



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindadeild

# **Written Feedback in English Foreign Language Writing Instruction**

*A Study of Teacher Feedback in 8th and 10th Grades  
of the Primary School in Iceland*

***Ritgerð til M.Paed.-prófs***

**Steinlaug Sigríður Bjarnadóttir**

**Október 2008**

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## Abstract

This study examines the nature of written feedback in English writing in 8th and 10th grades of the compulsory school in Iceland. It investigates the amount of feedback provided and which aspects of the writing the teachers address in their feedback. It also studies the teachers' views on their teaching of writing in English and their feedback practices. The data consists of two hundred and sixty-four copies of English writing samples from students in the 8th and 10th grades collected from the teachers, 162 copies from 10th grade and 102 copies from 8th grade. Additionally, the teachers were given two questionnaires in which they were asked to respond to their English instruction and feedback practices. The feedback on the writing samples gathered was categorized according to types of feedback and types of written comments and the types were counted. The study does not reveal any significant difference between these two grades regarding the amount of feedback provided or issues addressed. The emphasis is on error correction in both grades. Only two teachers, one in each grade use written comments on content and structure. The main difference in the feedback practices is between the individual teachers. The questionnaire reveals that the teachers who use error correction report that they discuss the writing with their students when handing back the assignments. Two teachers explain they prefer oral response to written commentary.

# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

Writing has often been referred to as the most difficult aspect of learning a foreign language and therefore demands a great deal of practice. There has been an increasing demand on high proficiency in written English as well as in the spoken form of the language in Iceland. In the forward to the section on English in the National Curriculum for the primary level the reasons for this are discussed. There the importance of the English language as a lingua franca in international commerce and politics, in tourist services and multimedia and for Icelandic students seeking an education abroad. (Aðalnámsskrá grunnskóla. Erlend tungumál. Inngangur 2006). Furthermore, not only the English Department at the University of Iceland demands better English language skills of its students but also other departments of the University, where an increasing number of courses are taught in English and a large part of the textbooks are in English. (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir 2007). Due to easy access to spoken English in the media, young Icelandic learners have good receptive knowledge of the English language but need training in their productive skills. This demand does not only apply to students in secondary schools but also to students at the primary level brought on by growing demands of being able to use English proficiently in higher education and the workplace.

Icelandic learners frequently encounter English in their environment today, through movies, television, music and the Internet, which must influence and improve their skills in the English language. (Lovísa Kristjánsdóttir et. al. 2006) However, Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007) has pointed out that proficiency in receptive skills in English, of Icelandic students, may lead to overestimation of their language skills.



She suggests that the drop out rate after the first year in the English Department, at the University of Iceland, may be a reflection that students overestimate their English language proficiency. When arriving at university students often lack the skills needed for academic pursuits. Therefore, it has been suggested that instruction in expository writing should be more emphasised, and paid attention to, even in primary school. Furthermore, a study, conducted by Gunnhildur Sigurðardóttir (2007), on the use of conjunctions in writing, by age, shows that there is little development in the acquisition of conjunctives between the age levels from eleven to twenty. This raises the question of whether teachers provide sufficient guidance on writing conventions like conjunctive relations in their instructional practices, including in their feedback to students' writing.

Responding to student writing plays an important role in ESL writing classes, and there has been an ongoing debate among researchers of ESL writing on the application and usefulness of different types of feedback. Several studies have been conducted on the nature of feedback in second language writing within the field of second language teaching, however, most of them have been concerned with secondary and tertiary students. In Iceland there is a lack of research on these issues, which should make it even more interesting to study what role feedback plays in EFL writing in Iceland. Moreover, the focus has shifted more to the learner and self-directing learning which has also brought a change to practices of assessment, connecting it closer to the teaching (Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir 2007).

In the section of the National Curriculum Guidelines (2006) which addresses writing instruction in foreign languages, it is pointed out that in writing exercises, where the emphasis is on creativity and free writing, the feedback should be on the content of the writing and not exclusively on the form. However, in certain exercises

accuracy and thorough corrections should be required (9). Moreover, it is proposed that when the learners have acquired some skills in the language they should be taught to organize their writing e. g. write an introduction, divide the main body into paragraphs and write a conclusion. It is also proposed that students should be trained in process writing and a short description is provided of how such approach can be applied (9). However, very little is known to what extent process writing has been practiced in schools in Iceland. While the process orientation to writing helps the students to develop writing strategies it also places emphasis on useful and comprehensible responses on the students' writing by teachers.

In the section of the National Curriculum Guidelines which deals with assessment, writing assessment is divided into four main factors: content and organization, structure, language and mechanics and vocabulary. Furthermore, it is pointed out that the amount of weight put on each factor depends on the nature of the assignment and emphasised that when assessing process writing the process itself should be assessed and not only the final product (15).

Correcting and responding to students' written work is time consuming and difficult. Studies have shown that students want response on their written work and for the teachers it seems obvious to use the response to guide their students in their language learning (Zhang 1995, Ferris 2003 in Raimes 2004). As a teacher of English of students in second half of primary school the question of how to provide useful and comprehensible feedback to my students has been a concern. I have often reflected on what type of feedback is appropriate at different proficiency levels and most useful for my students, as an assistance to improve their writing. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the development of EFL writing of younger learners and teacher response to their writing. Considering this my primary motivation for the study was

to examine the nature of feedback students in the compulsory school receive on their writing. Thus, conducting this study would hopefully provide a somewhat clearer idea of how teachers in primary school in Iceland are teaching writing in their English classes and what type of feedback the teachers are providing their students with in order to give them the guidelines needed to meet increasing demands of proficiency in the English language.

The research question of this study is: *What is the nature of teacher feedback on writing in English in the 8th and 10th grades of the compulsory school in Iceland?* Furthermore, I wanted to compare the feedback provided for these two grades, to see if any differences in use or type of the response could be discerned.

In order to answer the research question, six English teachers teaching in grades 8 and 10 of the primary school were contacted. The teachers answered a questionnaire on their English teaching. The purpose was to gather information on the teachers' preferences and methods when teaching writing in English. Additionally, the teachers collected 250 writing samples from their students that they had provided written feedback on. The feedback was categorized according to the types of feedback and types of written comments. Finally, the teachers were given another questionnaire where they were asked questions on their methods of responding to their students' writing. The purpose of the second questionnaire was to gather further information on the teachers' feedback practices and to determine whether the teachers' answers on their methods of responding agreed with their practice.

The study is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction which describes the motivational factors of the study, the thesis and the organization of the study. Chapter two is a literature review which consists of a historical overview of approaches to second language writing, a definition of feedback and different views

of its role and usefulness. In Chapter three the methodology of the study is presented, the participants, the method of data collection, and analysis. In Chapter four the analysis and the findings of the study are discussed. Chapter five contains the concluding remarks of the study and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### *Approaches to second language writing*

The following is a description of main approaches to second language instruction based on Raimes's (1993) and Hyland's (2003) categorization. This will be followed by discussions of other major findings of research on importance of the writing for second language learning. Raimes categorizes approaches to second language learning according to four main foci: Focus on form, focus on the writer, focus on content and focus on the reader.

*Focus on form.* According to Matsuda (2003) the neglect of early second language writing was caused by the dominating audiolingual method and applied linguistics where the emphasis was on the spoken language. Thus, in the early 1960s when controlled composition was the prominent approach, the focus was on the language structures, writing was mainly used to reinforce the application of grammatical rules and well produced sentences (Raimes 1993).

