Written Feedback on Midterm Scripts: Students' Expectations, Problems and Preferences

Monisha Biswas   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5377-1621

Lecturer, Department of English
East West University, Bangladesh
Email: monisha@ewubd.edu
        monishabiswas3@gmail.com

Abstract

Considering the increasing importance of written feedback (WF) on students' scripts in education nowadays in Bangladesh, this research paper aimed to find out students' expectations and problems regarding the written feedback provided on their midterm scripts by teachers. It also aimed to find out preferences of students in light of their expectations for making this process more effective. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from students (1st year to master's) of the Department of English, X University (pseudonym for a public university) through questionnaire and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). There were 86 participants in total (78 respondents of the questionnaire and 8 participants in the FGDs). The study found out that although students expect written feedback on their scripts, they are more interested to check their marks. It also found that some students expect corrections by teachers without trying on their own. Regarding problems faced by students, it was found that many students do not understand feedback with signs and symbols. The findings of this paper indicate that preferences of students should be taken into account by teachers and others concerned to make the process of written feedback effective for students.

Keywords: Written feedback; midterm scripts; students' expectations; problems; preferences

Introduction

Up until early 20th century, writing in second language was traditionally considered as a product, which was only to be marked after assessment by the teacher in the role of a judge (Karim & Ivy, 2011). Now, writing in a second language is considered a very complex process, which requires revision and rewriting (Bayat, 2014).Therefore, the idea of 'feedback' has become central in second language acquisition (SLA). Feedback can take many forms (Ellis, 2008). However, teachers' written comments on students' writing is the most common type of feedback in writing process; in higher education, it is common for students to receive a lot of written feedback on their work (Chalmers, Mowat, & Chapman, 2018; Higgins, Hartley, & Shelton, 2002). Written feedback can be defined as the extensive written comments of teachers on students' writings to provide a reader response to students' efforts and to help them improve their writing (Hyland, 2003). In Bangladesh, at the tertiary level, teachers are supposed to give written feedback on assignments and written exam scripts. The feedback is generally considered important to improve students' writing. In the department of English, it plays even a more important role.

The author's personal experience shows that many students of the department of English, especially from public universities in Bangladesh, face problems in receiving written feedback on their written tests. In public universities, due to large class size, only a few assignments are taken from students. So, teachers' written feedback on midterm scripts is a good source of feedback for students to improve on various aspects before final exams. It is noteworthy that scripts of final exams are not shown to the students. These students complete eight semesters at the undergraduate level and two semesters at the graduate level. In each semester (six months), they face one midterm examination in the form of a written test for both service and core courses and they generally consider teacher's written feedback on their scripts quite important. However, as the author's personal experience shows, students' preferences of written feedback are not generally considered while providing feedback, though they are quite significant in higher education (Agricola, Prins, & Sluijsmans, 2020).

Considering the above circumstances, this paper aimed to find out students' expectations, problems, and their preferences regarding the written feedback provided on midterm scripts by teachers in the department of English of X University (pseudonym for a public university). This department offers a wide range of core courses on literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, and English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper generated data from the core courses only.

Literature Review

Previous studies on written feedback (WF) maintain that it is an effective tool to develop students' writing abilities (Khan, 2013), and in higher education, it plays an important role (Agricola, Prins, & Sluijsmans, 2020). However, some factors can make written feedback ineffective. Providing effective written feedback is a complex process (Sadler, 2010) and its effectiveness can be improved if students inform teachers about their feedback preferences in advance (Agricola, Prins, & Sluijsmans, 2020). In other words, it is important to know students' expectations so that teachers can adjust their feedback technique (Ouahid & Lamkhanter, 2020).

