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Student perspectives on formative feedback as part of writing portfolios

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Abstract

Despite the crucial role that students play in formative assessment practices, student perspectives on such practices are relatively under-researched. Through a qualitative analysis of 128 reflection notes written by student teachers of English, this article investigates the students' perceptions of formative feedback as part of portfolio assessment at two teacher education institutions in Norway. As such, it contributes to bridging the gap between research and practice. Students received peer and teacher feedback on assignments and wrote reflection notes during the semester. Findings show that students are positive towards teacher feedback and highlight the significance of teacher praise. Main objections raised against peer feedback concern the lack of constructive criticism. However, positive attitudes towards peer discussion groups suggest that they may be a more effective way of implementing peer assessment than formalised written peer commentary. Student reflections suggest that a failure to understand the task and the feedback is a possible hindrance to successfully revising assignments. Overall, students' positive attitudes towards the portfolio process, which includes multiple drafting, suggest that students in higher education would benefit from more opportunities to revise and resubmit their work, yet they need adequate practice in providing peer feedback, and interpreting and implementing feedback in general.

Keywords: Formative assessment, portfolio assessment, formative feedback, teacher education

Introduction[1]

Although students are key participants in formative assessment practices, their perspectives on such practices have been under-investigated. According to a recent review of formative assessment in higher education by López-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho (2017, 89), 'research studies have focused mainly on the possible effects on students' academic results', while 'subjective experiences and social processes have been poorly analysed'. According to a comprehensive review study of assessment and feedback in higher education, only 7% of 460 studies during 2000-2012 explored student perceptions of feedback (Evans 2013). Walls and Kelley (2016) note similar tendencies regarding research on peer assessment, observing that when student perspectives have been examined, this was done predominantly through surveys where 'actual student voices played a peripheral role to quantitative statistical analyses' (Walls and Kelley 2016, 92).

It is important to study student perceptions of their engagement in formative assessment practices in order to improve actual formative assessment practices, as feedback cannot be formative if students are not able to use it. There are repeated calls in the research literature for a greater focus on how students make sense of feedback (Black and Wiliam 1998; Boud and Falchikov 2007; Higgins et al. 2002). In light of these observations, the present study sheds light on student perceptions of formative assessment practices as part of portfolio assessment in English-language courses at two teacher education institutions in Norway.

Writing portfolios and formative feedback

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[1] All authors have contributed equally to the article.

According to Lee (2011), self- and peer assessment, formative feedback through multiple drafting and portfolios are ways of realizing formative assessment in the classroom. Such classroom activities allow reflection, interaction, and opportunities to return to one's text and improve it. Students in higher education are rarely given the opportunity to revise and re-submit assignments (López-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho 2017). In the present study, writing portfolios (see Burner 2014) were used as the assessment tool in order to promote revision over time. Writing portfolios make learning concrete and visible, and they are evidence of knowledge (what the student knows), skills (what the student is able to do), and dispositions (the student's attitudes, beliefs, or values). Furthermore, writing portfolios include higher levels of thinking through inquiry and reflection (Johnson, Mims-Cox and Doyle-Nichols 2010). Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) suggest three main categories that define portfolios, namely collection, reflection, and selection. Collection does not mean merely collecting texts, but keeping track and working to improve drafts. Reflection is often linked to self-assessment and self-regulation. Selection is also a form of reflection, where students have to decide which texts they are most satisfied with and what they have learned over a longer period of time (Hamp-Lyons and Condon 2000).

Several researchers have argued for the pedagogical value of students' writing reflections (Quinton and Smallbone 2010; Sadler 1989). Jackson and Marks (2016) found that students who wrote assessed reflection notes on the feedback they received reported higher engagement with the feedback and improved their grades. Quinton and Smallbone (2010) argue that a vital part of the student learning process in higher education comes from engaging with and reflecting on written feedback. They stress the importance of using reflections on feedback in a formative way, and of dedicating classroom time to writing reflections (Quinton and Smallbone 2010). In this study, reflection notes were both an integral part of the writing portfolio, as well as the tool used to gain insight into student perceptions on formative assessment practices.