However, the sixties brought about changes in regard to ESL writing. The ESL students needed more than learning how to build correct grammatical sentences. “[W]hat was needed was a bridge between controlled and free writing” (Silva 1990: 13). Thus in addition to the grammatical form the rhetorical form of writing came into focus. In his article *Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education*, Kaplan (1966) introduced the concept of contrastive rhetoric which described the organizational structures of written discourse in different languages (Raimes 1993). Although Kaplan's study has been influential in the field of second language writing, his findings have been criticized for being “insensitive to cultural differences”

(Connor 2002: 503) for being “too prescriptive in taking a rigid view of “correct English rhetorical patterns,” and for “oversimplifying both L2 and L1 forms of writing” (Hyland, 2003: 46 – 47). Through the years of debate and extensive research contrastive rhetoric has been modified and undergone some changes. However, since Kaplan’s study there has been great interest in cultural differences in written discourse. Hyland (2003) points out that “contrastive rhetoric shows us that writing is a cultural resource and that different genres and rhetorical conventions operate in different settings” (48 – 49). According to Connor (2004), the study of cultures in contrastive rhetoric does not only mean ethnic cultures but also disciplinary cultures. Here gender is also considered a variable to study. She further points out that communicating interculturally is becoming increasingly important, where the communicators need to have knowledge of different styles of communication in order to be successful. According to Connor, contrastive rhetoric has therefore moved from simple analysis of paragraph organization towards analysis of texts for a variety of purposes.

*Focus on the writer.* Process writing, which emerged in the 1970s, was a reaction against form – focused approaches. This new approach focused on the writer as “an independent producer of texts” (Raimes 1993, Hyland 2003). The basic model for process writing consists of “planning-writing-reviewing.” As the students formulate their ideas and write drafts the response and guidance of the teacher is of great importance. This means that the response is not only at the end but during the writing process. With the process writing approach the focus shifted from linguistic accuracy from the beginning towards ideas and organization (Raimes 1993). Zamel (1985) criticized writing teachers for viewing themselves primarily as language teachers in their responses. He claimed that they “attend to surface-level features of

writing, and that they seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate pieces at the sentence level or even clause level, rather than as a whole unit of discourse” (Zamel, 1987:700). According to Silva (1990) from the process perspective “[t]he writer is the center of attention – someone engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning; the reader focusing on content, ideas, and the negotiating of meaning, is not preoccupied with form. The text is a product – a secondary, derivative concern, whose form is a function of its content and purpose” (16). Although being well received the process writing approach had its critics, as we shall see.

*Focus on content.* Critics of the process approach in ESL writing considered it inappropriate for academic purposes, “ignoring certain types of important academic writing tasks” such as academic essay writing (Raimes, 1993, Silva, 1990). This new view shifted the focus from the writer to the content of writing and led to the introduction of English for Specific Purposes. The ESP approach emphasised that writing instruction in ESL was to be specific to the context of language use (Matsuda, 2003). Hyland (2003) points out that content courses usually involve a set of themes or topics in many cases selected by the students themselves. According to Hyland content courses stress “the close relationship between writing and reading in L2 literacy development.” ... “Reading provides input for both content and the appropriate means of its expression – a positive link that reflects the wider role of reading in developing composing skills” (16 - 17).

A subfield of English for Specific Purposes, namely English for Academic Purposes, emerged with a focus on “the expectations of academic readers” specifically (Raimes, 1993:241). According to Raimes, the reader is not seen as “a specific individual” as in process writing “but as the representative of a discourse community, for example a specific discipline of academia in general” (242).

*Focus on genre.* The genre approach emerged from the communicative approaches to language teaching in the 1970s (Hyland, 2007). Teachers who go by the genre orientation in their writing instruction see the writing as “attempts to communicate with readers” (Hyland, 2003:18). The focus is on the text, however, the writing is used for particular purposes intended to work as communication. By studying the purposes for communicating the students are taught to distinguish between different genres and learn to express these genres in writing. “Explicit knowledge of language” is emphasised, and “expert” texts are used as models for the students to assist them in developing their writing skill. The text is seen in its social context, thus, “when a set of texts share the same purpose, they will often share the same structure, and thus they belong to the same genre” (Hyland, 2003:19). The genre orientation draws on ideas from sociocultural theory originating from the work of Vygotsky (1978, in Hyland 2003:21). In sociocultural theory learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development which is the area between what learners can do independently and what they can do with assistance. The support the learner receives from a teacher or another more able person is called “scaffolding.” Scaffolded feedback has been applied in writing instruction in peer-response and teacher student conferences. Weissberg (2006) concludes that “tutor feedback delivered in a one-to-one setting through scaffolded dialogue tailored to a particular student writer constitutes an unparalleled opportunity to provide targeted, individualized instruction” (261). Hyland (2007) points out that genre based writing courses which are “organised around texts and around talk about texts” provide “teachers and students with a shared vocabulary for discussing writing” (162). Hyland claims that this approach offers the teacher better opportunities for providing the student with an effective response that the student will be able to recognize and make use of. In genre-



based writing courses portfolios have been considered well suited for assessment. Moreover, using portfolios provides the students with the opportunity to reflect on their own writing and compare different genres (Hamps-Lyons & Condon 2000 in Hyland 2007).

*An effective methodology – a mixture of approaches.*

Raimes (1993) discusses the debate on what kind of writing students should be doing, whether the focus of the writing instruction should be on the process or the product. She criticizes the debate where product and process “have been seen as either/or rather than both/and entities.” Raimes emphasises that “students need be taught both how to use the process to their advantage as language learners and writers, and also how to produce an acceptable product upon demand. Thus, learning writing students need both “to learn how to pass exams” and “to perceive writing as a tool for learning” (245).

Hyland (2003) proposes a synthesis of orientations, process, purpose and context, for effective teaching and learning. This means in practice, “a synthesis to ensure that learners have an adequate understanding of the *processes* of text creation; the *purposes* of writing and how to express these in effective ways through formal and rhetorical text choices; and the *contexts* within which texts are composed and read and which give them meaning” (24). As Hyland further points out a number of new theories of SL writing have developed since the 1980s, however the emergence of a new theory does not mean that it has replaced the last one. Although teachers may have a preference for one approach they “tend to adopt an eclectic range of methods that represent several perspectives, accommodating their practices to the constraints of their teaching situations and their beliefs about how students learn to write.” (2).

Finally, researchers have stressed the importance of writing in language learning. Harklau, (2002), points out that we need to understand why “applied linguists seem more likely to ask *how students learn to write in a second language* than to ask *how students learn a second language through writing*” (332). This reflects what Dieter Wolff had written earlier (2000). Wolff emphasises that “writing is not only a means of communicating but also a tool for learning a language. In a way, writing is the most efficient L2 tool we have, more efficient than reading or the communicative skills. Rod Ellis’ (1985) formula “language learning is language use” is only valid if language use includes writing” (111). Considering this, a varied feedback that takes to all aspects of the language, should therefore be the most preferable for language improvement.

#### *Types of Feedback in Foreign and Second Language Writing*

Feedback in second language writing has been seen as essential in developing the writing skills and enhancing the students’ motivation. (Hyland & Hyland, 2006) Feedback can take on different forms according to teachers’ preferences, students’ proficiency level, types of writing tasks and the stage of the writing process (Hyland, 2003).

Changes in writing pedagogy and research over the past decades have also affected feedback where written response is often complemented with other kinds of feedback such as peer feedback or student teacher conferences. Furthermore, computers have also been influential tools in language learning, offering more possibilities for learning and feedback practices.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006) feedback has been categorized into summative and formative feedback. Summative feedback serves the purpose of evaluating the writing as a product, the goal of formative feedback is to assist the student in developing his/her writing skills. Where the genre and process approaches

to writing have been applied the summative feedback has been “replaced or supplemented by formative feedback” (83) as the emphasis is on the the process of the writing and the future writing development.