A number of studies show that students sometimes do not understand teacher feedback accurately (Higgins, Hartley, & Shelton, 2002; Hyatt, 2005) and they rarely think about the feedback (Duijnhouwer, Prins, & Stokking 2010). Leki (2008) shows how students may have problems like not reading annotations at all; reading, but not understanding; and understanding, but not responding. Thus, to make the feedback effective, it is important to know how students use the feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) maintain that feedback will have no power unless we know which form of written feedback is considered most effective or preferred by students. Researches show that feedback like underlining,

coding, or one-word comments do not help students (Sarwar, 2010; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Also, Sadler (2010) points out that sometimes there remains a gap between teachers and students which needs to be reduced to make written feedback effective. Thus, many experts recommended the use of conferencing as a follow-up activity (Sarwar, 2010). Thus, the literature suggests that written feedback will be ineffective for students if their expectations, preferences, and problems are not considered. In addition, it will be a waste of time and energy for teachers. Therefore, this paper addresses the following three research questions:

1) What are the expectations of the students regarding the written feedback provided on their midterm scripts?
2) What problems do these students face with regard to written feedback?
3) What are their preferences regarding the written feedback provided on their midterm scripts?

Research Methodology

Instruments

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was developed to collect data. The first part of the questionnaire elicits general information about the students. The second part has 16 statements based on Likert Scale with five response options ranging from strongly agree (scale no.5) to strongly disagree (scale no.1). In the third part (open-ended), students were asked to write about their preferences or suggestions. For qualitative data collection, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted (see Appendix 2).

Participants

The research used purposive sampling where the target population was students of the Department of English, X University (pseudonym). There were 78 respondents of the questionnaire. They were students from first year to Master's level and were chosen considering availability and readiness. All participants for the FGDs were selected from the Master's level based on availability, readiness and CGPA between 3.00 and 3.5 (on a scale of 4.00). The first FGD had four students (2 male, 2 female) from the Literature stream and the second one had four students (all female) from the Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT) stream.

Data collection and data analysis procedure

For quantitative data collection, the questionnaire was given to the students of both undergraduate and graduate levels at the department. They were invited to participate voluntarily. In total, 80 copies of the questionnaire were distributed out of which 78 were returned properly. All of the copies were numbered (e.g. respondent no.1, respondent no. 2) for identifying participants for the purpose of analysis. The responses were analyzed using Microsoft Office Excel 2007. To collect qualitative data, both FGDs were conducted at the department. In the FGDs, both Bangla and English language were used. For data analysis, FGDs were audio-recorded. The process of thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Findings and Analysis

Questionnaire analysis

The analysis shows that almost all of the students (96.15%) in the department of English opine that written feedback on the midterm scripts is important. Figure 1 illustrates the results (statement no. 1 in the questionnaire).
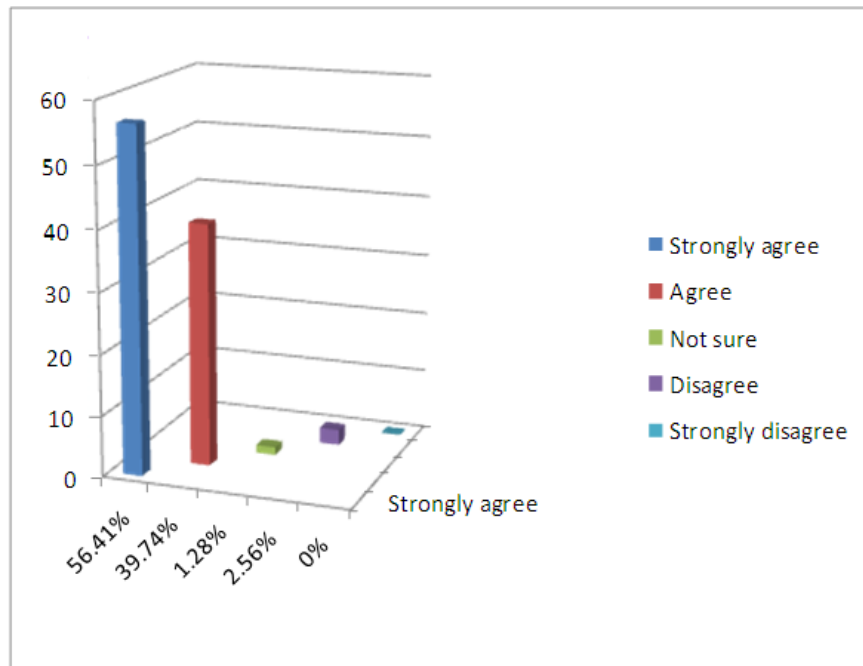

Figure 1. Importance of written feedback on midterm scripts

Students' expectations of written feedback

The analysis reveals that there are some specific expectations of the students regarding written feedback on their midterm scripts. Table 1 shows the results regarding students' expectations.

