of attitudes, Class B students were more inclined to accept the initiator role in conference interaction, while their counterparts in the other class tended to reject the role.

While this study does not intend to compare the success of the two teachers' conferencing practices, it may be worth considering their possible outcomes. With a more directive style, Class A teacher could use the conferencing time more efficiently and provide expert opinions and explanations as needed and expected by learners. Nevertheless, while students tended to find these conferences more helpful, a possible outcome is that they may grow dependent on teacher evaluation and suggestions (Murray, 1985); once the support is withdrawn, learners may feel disoriented and ill-equipped to assess their own writing process or product. On the other hand, Class B teacher relinquished the control of the agenda and assumed a rather passive role in conference interaction. Students unprepared for the initiator role may find these conferences unhelpful and even stressful (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). However, those who are not intimidated by the teacher or the initiator role can enjoy and benefit from having the floor all to themselves, with the teacher ready to respond to their concerns.

Implications can be derived from the study results. First, although it may be tempting to compare the superiority of one conferencing strategy over the other, it appears that both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Furthermore, it may be contended that the two approaches are not exclusionary. As indicated in Sperling (1990), even taking a collaborative stance, teachers still have a "special leadership role" because they arguably are responsible for "engaging and sustaining the student's participation in writing conference conversation" (p. 295). In addition, instead of adhering to one end of the directiveness continuum

or deciding between telling and asking, teachers may attempt showing and explaining techniques (Williams, 2004) to facilitate L2 learners' processing of the information offered. Finally, teacher's and learners' agendas need not preclude each other. Teachers can set an agenda for the conference but still remain flexible and respect learners' wishes to pursue their own concerns (Eckstein, 2013). Similarly, teachers inclined to allow students to have their agenda should also be prepared to direct conference talk to areas worthy of attention after having taking care of learners' questions (Keh, 1990).

Finally, this study observed that using learners' first language in the conference seemed to exert positive influence on students' conferencing experience. Research has shown that foreign language teachers used students' first language for both pedagogical and social purposes including translating foreign language words and creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere (de la Campa & Nassaji, 2009). This study of learner perspectives provided further evidence that first language use can noticeably alleviate learner anxiety in a pedagogical event where students are expected to speak more than in the classroom. Nevertheless, while using the first language could ensure students' free expression and thus potentially lead to more meaningful negotiations in writing conferences, most of the students in this study were still visibly wary of taking a more active role in the form of setting the agenda. This suggested that—regardless of whether conferences are considered directive or nondirective or conducted in the students' first or second language—students may tend to see the event as "an extension of the classroom" (Black, 1998, p. 32) and choose to follow the same discourse rules as in classroom interaction if they are not first made aware of issues such as ownership of text and changed norms in conference interactions.

Conclusion

As Garrison (1974) aptly commented, a class doesn't have writing problems—only individuals have problems saying what they mean (qtd. in Harris, 1986, p. 18). Individualized and personalized instruction may thus be argued to be the strongest appeal of writing conferences. Given this understanding, it is even more important for teachers to observe students' reactions to their conferencing practices so that the time and effort both teachers and students invest in the activity can be justified. While

acknowledging the limitations of self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews, this study has contributed to the body of research on student experiences and attitudes towards writing conferences. Future directions of research may include analyzing the discourse of teachers and learners in writing conferences together with the participants' interpretations to obtain a better understanding of the factors affecting students' conferencing experiences. Finally, first language use, a major distinguishing feature of EFL conferencing, should also be investigated in further detail to understand its specific nature as well as its impact on the process and product of EFL writing conferences.

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