Feedback plays a key role in formative assessment (Hattie and Timperley 2007; López-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho 2017; Sadler 1989). It is feedback that is used to support learning and enable the students to bridge the gap between the actual level of performance and the desired learning goal (Biggs 2003; Black and Wiliam 1998; Ramaprasad 1983; Taras 2006). The significance of feedback in promoting student learning is often highlighted in research (Black and Wiliam 1998, 2018; Hattie and Timperley 2007), though variable effects of feedback on student performance are documented. As Hattie and Timperley's (2007) review of research on feedback shows, feedback can be helpful, it may have no effect or it may have negative effect on students' learning, achievement and motivation. Against the backdrop of such results, various studies have attempted to identify qualities of effective feedback practices, and there is a growing consensus regarding the kind of feedback practice that is more likely to yield positive learning gains. In this respect, student engagement in the feedback process is seen as one of the key ingredients of effective feedback practices (Black and Wiliam 1998, 2018). It is not enough merely to provide feedback. Formative feedback has to be used - actions have to be taken by the students, in order for feedback to be effective (Poulos and Mahony 2008; Sadler 1989).

Despite this, students may find it challenging to engage effectively with feedback, and there are many reasons why students may fail to capitalise or act on feedback (Jonsson 2013; Winstone et al. 2017). Difficulties in understanding the feedback may limit the students' engagement with it (Winstone et al. 2017). Some may lack the required domain knowledge and skills needed to revise their work. Sadler (2010, 537) argues that 'students cannot convert feedback statements into actions for improvement without sufficient working knowledge of some fundamental concepts'. Students' motivation and resilience, as well as their ability to persist when faced with difficulty, are important factors. In this respect, positive feedback has an important role to play in boosting student confidence and motivation (Ferguson 2011). Students'

engagement with feedback may also be hampered by their emotional responses (Quinton and Smallbone 2010). It is also important that students and teachers have a shared understanding of what constitutes feedback, its functions and its potential impact on learning, as well as their respective roles in the feedback process (Carless 2006). Related to this issue are students' beliefs regarding sources of valuable feedback. Students often feel that only teachers have the required authority and skills to provide valuable feedback, explaining some of the challenges related to effective implementation of peer feedback (Walls and Kelley 2016). Finally, the significance of the network of support that students draw on when interpreting and making use of feedback should not be neglected (Evans 2013). Peer discussions may play a significant role in supporting students in their interpretation and use of feedback (see Black and Wiliam 2018; Sadler 2010).

The importance of including peer assessment as part of the assessment design is often emphasised as a way of enhancing the role of students in feedback processes (Black and Wiliam 1998). Drawing on Falchikov (1986), Van der Pol et al. (2008, 1805) define peer assessment 'as a method in which students engage in reflective criticism of the products of other students and provide them with feedback, using previously defined criteria'. Research highlights the potential of peer assessment in improving student learning and promoting lifelong learning skills, fostering interpersonal relationships and improving students' communication skills (see Ballantyne, Hughes and Mylonas 2002 for an overview). The success of such feedback practices depends on a number of factors, including, as already noted, students' belief regarding potential sources of valuable feedback, as well as the way peer assessment is implemented and the extent to which the students are prepared to provide and receive peer feedback (see van Zundert, Sluijsmans and van Merriënboer 2010 for an overview). This study investigates student perspectives on engagement with the above-mentioned elements of formative assessment as part of writing portfolios in teacher education in Norway.