Table 1. Students' expectations

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.Teachers should provide written feedback on midterm scripts of students	55.12%	34.61%	6.41%	3.84%	0%

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2.Teachers should provide feedback on the content of answer	39.74%	52.56%	5.12%	2.56%	0%
3.Teachers should identify grammatical errors	25.64%	64.10%	8.97%	1.28%	0%
4.Teachers should provide correction to grammatical errors	20.51%	51.28%	15.38%	12.82%	0%
5.I expect my linguistic problems to be both identified and corrected	21.79%	50%	16.6%	11.53%	0%
6.I expect teachers to write detailed comments	38.46%	23.07%	20.51%	14.10%	3.84%
7.I expect positive comments from teachers for good writing	35.89%	50%	8.97%	3.84%	1.28%
8.Teachers should explain the feedback in a face to face conference	82.05%	14.10%	1.28%	2.56%	0%

Results show that 61.53% students expect detailed comments on their writing. In regard to the types of feedback, 92.3% participants expect feedback on the content of their midterm scripts. 71.79% (21.79 % strongly agree and 50% agree) expect the identification and correction of linguistic errors. When it comes to the question of expecting positive comments, 50% agreed and 35.89% strongly agreed. It indicates that students expect encouraging, motivating and appreciating comments from the teachers for good writing.

Problems with written feedback

The analysis shows that students face problems in receiving written feedback. Table 2 contains data regarding some of these problems.

Table 2. Problems in the process of receiving written feedback

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
9.I find it difficult to understand some comments	7.69%	52.56%	17.94%	21.79%	0%
10.I ask my peers for the meaning of a comment when I do not understand	11.53%	53.84%	17.94%	15.38%	1.28%

11.I rarely ask teachers for clarification in case I do not understand any written comment	10.25%	48.71%	11.53%	25.64%	3.84%
12.I always count the marks to see if the sum is right	29.48%	52.56%	11.53%	5.12%	1.28%
13.I fear the idea of getting less marks than expected	39.74%	23.07%	20.51%	14.10%	3.84%
14. I sometimes get negative (such as sarcastic) comments	8.97%	73.07%	14.10%	3.84%	0%
15. Negative comments or error identification discourages me	10.25%	32.05%	19.23%	32.05%	6.41%

Results demonstrate that 60.25% participants find it difficult to understand some comments. Another problem is that students rarely (10.25% strongly agreed, 48.71% agreed) ask teachers for clarification if they do not understand any written comment; rather, they ask their peers (11.53% strongly agreed, 53.84% agreed). Another problem that hinders students' proper reception of written feedback is students' concern about marks. Voerman, Meijer, Fred, and Simons (2012) found that negative comments did not have a bad influence on students. In the present study, 10.25% strongly agreed and 6.41% strongly disagreed that negative comments or error identification discourages them.

Preferences of the students

Thematic analysis of the third part of the questionnaire indicates that respondents have preferences for written feedback. Most of the respondents pointed out the necessity of showing midterm scripts at a convenient time. For instance, respondent no. 64 wrote that scripts should be shown in due time so that students can get the scope to improve themselves by knowing their problems. Respondent no. 77 wrote, "Scripts should be shown as soon as possible". Another (respondent no.52) wrote, "We often do not get to see the midterm scripts on time. If they are shown earlier, it will be easier for us to correct our errors".