The types of feedback that will be discussed here are teacher written feedback, teacher-student conferencing and peer feedback, as these three types are the most relevant to the study, with teacher written feedback given special attention.

*Teacher written feedback.* According to Hyland & Hyland (2006) feedback became an important aspect of writing instruction in the 1970s with learner centered approaches. With the process approach, with a focus on the writer the feedback was aimed at the writing process itself instead of assessing the final product.

Many scholars have called attention to the importance of written feedback. Ferris et. al. (1997) claim that written feedback, although difficult and time-consuming is “arguably the teacher’s most crucial task” (155). Hyland (2003) further stresses the importance of feedback when he says:

A response is potentially one of the most influential texts in a process writing class, and the point at which the teacher’s intervention is most obvious and perhaps most crucial. Not only does this individual attention play an important part in motivating learners, it is also the point at which overt correction and explicit language teaching are most likely to occur (12).

Researchers have distinguished between direct and indirect feedback strategies. “Direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form, while indirect strategies refer to situations when the teacher

indicates that an error has been made but does not provide a correction, thereby leaving the student to diagnose and correct it” (Bitchener et. al. 2005:193).

A variety of techniques have been applied when providing written feedback to students. Here, three types will be addressed; written comments, rubrics and correction codes.

*Written commentary.* In second language writing written commentary is considered the most common form of written feedback (Hyland, 2003). Written comments are usually provided at the end or in the margins or both types may be used simultaneously. End comments can serve as “summative commentary,” bringing together the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s work (Goldstein, 2004). Goldstein discusses the role of the context as to how teachers form their commentary. “This context is a unique combination of factors stemming from the institution and the program within which the writing, commenting, and revision takes place, and factors that teachers and students bring to the process as well” (65). Goldstein suggests that where the focus of the writing instruction is primarily on developing grammatical and lexical proficiency the teachers are less likely to provide written comments on content and rhetorical features because the pressure is to respond to the form.

Written response has been emphasised as being more preferable to the students. According to Harklau (2002) students found written response easier to work with than peer or teacher talk “because the written texts were reviewable while teacher and peer talk were not” (331). After observing learners in several U. S. high school classrooms Harklau discovered that opportunities for teacher, students interaction or peer talk were quite limited, especially in larger classrooms. Harklau found that there was a very little time for oral response allotted to the individual

student, where the teacher did most of the talking. However, she found that the written input was more varied. From Harklau's observations she concluded: "In terms of linguistic feedback, the learners I studied received virtually no feedback on language form in face- to-face communication with teachers or peers. On the other hand, teachers routinely provided learners with explicit feedback on language form on their written language output" (331 – 332).

Some researchers have found that marginal comments are most effective as they are written next to the place where revision is needed and should leave no doubt what they refer to. (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998, 2005 in Hyland and Hyland, 2006). A study by Milena Remis (2004) on students views on feedback revealed that students find marginal comments practical for the same reason.

*Rubrics.* According to Hyland (2003) rubrics are a form of commentary usually used on the final product as an assessment. One of the advantages of using rubrics is that they indicate more explicitly what aspects of the assignment are being assessed.

Hyland (2003) discusses three types of scoring rubrics: First, holistic scoring which means responding to the text as a whole. An example of such scoring is the use of letters when grading and sometimes with the use of + and – for finer distinction. Secondly, analytic scoring methods which address different aspects of the writing such as content, structure, grammar, mechanics, vocabulary and spelling by using separate scales for all of the mentioned components or some. Thirdly, trait-based scoring methods where, according to Hyland, the multiple-trait scoring method "treats writing as a multifaceted construct which is situated in particular contexts and purposes" (230). Thus, despite time consuming to devise, multiple-trait scoring is more flexible method adapted to each task and purpose of the writing. Weigle (2002)

points out that giving the students the rubrics in advance can make the students better aware of “what the criteria are on which their writing will be judged” (182). Furthermore, rubrics help instructors to be more concise when assessing papers and save time for them as it simplifies the grading process.

*Correction codes* are a kind of written feedback which is in-text and form-based, a type of response that has been called “minimal marking.” (Hyland, 2003). Correction codes make use of symbols intended to locate and give the type of error without providing the correct answer, thus intended to stimulate the student to find and identify the mistakes. One drawback is that younger learners might find the codes confusing.

*Teacher-student conferencing.* Although written response plays an important role in writing instruction oral response has been given increasing attention. Teacher-student conferences can take the form of one-to-one activities between a teacher and a student or be held in small groups. Hyland (2003) points out that “[t]he interactive nature of the conference gives teachers chance to respond to the diverse cultural, educational, and writing needs of their students, clarifying meaning and resolving ambiguities, while saving them the time spent in detailed marking of papers” (192). Conrad and Goldstein (1999) come to the conclusion that students need to be taught how to revise their papers. Especially, students at lower levels might benefit from discussions where the teacher provides guidance on how to interpret written feedback. Indirectness in written commentary can be difficult for students to interpret. (Goldstein, 2004, Conrad and Goldstein, 1999). In cases where the student has not understood the response and therefore not utilized the teacher’s feedback in revision a teacher-student conference would help to clarify misunderstandings. Bitchener, et. al.

(2005) found that explicit written feedback combined with one-to-one conference feedback gave L2 writers better results in accuracy than written feedback alone.

*Peer feedback.* Peer response is difficult to apply at lower language levels as it demands certain linguistic knowledge. For the peer response to be successful teachers need to train the students in peer response techniques. Furthermore, the students need to trust each other for the peer response to be productive and sometimes cultural differences can be an obstacle (Paulus, 1999). Paulus's study showed that both peer and teacher feedback contributed to improvements in multiple-draft essay writing, however with the teacher feedback having more influence. Peer response has been successful where the students have given each other support and advice during the writing process instead of focusing on the final product (Hyland, 2000, in Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

*Error feedback.* There has been an ongoing debate as to whether error feedback helps students to improve the accuracy of their writing. Danielle Guénette, (2007), discusses the contradictory results of many studies on the effectiveness of corrective feedback and suggests that the different findings can be due to the design and methodology of the studies. Furthermore, she points out that when looking at the effects of error feedback on students writing studies have to take into account the different factors. "The success or failure of corrective feedback will depend on the classroom context, the type of errors students make, their proficiency level, the type of writing they are asked to do, and a collection of other variables that are as of yet unknown" (52). Therefore it is of importance for teachers at all levels to be well aware of individual abilities of their students in order to be able to provide them with comprehensible and useful feedback. Truscott's view that error correction should be abandoned altogether has been contradicted by other researchers (Ferris, 2004), and

Chandler (2000) who found that error correction increased fluency and the students' first drafts became more accurate when students corrected their errors before writing their next assignment.

*Studies on the Effectiveness of Teacher Response.*

Fathman and Whalley (1990) found that feedback on grammar and content had positive effect on rewriting, whether it was given simultaneously or separately.

Although researchers such as Zamel (1985) have suggested that teachers focus more on the content than the form and even abandon feedback on form altogether because it is ineffective, (Truscott, 1996), others consider this division of ideas and form not helpful. They have pointed out that teachers will vary their feedback according to the personalities and abilities of their students (Ferris et. al. 1997). Hyland (2003) considers it important that teachers respond both to the form and the ideas of their students' writing, although one should not be emphasised to the neglect of the other. "Teachers may feel that they can only help learners to engage in the writing process by responding to their ideas, but in fact, the separation of form and content is largely an artificial one, of dubious theoretical value and impossible to maintain in practice" (184). However, it is not necessary to respond to every aspect of the student's texts simultaneously the type of feedback used may depend on the purpose and the level of the writing. The teachers are not only responding to the texts but also to the students themselves, based on what they know of his or her background (Hyland, 1998). Therefore teachers should be aware that the same type of comment does not always give the same results due to individual differences Conrad & Goldstein,1999). Moreover, feedback is usually accompanied by classroom instruction which adds to its effect.