Students also wrote regarding the types of written feedback. One respondent (no. 14) wrote that "Just identification or underlining is not enough". Another (respondent no.21) suggested that teachers can use codes like GM for grammar mistake, SS for sentence structure instead of only underlining. Respondent no. 35 pointed out that even if the teacher is underlining, he/she should critically explain what to improve as well. Participants also showed preference for written feedback on both content and language (respondent no. 5, respondent no. 13). Another (respondent no. 40) pointed out that teachers may write one or two sentences at the end of the scripts to provide overall feedback on the answers. He/she wrote that if he/she is told that his/her organization of ideas is not up to the mark, he/she will try to focus on that part. Many wrote regarding their preferences for both positive and negative comments as shown in the following statements:

"I expect both positive and negative comments from the teachers". (respondent no. 64)
"I wish to see all my midterm scripts on proper time with proper feedback along with both positive and negative aspects of my writing". (respondent no.76)
"Feedback should be constructive. Teachers should provide motivational comments besides feedbacks provided for the mistakes". (respondent no.26)

"Teachers seem to find out the negative sides only. But positive feedback can be beneficial too". (respondent no.10)
"Negative comments should be given in a very positive manner" (respondent no. 13).

These apart, preferences were found regarding follow-up feedback or conferencing. Literature shows that only providing written feedback is not enough (Sarwar, 2010). Findings of the present study support this perspective. For example, one Master's level student (respondent no.44) wrote that teachers should give short comments and simultaneously discuss them elaborately in the class to make students understand their errors and mistakes. Respondent no. 2 suggested that teachers should take a separate class to discuss errors from the midterm scripts. Respondent no. 64 also suggested that teachers should discuss errors with the whole class. Also, teachers should give feedback using board for the class (respondent no. 75). Respondent no. 13 wrote about his/her preference for clarification from the teachers with smiling face. Another (respondent no. 20) said, "It should be kept in mind that feedback should not discourage the students".

Analysis of the focus group discussions

Students' expectations of written feedback

From the FGDs, students' expectations regarding feedback were identified. First of all, participants from both the FGDs agreed that written feedback on their midterm scripts is an important tool to develop their writing skills. One participant from the first FGD pointed out that written feedback helps to know possible areas of errors. Therefore, they expect teachers to give them feedback on their midterm scripts. With regard to the types of feedback, one participant from the second FGD pointed out that she prefers error-correction. Another participant from the same FGD expressed her expectations in having feedback regarding the overall organization of her answer. Participants from the first FGD also expected motivating, encouraging, and positive comments.

Problems with written feedback

One of the problems that students frequently face is that midterm scripts are shown just before the final exams. Participants from the first FGD pointed out that by the time scripts are shown, they even forget what they had written. Also, they informed that they do not get enough time for taking necessary steps for improving. The second problem is regarding the feedback type. One participant from the second FGD expressed her dislike of underlining, which is 'confusing' to her. Some also pointed out the issue of clarity or intelligibility. One participant from the first Focus Group Discussion (FGD) said, "Sometimes comments are written in such a bad manner that it becomes unintelligible". She remarked that although the teacher had written quite detailed comments, she could not understand them. Three participants pointed out that some teachers use signs and symbols in proving WF, but they do not explain them. Therefore, they find it difficult to understand the feedback.

Another problem pointed out by the participants of both the FGDs is that there is a distance or gap between some students and teachers. This finding matches with the view of Sadler (2010). One participant from the second FGD said that she fears the idea of being scolded by the teacher and thus, never asks her teacher for clarification. The last important problem is related to the students themselves. In both FGDs, participants pointed out the issue of assessment of their midterm scripts. Participants from the first FGD pointed out that when they do not get the expected score, they lose their interest to go through the written feedback on their midterm scripts. Also, participants' comments implied that they were more interested in getting higher marks than actually improving their writing skills.

Preferences of the students

Participants of the FGDs pointed out similar preferences to that of the questionnaire. First of all, they want their scripts to be shown much before the final exams. Again, they suggested that although there are several scripts to check, teachers should try to provide elaborate comments. They also think that if possible, teachers should give feedback using board in the class. Here, the implication is clear that there is a need of follow-up activities with students. One participant also expressed her wish that comments should be written clearly by teachers. Lastly, in both FGDs, participants showed preference for discussion on common mistakes.

Discussion and Implications

The research found similar results from the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. Students' first wish was to see their midterm scripts much before their final exams. The implication is that they need enough time to improve. With regard to negative comments, different results were found. Whereas results from questionnaire show that 82.04% respondents get negative comments, none in the two FGDs received negative comments. It implies that perception of what constitutes negative comment differs. However, teachers should be careful in providing constructive feedback so that students perceive feedback positively which is believed to develop self-efficacy, confidence, and motivation in students (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Also, fostering positive perceptions of feedback in students should be a primary goal of teachers (Ekholm, Zumbrunn, & Conklin, 2015).

The research found that the students do not understand the signs and symbols used in written feedback; teachers also do not explain the symbols. Most of the students expect detailed comments on both content and grammar. Chen, Nassaji & Liu (2016) showed similar preference of Chinese ESL students for detailed comments from teachers. They opined that EFL/ESL students outside English-speaking countries have a preference for written corrective feedback (WCF) which is evident in this study too. Bitchener (2008) found that students who receive direct corrective feedback with written and oral meta-linguistic feedback outperform those who do not receive any feedback. In the context of Bangladesh, WCF can be helpful. Also, it can be supported with verbal feedback as research shows that verbal feedback has a significantly higher impact on students (Agricola, Prins, & Sluijsmans, 2020). The present study also found that students are more concerned with the marks than the feedback. This hinders students from receiving the written feedback properly. It may not be possible to change this tendency of the students, but teachers should put as much attention as possible on follow-up activities so that the students understand the value of the written feedback (Ouahid & Lamkhanter, 2020).

Conclusion

The research found that students' are over-occupied with marks. This tendency exposes the negative side of our exam-oriented culture. Kohn (2011) believes that the more students are focused on doing well in exams, the less engaged they tend to be with what they are doing. Therefore, teachers need to try to make students form habits of occupying themselves more with the feedback than with marks. Karim and Ivy (2011) suggest that teachers must take some time to reflect on their feedback techniques and their effects on students' writing. Besides, students should remember that only getting feedback from the teachers is not enough. They have to respond to the feedback properly if they wish to improve writing skills in English. One participant (no. 8) rightly commented that students need to be practical. They should understand that they cannot expect teachers to provide exhaustive feedback; it will be too difficult for the teachers. Moreover, participants from the first FGD pointed out the need of co-operation between teachers and students. Therefore, students should also be responsible to take necessary steps for their own

improvement in writing skills. Further research can be done to investigate what students actually do with the written feedback; also, research on teachers' perspectives can add another dimension to it.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

I, hereby, state that I conducted the research and prepared the manuscript following the protocol of research and publications ethics. I am solely responsible if any deviation or mistake (in content and language) is identified in the manuscript.

References

Agricola, B. T., Prins, F. J., & Sluijsmans, D. M. A. (2020). Impact of feedback request forms and verbal feedback on higher education students' feedback perception, self-efficacy, and motivation. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *27*(1), 6-25. doi:10.1080/0969594X.2019.1688764

Bayat, N. (2014). The effect of the process writing approach on writing success and anxiety. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 14* (3), 1133-1141. doi:10.12738/estp.2014.3.1720

Bitchener, J. (2008). Evidence in support of written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *17*, 102–118. doi:10.1016/j.jslw.2007.11.004

Caffarella, R. S., & Barnett, B. G. (2000). Teaching doctoral students to become scholarly writers: The importance of giving and receiving critiques. *Studies in Higher Education*, *25*(1), 39–52. doi:10.1080/030750700116000

Chen, S., Nassaji, H., & Liu, Q. (2016). EFL learners' perceptions and preferences of written corrective feedback: a case study of university students from Mainland China. *Asian. J. Second. Foreign. Lang. Educ. 1***,** 5. doi: 10.1186/s40862-016-0010-y

Duijnhouwer, H., Prins, F. J., & Stokking, K. M. (2010). Progress feedback effects on students' writing mastery goal, self-efficacy beliefs, and performance. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, *16* (1), 53–74. doi:10.1080/13803611003711393

Ekholm, E., Zumbrunn, S., & Conklin, S. (2015). The relation of college student self-efficacy toward writing and writing self-regulation aptitude: Writing feedback perceptions as a mediating variable. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *20* (2), 197–207. doi:10.1080/13562517.2014.974026

Ellis, R. (2008). A typology of written corrective feedback types. *ELT Journal*, *63*, 97-107. doi:10.1093/elt/ccn023