### *Students' Preferences of Feedback*

Some research has been done on students' preferences of feedback. In her study of students' views and preferences of different types of feedback Milena Remis (2004) found that the students in her study preferred balanced written feedback that focused both on content and form. Additionally, grammatical accuracy was the major priority for the students. From her findings she concluded that the students needed to be made aware of how important content and structure are in a composition. "They need to be shown that even if they have perfectly correct grammatical sentences, if the content doesn't make sense, then their work will not be a good piece of writing" (88). Although the students in Remis's study were university students her words could apply to students of lower levels.

Remis's study reveals that students and teachers were positive toward the effectiveness of written comments: the students found it more personal when the teacher wrote a comment. This made the feedback more comprehensive. This was in an agreement with the teachers view of the written commentary as "a necessary component of feedback" (86).

### *Praise and Criticism in Feedback.*

The issue of how to provide a written feedback that is both guiding and supportive can be a difficult one. Teachers have to be careful when constructing their comments as they are not only responding to the written product as such but to the student as an individual. In their analysis of teachers' comments Hyland and Hyland (2001) discuss three categories: praise, criticism and suggestion. Although praise can be encouraging and motivating for the student it has to be constructive and designed to improve, an empty praise could be regarded as insincere by the student (Hyland, 2003). As Hyland (2003) points out praise, particularly used in responding to

students' ideas in a text, "is often reserved to final drafts where it can act to reward students for their efforts" (187). In order to provide constructive criticism that will not be misunderstood by the student teachers often use suggestions intended to propose revisions to the text or use other mitigating strategies such as combining criticism with praise to soften their critical remarks (Hyland, 2003).

*Amount of teacher written feedback and issues addressed.*

When responding to students' writing the amount of feedback can vary considerably for various reasons. Analysing the use of different types of comments, Ferris et. al. (1997) found that the amount of comments decreased near the end of the semester. Ferris et. al. suggested that a possible explanation to this might be "student improvement and general shared knowledge" (172). Because of these earlier feedback and "in-class teaching the teacher did not need to spend as much time on feedback as earlier. Ferris et. al. study also found difference in feedback across student ability levels with the weaker students receiving the most feedback on grammar "while the "strong" group was addressed with the fewest imperatives" (174).

Goldstein (2004) discusses studies that suggest that students do not always understand the teacher's comments and therefore do not know how to revise. She points out that teachers need to examine actual comments in order to understand why they comment in the way they do. As a result of that they should become more aware of what types of revisions their comments suggest. This could also prevent appropriation with the teacher taking over the student's text with commentary that changes the student's intended meaning of the text. Goldstein (2004) further discusses text-specific comments as effective form of commentary. She explains this form further: "Text-specific comments serve to show exactly what difficulties the

reader is having with the text and where; they are also motivating as they show the reader actively engaged with the writer's text (76).

The literature review above discussed the different approaches in teaching second language writing starting with focus on form and concluding with researchers' suggestions of approaches for an effective method of second language writing instruction. Further, different types of feedback were presented, (written commentary, rubrics, correction codes, teacher student conferencing, peer feedback and error feedback). Some studies on the effectiveness of teacher response were discussed followed by description of studies of students' preferences of feedback. In addition, research done on use of praise and criticism in feedback was addressed. Finally, I discussed studies concerning the amount of teacher feedback and issues addressed.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of my study which was conducted to investigate the nature of teacher feedback on student ESL writing in eighth and tenth grades of primary school in Iceland. Specifically, the goal of the study was to examine the amount and the nature of feedback on students' writing, whether it differed between grades, nature of assignments and the teachers' ideas of how to respond to their students' writing.

#### *Participants*

The data was collected from six teachers, of English in grades 8 and 10 in primary schools in Reykjavík, Kópavogur and Hafnarfjörður. The participating teachers came from five public schools. The teachers were contacted by e-mail or telephone. I explained my research to them and asked them if they were willing to answer questions on their English teaching, especially on teaching writing, and to provide copies of their students' writing after they had responded to them. The participating teachers were therefore the first six teachers who consented to helping with the research project. To maintain anonymity all the teachers are referred to by using codes, the letter T and the numbers 1 – 6. The collection of data took place during spring term, from the end of January to May. The motive for the choice of these two grades was to examine whether the approaches to the writing instruction and feedback differed between the grades. Furthermore, the intention was to examine the amount of feedback and which aspects of the writing were addressed in these two grades.

## *Data*

*The first questionnaire.* The teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire where they were asked about their teaching experience and their teaching of EFL writing. The questionnaire used was adapted from interview questions for teachers in a previous study by Milena Remis (2004), on students' views on feedback in second language writing. It contained both closed options from a set of fixed alternatives and open-ended questions (See Appendix 1). The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit information on the teachers' education and teaching experience, their perspective on teaching writing, their preferences with regards to choice of writing exercises, and how much time their students spent on writing practices in class. I also wanted to know how useful the teachers found the textbooks they used.

*The writing samples.* Additionally, two hundred and sixty-four copies of English writing examples from students in the 8th and 10th grades were collected from the teachers for this study. 162 copies from 10th grade and 102 copies from 8th grade. One of the teachers provided copies of exercises from both 8th and 10th grades, two provided copies from 8th grade only and three provided copies from 10th grade only. All copies were anonymous and coded before they were analysed. The samples varied in length from being a book report or conversation of approximately 80 words up to a biographical profile from an interview of more than 300 words in 10th grade. In 8th grade similar book report was the shortest sample 70 – 80 words and the longest an essay about a film, where the longest one counted around 800 words. The average size of the samples from 8th grade was about 100 - 120 words but in 10th grade around 130 - 150 words.

All sets of writing samples were numbered, the letter A used to indicate the copies from 10th grade and the letter B to indicate the copies from 8th grade. The

writing exercises were numbered and categorized, according to types of writing activities (See Appendix 1). In addition, the feedback provided by the teacher was categorized, first according to the types of feedback. The feedback was further categorized according to what aspects of the language the written comments attended to. The categories used were adapted from Hyland (2003) and Ferris (2007).

*The second questionnaire.* Having collected all copies of writing another questionnaire was administered to the teachers in order to gather further data on the feedback practices (See appendix 2). These questions were intended to add to the information on the feedback, gained from the copies, provided by the teachers. The questions were on the teachers' perspective on written feedback, what kind of feedback they emphasised and considered useful for their students. Furthermore, the intention was to find out if the teachers used oral feedback with the written corrections, and their perceptions of how well the students were using the feedback. Some comments, such as question marks, did not always indicate clearly what was referred to, thus it was important to see if the teachers used oral response where such comments could perhaps be clarified. The teachers were asked if peer response was used and finally, the intention was to see how well the teachers' answers on the feedback agreed with their practices in the copies they provided.

#### *The Analysis of the Data*

*Analysis of the first questionnaire.* All of the participants were certified teachers, in addition, three of the teachers had a BA in English, two had a teacher's certificate from KHÍ with an English elective (special training in English) and one had teacher's certificate from Kennaraskóli Íslands. Three of the participating teachers had twenty years or more of teaching experience, one had 10 – 15 years of teaching experience and two had 5 – 10 years of experience. Four of the teachers, who participated, taught

both 8th and 10th grades, as it appears to be common in the primary school that the same teacher teaches all three grades of the secondary level, eighth, ninth and tenth grades.