Ferris, D., & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes. *Journal of Second Language Writing - J SECOND LANG WRIT, 10*, 161-184. doi:10.1016/S1060-3743(01)00039-X

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research, 77* (1), 81-112. doi:10.3102/003465430298487

Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Shelton, A. (2002). The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, *27*(1), 53–64. doi:10.1080/03075070120099368

Hyatt, D. F. (2005). 'Yes, a very good point!': A critical genre analysis of a corpus of feedback commentaries on master of education assignments. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *10* (3), 339–353. doi:10.1080/13562510500122222

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Karim, M. Z., & Ivy, T. I. (2011). (L2) Writing Classrooms: a study on some private universities in Bangladesh. *Journal of Bangladesh Association of Young Researchers*, *1*(1), 31-48. doi:10.3329/jbayr.v1i1.6837

Khan, S. I. (2013). The Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on L2 Students' Writing. *Spectrum: Journal of Department of English, 8,* 209-224.

Kohn, A. (2011). The Case Against Grades. *Counterpoints*, *451*, 143-153. https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/

Leki, I. (2008). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals, 24 (3),* 203-218. doi:10.1111/j.1944-9720.1991.tb00464.x

Ouahidi M., Lamkhanter F. (2020). Students' perceptions about teachers' written feedback on writing in a Moroccan University context. In: A. Ahmed, S. Troudi, &S. Riley (eds). *Feedback in L2 English writing in the Arab world,* (pp. 35-63). doi:10.1007/978-3-030-25830-6_2

Sadler, D.R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assesment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*, 535-550. doi:10.1080/02602930903541015

Sarwar, B. (2010). The Role of Feedback in Teaching Process Writing: From Theoretical Considerations to Practical Implementation . *Spectrum: Journal of Department of English*, *6*, 1-11.

Voerman, L., Meijer ,C., Fred A. j. K.,, & Simons, R.J. (2012).Types and frequencies of feedback interventions in classroom interaction in secondary education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28* (8), 1107-1115. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2012.06.006

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Dear students,

This research intends to find out your expectations and preferences regarding the written feedback provided by teachers on your mid-term scripts. Your participation is kindly sought. Be assured that all responses will be kept confidential. Kindly answer all the questions. Thank you!

Regards,
Monisha Biswas
Email: monishabiswas3@gmail.com

Part 1

Kindly put a tick (√) Mark

1) What is your class standing?
  a) 1st year   b) 2nd year   c) 3rd year   d) 4th year   e) Masters

2) Kindly mention your gender.
   a) Male   b) Female

3) What is your current CGPA/GPA?
 a) Under 3.00   b) Between 3.00 and 3.24   c) Between 3.25 and 3.49   d) 3.5 and above

Part 2

Kindly put a tick (√) Mark

	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		5	4	3	2	1
1	Teachers' written feedback on midterm scripts are of great importance					
2	Teachers should provide written feedback on					

	midterm scripts of students					
3	Teachers should provide feedback on the content of answer					
4	Teachers should identify grammatical errors					
5	Teachers should provide correction to grammatical errors					
6	I expect my Language problems to be both identified and corrected					
7	I expect teachers to write detailed comments					
8	I expect positive comments from teachers for good writing					
9	Teachers should explain the feedback in a face to face conference					
10	I find it difficult to understand some comments					
11	I ask my peers for the meaning of a comment when I do not understand					
12	I rarely ask teachers for clarification in case I do not understand any written comment					
13	I always count the marks to see if the sum is right					
14	I fear the idea of getting less marks than expected					
15	I sometimes get negative (such as sarcastic) comments					
16	Negative comments or error identification discourage me					

Part 3

Briefly write about your preference/s or any suggestion regarding teacher's feedback on midterm scripts.

--- --------------
--- --------------
--- --------------

Thank you so much for your co-operation!

Appendix 2

Questions Asked in Focused Group Discussions

Opening Question-

Do you think teachers should provide feedback on midterm scripts?

Core Questions-

1. What are your expectations regarding written feedback on midterm scripts?
2. Do you face any problem with the written feedback?
3. What are your preferences regarding written feedback on your midterm scripts?