*English lessons per week and time spent on teaching writing.* All the students of the 8th grade had three forty minutes lessons of English per week and all the students of 10th grade had four forty minutes lessons of English per week.

*Time spent on practicing writing in class, per week and number of exercises per term.* Of the three teachers providing samples from 8th grade one said that she spent at least 20 minutes on practicing writing, another said she used 15 – 20 minutes, and the third one who provided samples from both 8th and 10th grades answered that the students had 1 – 2 exercises per month, two book reports, (one per term), and a theme work. The teachers providing writing from 10th grade gave the answers 30 minutes, 40 minutes, and the third one answered that the students had writing every week, mostly at home. The same teacher also mentioned that her students used a “scrapbook” for free writing. Two of the 10th grade teachers said they had their students hand in approximately 10 writing exercises per term, the other gave the number 4 – 6.

*Prompts used for writing activities/Choice of writing tasks.* When asked what kind of prompts the teachers used for writing activities fixed categories were given (See appendix 1). The three most often chosen categories were: brainstorming, pictures and a reading text. Four of the teachers mentioned the textbook as a source for the choice of writing tasks along with other sources, such as, themes, exercises from the national test (10th grade teachers), and current events. One teacher who does not use the textbooks that are available says she organizes writing tasks around

themes especially with regard to the vocabulary related to that theme. Another gives her students ideas to choose from or the students suggest some issues to work on.

*Teaching material.* All teachers, except for one, use the textbooks offered by Námsgagnastofnun, Network 1 and 3, Go For It and Move On with additional photocopied material. One teacher is not satisfied with the textbook Network. Instead she uses Go For It and Move On in 8th grade with photocopied material. In 10th grade the students have 2 – 4 elective books and photocopied material put together by the teacher. The teacher mentions the variety of English teaching material on the Internet which she prefers to use.

*Table 1*

*Types of writing activities collected for the study.*

<b>Grade 8, eight sets of samples* from T2, T4, T5.</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Grade 10, eight sets of samples from T1, T2, T3, T6.</b>	<b>Number</b>
Writing about a picture story	1	A picture story. From a national exam in English	4
Film review	1	Exercise from a national exam. (Conversation)	2
Book review	1	Book review	1
Theme	1*	Theme	1*
Description (My Room)	2	Story of a mad scientist. Emphasis on specific vocabulary.	1
Personal experience, (i. e. summer vacation/interests).	2	An Interview	1
Interview (A historical figure)	1		
Finishing a story (Beginning given)	1		
Detective story (Words given)	1		
Diary for one week	1		



\* These copies were excluded from the analysis of the feedback. They were a final product of a theme work and did not contain any written comments or corrections.

Table 1 shows the categorization of the types of written activities collected for the study. From one teacher the sets of samples contained more than one type of writing activity, therefore the large number of writing activities compared to the number of sets.

#### *Methods of Analysis of Teacher Feedback in the 8th Grade*

The feedback on the written assignments in 8th grade was categorized according to these categories:

- Underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase
- underlining or crossing out a word/letter without correction
- written comments in the margins
- written comments at the end
- written comments both in the margins and at the end
- multiple trait scoring (Rubrics)
- a grade/number
- a grade/very good/good/satisfactory.

Table 2

Teacher feedback in the 8th grade Number of feedback types used per set of essays

Types of feedback	Sets of essays and numbers of copies per set.								
	B1 8	B2 6	B3 7	B4 15	B5 15	B6 15	B7 15	B8 13	Total 94
Underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase	8	6	7	15	15	15	15	13	94
Underlining or crossing out a word/letter without correction	1		4		9		4		18
Written comments in the margins	3	1	3					1	7
Written comments at the end				15	3	1	4	13	14
Written comments both in the margins and at the end			4						4
Multiple trait scoring (Rubrics)				15				13	28
A grade/Number			7	15				13	35
A grade/Very good, Good, Satisfactory					15	15	15		45

*Underlining and/or writing the wright word.* As Table 2 shows, underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase was by far the most common type of feedback used in 8th grade. All ninety-four copies had his type of feedback with all errors corrected and all were final products. The emphasis of error correction in 8th grade was mainly on grammar, vocabulary and spelling.

*Underlining or crossing out a word/letter without correction.* In cases where underlining or crossing out a word or letter was without correction it was due to repeated error, repeated wrong spelling, superfluous word or typing error (i. e. no space between words).

*Written comments.* Out of eight samples of writing five samples had written comments at the end and one sample had written comments both at the end and in the margins. Three sets of samples had one word comment at the end that served as a

grade; very good, good, satisfactory. The same samples, B5, B6, and B7 had six occurrences of end comments altogether other than the grade. The purpose of these comments was to emphasise the right use of certain words or phrases that had been corrected earlier in the paper. Written comments in the margins occurred in four samples, but were few. In B1 and B2 they are in form of question marks, asking the student to take a closer look at some error (NB) and the interrogative pronoun “who” asking the student who is referred to. One teacher, providing three samples, B3, B4 and B8, used both end comments and a grade, (number).

*Multiple trait scoring + written comments.* In two samples, B4 and B8, the teacher used multiple trait scoring provided on a separate sheet of paper. The scoring rubrics were on vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and content. Additional rubric was called “on time”. In this rubric -1 meant that the assignment had been turned in too late. Under this rubric the teacher wrote comments on the content, grammar, and vocabulary, mostly to point out what was well done and what needed to be improved and worked more on.

*Grades.* Two teachers used grades. One used the grade (number) with written comments and on a multiple scoring sheet, as mention before. The other used words for grading in all three samples B5, B6, and B7, very good, good and satisfactory with underlining and writing the right word.

As mentioned before, eight copies, were left out in the analysis of the teacher feedback since they were a final writing on a theme work and did not contain any response from the teacher. The teacher wrote a note with them explaining that the students had written a draft she had corrected and handed back.

*Methods of Analysis of Teacher Feedback in the 10th Grade.*

The feedback on the writing samples from students in 10th grade was categorized according to the following criteria:

- underlining and writing the right word/phrase
- underlining without correction
- using correction code
- written comments in the margins
- written comments at the end
- written comments in the margins and at the end
- errors counted at the end
- multiple trait scoring
- underlining and comment by the word
- scoring 0 – 1 – 2

Table 3

*Teacher feedback in 10th grade. Number of feedback types used per set of essays.*

<b>Sets of essays and numbers of copies per set.</b>									
<b>Types of feedback</b>	<b>A1 5</b>	<b>A2 12</b>	<b>A3 31</b>	<b>A4 21</b>	<b>A5 26</b>	<b>A6 13</b>	<b>A7 23</b>	<b>A8 25</b>	<b>Total 156</b>
Underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase.	5	10	30	19	22	1			86
Underlining without correction.		1				11			12
Correction code (4 symbols)							23	25	48
Written comments in the margins.		1			1	3			5
Written comments at the end.	1			2	1	13			17
Errors counted at the end		1							1
Multiple trait scoring. (Rubrics)							23		23
Underlining and comment by the word. (Usually one word)							8	1	9
Scoring 0 – 1 – 2								25	25

With the exception of one set of essays, which was a first draft, all samples of writing collected from 10th grade were the final writing product. Out of eight sets of samples six were exercises from previous National Exams in English.

*Underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase.* Similar to 8th grade underlining and/or writing the right word/phrase was the type of feedback most frequently used in the 10th grade writing samples. Out of eight sets of essays six had this type of feedback. However, the teachers did not provide comments at the end in those cases, with the exception of one or two words emphasising what had been corrected in the exercise earlier. Furthermore, all errors were attended to, with the exception of one sample, whether the errors were just indicated by underlining, using a code, or when correction was added.

*Underlining without correction.* This type of feedback was used in one set of essays, a first draft, and additionally in a single copy of another set. On the first draft comments at the end were used to clarify what needed to be adjusted and corrected.

*Correction code.* In another set, of essays, (A7), a correction code was used to indicate spelling error, grammar error, wrong word and word order. This was complemented with rubrics at the end and + or – mark added to the rubrics to indicate which aspects of the writing were well done and which needed attending to. Apparently these rubrics were adapted from the evaluation sheet of the English National Exam, as the exercise was from such exam. These were followed by a comment at the end; one or two words clarifying – accompanying a rubric.

*Written comments.* Altogether, twenty - two copies had written comments, of those thirteen were from the same set of essays, a first draft of a narrative. Only five copies of all sets of essays had written comments in the margins.

*Errors counted at the end.* One copy had errors counted at the end, apparently done to point out the great number of these, but otherwise no end comments. Six copies were without errors. To those no comments or a grade were added, The only comments in those copies were question marks indicating that the end was missing.

#### *Analysis of Teacher Written Comments in 8th and 10th Grades*

Categorizing the comment types was difficult and time consuming because in one sentence there could be remarks about different aspects of the student's work and the comments were sometimes paired, that is a positive comment could be combined with a negative one. The comments at the end that contained more than one word were used by two teachers, one in each grade. The comments were on a first draft from 10th grade students and on three sets of samples from the 8th grade students. Those samples from 8th grade were provided by the same teacher.

*Types of written comments in 8th and 10th grade.* The types of written comments in both grades were categorized according to the following criteria:

- Ask for information on the content
- Statement/direction on the content
- Positive comment on the content/work
- Negative comment on the content/work
- Paired comments. Combining criticism with praise
- Structure/Organization – Question
- Structure/Organization – Statement/Direction
- Grammar – Question
- Grammar – Statement/Direction
- Vocabulary – Statement/Direction
- Spelling/Mechanics – Statement
- Statement/Question on the guidelines
- A grade – Very good/Good/Satisfactory\*
- Emphasising what has been corrected

\*This category was only applied to the 8th grade commentary.

Table 4

*Types of Written Comments in 8th Grade*

Type	B1 8	B2 6	B3 7	B4 15	B5 15	B6 15	B7 15	B8 13	Total 94
Ask for information on the content	1		2	1				1	5
Statement/Direction on the content			6	2				4	12
Positive comment on the content/work			1	13				9	23
Negative comment on the content/work								1	1
Paired comments. Combining criticism with praise.			1	2				1	4
Structure/Organisation Question			3						3
Structure/Organization Statement/Direction			6	3				2	11
Grammar/Question			2						2
GrammarStatement/Direction			1	4				7	12
Vocabulary/Statement/Directive			1	4				3	8
Spelling/Mechanics/Statement			2	2				2	6
Statement/Question on the guidelines.	1							4	4
A grade Very good/Good/Satisfactory					15	15	15		45
Emphasising what has been corrected	2	1							3
<b>Total comments</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>139</b>

*Analysis of types of written comments in 8th grade.* Three teachers provided writing samples from the 8th grade. Each of them provided three samples where of one was left out in the analysis as it did not contain any comments, as mentioned before. One teacher in 8th grade had combined the end comments with multiple trait scoring form she used when giving her students feedback on their writing. The rubrics



were used in two sets of samples, B4 and B8. The rubrics were on vocabulary, grammar, and content where the student could score from 0 – 3 on each, and spelling where the student could score 0 – 1. Additionally, comments were provided on the student's work under the rubric "on time". This was written on a separate sheet of paper when handing the writing back to the student.

Notably, all written comments on the structure and content came from the same teacher with the exception of one question mark. That same teacher had therefore provided all comments that were categorized as positive. Of 35 samples provided by the this teacher 23 had positive comments. The comments were frequently: "*Well done*" or "*A very good essay*" and then some direction was added, such as: "*You have to pay attention to word order in the sentences*" (Sample B5#7). The directions were mainly on content, structure and grammar. The paired comments were found in a sample where the student obviously had difficulties with the spelling. The teacher's commented on the text being too short but still well done and then she advised the student to use the computer when writing, with correction program. On the whole, the teacher seemed to tend to individual abilities of her students, as her comments reflect. The only negative comment which is not paired is: "*You can do so much better.*" (Sample B8#8). In the B8 samples there are four comments on the guidelines, three of them because the essay has been turned in late and one because the essay is too short.

The B1 and B2 samples had only five comments altogether. One question mark on an unfinished book report and one statement on the guidelines which only involved a translation of the word summary for the student. Finally, emphasising what had been corrected was the use of NB (ath!) near the correction. As mentioned before three sets of essays B5, B6 and B7 did not contain any written comments except

“*Very good, Good and Satisfactory.*” However they were categorized separately as they seemed to be used for the purpose of grading.

*Table 5*

*Types of written comments in 10th grade*

<b>Type</b>	<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>A4</b>	<b>A5</b>	<b>A6</b>	<b>A7</b>	<b>A8</b>	<b>Total</b>
	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>125</b>
Ask for information on the content				1	1		2	<b>4</b>
Statement/Direction on the content					6			<b>6</b>
Positive comment on the content/work								
Negative comment on the content/work			2		2			<b>4</b>
Paired comments. Combining criticism with praise.					3			<b>3</b>
Structure/Organisation Question					1			<b>1</b>
Structure/Organization Statement/Direction					10	5	1	<b>15</b>
GrammarStatement/Direction					1	2	1	<b>3</b>
Vocabulary/Question				2				
Vocabulary/Statement/Direction					3	19		<b>22</b>
Spelling/Mechanics/Statement					4	2		<b>6</b>
Statement/Question on the guidelines.					3			<b>3</b>
Emphasising what has been corrected.	1	1						<b>2</b>
<b>Total comments</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>69</b>

*Analysis of Types of Written Comments in 10th Grade.* Four teachers provided written exercises for 10th grade. Similar to 8th grade the error correction was by far the most frequently used feedback in 10th grade. Two sets of essays, A6 and A7, had written comments added. Total comments were 34 for A6 and 28 for A7. A6 which

contained 13 samples was the only set of essays which had written comments that counted more than one or two words. As mentioned before, this set was a first draft. There the comments were mostly on the content and the structure. Furthermore, the only positive comments on the draft were combined with some criticism.

**Example:** *“A good story. You are using the right words. However, there s awkwardness here and there. Have a look at the underlined words and see if you can correct them.”* (Sample A6#4).

**Example:** *“OK story – it has a beginning – middle – and an end. However, I have the feeling that your vocabulary is far better than you present here.”* (Sample A6#6).

The comments on the guidelines were usually a question: **Example:** *“Where is your story?”* (Samples A6#3 and A6#8) **Example:** *“What, I cannot see any story!”* (Sample A6#9). However, the most frequently used type of comment was statement/direction on the structure/organization, used 10 times. The other set of essays, A7, which contained 23 samples, had comments of one word added to rubrics adapted from scoring rubrics used for assessing student writing skill on the national exam in English. The exercise was the part of an English national exam where the students are to write about a picture story. Most of the comments there were on vocabulary and used to clarify the meaning of a minus added to a rubric.

**Example:** - *Vocabulary – simple* (A7#11).

An attempt was made to categorize the question marks. In A5 there were question marks in three copies. One because the end of the story was missing and the last sentence was half finished. The other two indicated a word that either was wrong or misspelled and not clear what word it was. Two comments in set A4 were

categorized as negative. There the teacher had written that the errors were too many to correct.

### *Analysis of Teachers' Answers on their Feedback Practices*

*Types of feedback.* When asked what type of feedback the teachers preferred four alternatives were given:

- written comments
- oral feedback
- correction code
- underlining and correcting errors

The teachers were asked to number the alternatives 1 – 4 according to their use of them. One teacher, (10th grade), did not number the alternatives but marked two of them: underlining and correcting errors and oral feedback. The same teacher said she emphasised appropriate use of vocabulary. She did not use written comments but said that when she returned the papers she discussed the problems with the students individually. Two 10th grade teachers and one 8th grade teacher put underlining and correcting errors in first place.

*Issues addressed in the written feedback.* Four of the teachers placed structure and content as the two most important elements to address in their responses, one put grammar and spelling in the first place and one just marked two alternatives, underlining errors and correcting, and oral response. The two teachers who used end comments most frequently chose structure and content as the most important issues to give feedback on. Their answers were in agreement with their practices. Two other teachers chose the content and structure as the most important issue, however, neither of them used end comments. Instead they explained that they discussed the writing assignments with their students when they handed them back.

*Oral response.* Although the teachers vary in their answers on how often they use oral response all of them claim they make use of such feedback when handing in writing assignments. Two teachers view the oral response as effective for their students. One reports always conferring with her students when handing back papers, and giving individual guidance. Another points out that she does not use written comments, only oral response. The same teacher divides the class into groups and confers with the students individually. She says she emphasises the importance of bringing out the positive details of the writing when conferring with her students and prefers to correct errors with her students to written corrections. This kind of response is used when a part of the class is working in the library.

The teacher from 8th grade who used rubrics and end comments reported that she used oral response only once in a while mostly with shorter texts or when she had the students write a draft first. Then she conferred with them before they handed in the final work.

Most of the teachers say that the oral feedback they use takes to all aspects of the writing. However, one teacher from 10th grade mentions that she emphasises vocabulary and structure in her feedback, and another one says he uses the feedback least on structure and content. The same teacher emphasises grammar and spelling in the written feedback.

*Peer feedback.* The teachers were simply asked if the students corrected each other's work. The question could have been formed better to gain more information. Four teachers gave a negative answer. One teacher in 8th grade said that occasionally the students assisted each other in correcting their writing. However, the teacher was rather sceptical to the usefulness of such feedback for 8th grade as some of the students did not have the linguistic ability to correct other students' work. Moreover,

a student having numerous errors could be an offer for teasing. Another teacher in 10th grade reported that her students had corrected each others' work when writing on the same subject.

*Teachers on the students' use of the feedback.* The last question was how well the teachers thought their students were able to use the feedback. The answers were similar for teachers of both grades. Four of the teachers said that the students' use of the feedback varies greatly due to individual differences, such as motivation. The other two teachers found the feedback of great use for their students, and one mentions again that, in most cases, her students appreciate the feedback when she confers with them.

Mostly, the teachers' answers on their feedback practices were in harmony with their written feedback. However, some discrepancies were detected. Two teachers reported they emphasised feedback on content and structure. Their written feedback did not give evidence of that, however they claimed they addressed those issues in their oral feedback.

## CHAPTER IV

### Discussion

#### *Summary of findings*

The purpose of this study was to investigate written feedback in 8th and 10th grades and to compare the type and amount of feedback in these two grades. Further, information was gathered on the teachers' writing instruction and feedback practices.

The number of copies gathered from the teachers varied considerably. The teachers were asked if they could provide two or three sets of essays of their students' writings. Four of them provided three sets one provided two sets and from one only one set was provided. The difference in the number of copies between the grades was partly due to the varying number of students in the classes and partly due to the teachers.

When studying the different types of writing activities of those two grades two distinctive features could be detected. First, the types of written exercises varied more in the 8th grade than the 10th grade. The exercises from the 10th grade students indicated that the emphasis was on preparations for the impending national exam students take when leaving 10th grade. Considering the time of the school year the materials were collected, (spring term), this does not come as a surprise. However, this raises the question if the use of these types of writing exercises in 10th grade is not overemphasised at the cost of other aspects of EFL writing, such as process writing, or the use of more varied genres in the writing instruction. Thus the choice of topics suggests that the national exam at the end of 10th grade influences the instruction. Auður Torfadóttir (2006) has criticized the repeated use of a picture story as a prompt for assessing writing on the English National Exam at the end of the

primary school. She points out that this choice of prompt is more consistent with the objectives of the National Curriculum for the 8th grade than 9th or 10th grades. Moreover, she suggests that the students would be able to write a better text if they were given more freedom of choice and more concise instructions regarding the structure of the writing.

Secondly, two samples of the 10th grade and one from the 8th grade writing showed a process oriented approach to the writing instruction. Two of them were provided by the same teacher. However, those samples couldn't be included in the analysis as they showed the final product and did not contain any response from the teacher. The teacher wrote an explanation with the copies that those papers had been corrected. The same teacher used underlining and correcting the wrong word on all the other copies she provided. She reported that she did not use written comments but used to confer with her students individually when handing back the exercises. However, there was not any indication of whether the students had been prepared for these conferences.

Another distinctive feature is that there cannot be discerned any major differences in the teachers' feedback practices between these two grades. The real difference is between the individual teachers. With the exception of the first draft paper from the tenth grade students and essays from one of the 8th grade teacher there is hardly any written feedback on the content and structure of the writing exercises. In fact, there is a larger number of written comments in the 8th grade, despite the number of copies collected from the 10th grade was considerably larger. Notably, there were 139 written comments counted from the 8th grade, whereas the written comments in 10th grade counted 69. This is contrary to the expectations. The teacher concern themselves mainly with correcting the grammar, spelling and vocabulary, and



teachers of both grades seem to find it important to correct every error. This could be due to the fact that the feedback in both grades, with one exception, is on the final work. In 8th grade the emphasis on linguistic features in the feedback does not come as a surprise as the students of that grade may not have sufficient competence to make good use of written commentary on content or rhetorical issues. However, no significant development of written feedback could be detected in 10th grade as should have been expected.

Two of the teachers, one from each grade, used rubrics when responding to their students' papers. The tenth grade teacher used the scoring rubrics similar to the assessment scores of the English national exam, whereas the eight grade teacher used multiple trait scoring and end comments. The comments of the eight grade teacher were overall positive or paired, and simultaneously guiding and encouraging for the student. This teacher stands somewhat out in providing her students with written feedback that takes to all aspects of the language. Multiple trait scoring has often been considered the ideal tool of assessing writing, (Hyland, 2003), although it can be time-consuming to administer. Hyland claims the method is "flexible as each task can be related to its own scale with scoring adapted to the context and genre of the elicited writing" (280). Introducing this method of responding to the students, should give them a clear idea of what is expected of them, which can also reduce anxiety. Moreover, in the questionnaire the teacher explains that she prefers scoring rubrics to correction code which she considers too difficult for her students to work with. She considers the scoring rubrics more to the point and fair.

With the exception of two 10th grade teachers, one who underlined without correction on a first draft, and another who used correction code, all errors were corrected.

Altogether seventeen instances were counted of comments directed to the content, and sixteen comments which addressed structure and organization. These comments were almost entirely provided by two teachers.

Two teachers wrote an explanation with a few exercises where the exercise was too short or had numerous errors. These explanations were intended for me. The teachers wanted to explain that the student in question had learning difficulties, but was a conscientious learner and trying to do his/her best. These explanations suggest the teachers are well aware of individual abilities, and the needs of individual students, but do not give an indication of how they use their knowledge to target the feedback to those needs.

One teacher in 8th grade used words as grades. (Very good/Good/Satisfactory). While, it tells the student how well he/she has done it does not serve as any guidance to better the writing skills. Thus either an oral response or written comments on the content and structure should be needed to provide such guidance. In her response on the feedback, the teacher claimed that she used to confer with her students individually when handing back the assignments. Importantly, students need to be taught to make the best use of the feedback they get for improving their writing. This can be done in teacher student conferences.

Before conducting the study, I expected there would be greater difference in the amount of written comments between these two grades. It could be expected that the emphasis had shifted somewhat from the grammar and mechanics in 8th grade towards the structure and content in 10th grade. However, the results showed that there was not any clear difference between the feedback in those two grades

The use of questionnaires, however limited, provided somewhat clearer picture of the teachers' ideas of feedback practices. Categorizing the answers was

difficult and revealed the limitations of the questionnaire. Here an interview with each teacher would have produced clearer answers.

Finally, it should be noted that most of the research on second language writing and feedback that I examined for this study were done in writing classes, where the emphasis is on the written language. In the compulsory school the teacher has to attend to all aspects of the language learning which inevitably limits the time for writing activities such as writing multiple drafts and revision. However, this makes it all more important for teachers to be well aware of the possibilities of teaching the language through writing.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion

The question of what types of feedback are the most effective is a difficult one. The feedback must depend on various factors, such as the context, the students, their different needs, culture and language proficiency. As Weigle (2002) puts it; “writing is both a social and a cultural activity, in that acts of writing cannot be looked at in isolation but must be seen in their social and cultural context” (22). In the lower levels the focus of the feedback inevitably is more on the form than the content constrained by the limited language knowledge of the students. However, the results of this study suggest that the teachers, even in 10th grade, are more inclined to provide corrective feedback on the form rather than addressing the content or structure of the writing.

Although this is a small scale study and has its limitations, and the data collected gives mainly information of teachers’ written feedback, it provides some idea of teachers’ approaches to feedback in these two grades. However, instead of using questionnaires interviews with the teachers could have given clearer answers and more information on other types of feedback than written. Although I had the chance to meet the teachers and discuss their instruction briefly with them, a structured interview would have been a better supplement to the questionnaires. It would also have been of interest to receive some information on how much time the teachers spend on providing written feedback.

The results of this study raise some questions on the development of the writing instruction from 8th grade to 10th grade. There is not any significant difference in choice of writing tasks or genre and the emphasis seems to be as much

on the form in 10th grade as in 8th grade. The proficiency level between students varies widely, even in 10th grade, and it is difficult for teachers to attend to the needs of all students. However, it is important to be aware of that by more varied approaches and feedback practices the more likely it is that the students needs will be tended to. In her paper on preparing teachers to respond to student writing Ferris, (2007), concludes that: “Experience alone will not make a teacher an effective responder, but solid principles, useful techniques, and thoughtful reflection and evaluation probably will” (179). In addition to this, awareness of individual abilities and motivation will assist successful feedback practices.

Conclusively, considering the status of English in Iceland today, writing in the English class in the second half of the primary education, needs to go further than mere serving the purpose of “language practice.” Therefore teachers have to address the content and writing style more in their responses. Teachers in the compulsory school may need to discuss feedback practices and how they best can meet the needs of their students and the increasing demands of good English language skills in Iceland.

Finally there is a need for larger scale studies on feedback practices in the primary school, studies that take to more than written feedback. If error feedback is the main part of the written feedback, as this study implies, it would be of interest to find out how much time the teachers spend on oral response or if peer-response is used at all in the secondary level of the primary school.

Appendix 1

**Spurningalisti kennara um kennslu á ritunarþættinum í ensku.**

Bekkur \_\_\_\_\_ Fjöldi kennslustunda í ensku á viku \_\_\_\_\_

Hvaða nám hefur þú í ensku? KHÍ - enskuval \_\_\_\_\_ BA í ensku frá HÍ \_\_\_\_\_

Annað: \_\_\_\_\_

Hve mörg ár hefur þú kennt ensku? 1 – 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 – 10 \_\_\_\_\_ 10 – 15 \_\_\_\_\_

Annað: \_\_\_\_\_

Um það bil hve mikill tími á viku fer í ritunaræfingar? 15 mín. \_\_\_\_\_ 30 mín. \_\_\_\_\_  
40 mín. \_\_\_\_\_

Athugasemdir: \_\_\_\_\_

Fá nemendur sérstaka þjálfun í ritun? Til dæmis hvað varðar skipulag, frágang eða  
þjálfun í ferlisritun? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hve mörgum ritunarverkefnum skila nemendur á önn? (Verkefni sem eru a. m. k. 90  
orð eða lengri.) 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ Fleiri (tala) \_\_\_\_\_

Athugasemdir: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hvernig fyrimæli, eða kveikju til að vekja áhuga, notar þú helst þegar þú leggur fyrir  
ritunarverkefni? Merktu við 1 – 5 eftir því hvað er algengast.

Mynd/ir \_\_\_\_\_ Hugtakakort \_\_\_\_\_ Lestexti \_\_\_\_\_ Þankahríð \_\_\_\_\_ Myndband \_\_\_\_\_

Annað: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hvað ræður vali á ritunarverkefnum? \_\_\_\_\_

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Hefur þú/þinn skóli einhverja sérstaka stefnu í ritunarkennslu í ensku? Ef já, í hverju felst hún? \_\_\_\_\_

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Hvaða kennslubækur notar þú aðallega í ensku? \_\_\_\_\_

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Hversu vel finnst þér kennslubækurnar nýtast til þess að ná þeim markmiðum í ritun sem Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla setur? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix 2

### Spurningalisti kennara um endurgjöf á ritunarverkefni í 8. og 10. bekk.

Bekkur \_\_\_\_\_ Fjöldi kennslustunda í ensku á viku í bekknum. \_\_\_\_\_

Var fjallað um endurgjöf á ritun í þínu kennaranámi? Já \_\_\_ Nei \_\_\_

Ef já, á hvað var lögð áhersla? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hvernig endurgjöf notar þú oftast á ritunarverkefni nemenda? Merktu við 1 – 4 eftir því hvað þú notar helst:

Skriflegar athugasemdir \_\_\_ Munnleg endurgjöf \_\_\_ Leiðréttingalykill \_\_\_ Strika undir villur og leiðrétti \_\_\_

Annað: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Á hvaða atriði leggur þú mesta áherslu í endurgjöfinni? Skrifaðu tölurnar 1 – 3 eftir mikilvægi.

Málfræði/Stafsetning \_\_\_ Orðaforði \_\_\_ Ritleikni/Innihald \_\_\_

Annað/Athugasemdir: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Hefur þú stuðst við matsreglur þær sem notaðar eru í samræmdu prófi við endurgjöf?

Já \_\_\_ Nei \_\_\_

Ef já, hvenær þá helst? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



Ef þú gefur nemendum þínum munnlega umsögn/endurgjöf:

Hvenær notar þú hana? \_\_\_\_\_

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Um hvaða þætti ritunarinnar notar þú hana? (T. d. um innihald, orðaforða, skipulag, málfræði, stafsetningu.) \_\_\_\_\_

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Ef þú notar skriflegar athugasemdir hvar skrifarðu þær við ritunarverkefni? T. d. á spássíurnar, aftast eða bæði. \_\_\_\_\_

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Leiðréttu nemendur hver hjá öðrum? Já\_\_\_ Nei\_\_\_

Ef já, í hvernig verkefnum þá helst? \_\_\_\_\_

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Hversu vel telur þú að endurgjöfin nýtist nemendum þínum? \_\_\_\_\_

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