Methods

Forty student teachers of English as a Foreign Language from two teacher education institutions in Norway took part in the study during the autumn 2017 semester. All aspects of the course were conducted in English. The course design focused on improving formative assessment practices (the redesign of the courses was funded by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education). When designing the course, the instructors discussed when the feedback would be provided and by whom (teachers/peers/mixed). Instructors made efforts to balance praise and criticism, and to provide feedback that offered students specific guidance on how to improve. Students were given formative feedback on three assignments that were to be considered for inclusion in their portfolio. The assessment criteria for the portfolio assignments were developed together with the students in class. Written teacher feedback was provided on the first assignment and peer feedback on the second assignment. On the third assignment, both teacher and peer feedback was provided, with teachers focusing on content and structure, and peers focusing on language. The importance and role of peer assessment was discussed in class, and students were given guidelines on how to provide peer feedback. Students were also given the opportunity to discuss the feedback they received in class and ask for clarification. Furthermore, they were given time to revise their assignments during the course of the semester.

Students also wrote reflection notes during the semester, as well as when submitting their final portfolios. They were asked to reflect on how satisfied they were with their assignments, what the feedback told them to revise, what they learned from the feedback, what revisions they made, and what helped them successfully complete their assignments. Neither the peer reviews,

nor the reflection notes were graded. The students produced a total of 128 reflection notes collected throughout the semester. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and the researchers obtained written consent from the participants.

The data analysis was based on Corbin and Strauss' (2008) data analyses techniques. The researchers coded the student reflection notes individually and met regularly to moderate their analyses by discussing and comparing their coding. Following a validation process of coding, the researchers discussed and agreed on meaningful categories based on the codes, constantly comparing them in order to reduce the categories. This resulted in the following four categories: 'learning from the process of portfolio assessment', 'learning from and attitudes towards teacher feedback', 'learning from and attitudes towards peer feedback', and 'strategies for acting on feedback'.

Results

Learning from the process of portfolio assessment

This category reports students' perceptions on the process of portfolio assessment, which included feedback cycles and opportunities for revision. The most frequent topic in the student reflection notes was the possibility to revise texts, as illustrated in the following student quotes:

> S1: *It has been beneficial to work further with assignments after handing it in the first time*
>
> S18: *Through the process of revising I learned more convenient ways to use the language*

One student also identified the reflection notes as important learning tools in terms of serving as a written record for future revision work:

S19: *To start, I have found it very useful to write reflective commentaries after doing obligatory assignments and afterwards trying to improve on certain aspects I have mentioned in my reflections*

Several students reported the satisfaction they felt from having been able to work on their texts over time, taking feedback into account, but also the new knowledge and skills they may have gained during the course of the semester. These included the students' experiences from teaching practice:

S10: *The final versions I have submitted, are something I am very satisfied with. I took the feedback I had gotten, and changed the plan accordingly, as well as added things I saw were needed*

S13: *What really helped me during my revision of this assignment was our practice period*

Another frequently occurring topic related to the portfolio process was the improvement of writing skills. Students noticed *a progression while rewriting* (S19) their texts, and reflected that the process of revision and resubmission allowed them to *write better texts* (S27) and improved their *English writing skills* (S28). As one student reflected:

S13: [After revision] *I noticed that my language was more precise and it was easier for me as well, reading the essay*

The quote above also suggests that the student was able to approach the essay with more of an outside perspective after feedback and revision. Students specifically reported that they gained a critical distance to their writing through the portfolio approach:

S20: *I have gotten the necessary distance from my products to be able to reflect critically upon them before revising*

Portfolio assessment also seemed to increase motivation for learning for some students. Students reflected on experiencing a sense of mastery from being able to track progress over time, from receiving formative feedback, and from being given the chance to improve their work.

S15: *I´m really satisfied with this way of assessment. I feel like it has helped me to learn from my own mistakes, and that I from that have become more aware of both my strengths and my weaknesses*

S6: *Even though they could be better I have learnt a lot by working with the texts over a prolonged period of time*

S21: [I am] *motivated to do an even better job next time*

S2: *revising them* [the assignments] *was, in fact, enjoyable*

Moreover, the process led to students understanding the purpose of formative assessment:

S20: *I found out that formative assessment is the key to reaching the goal ahead*

Several students mentioned transversal skills and knowledge, that is, skills and knowledge they can use in other contexts, for example in their future careers as teachers:

S10: *My own engagement through the course could have been better, but I feel I have learnt a whole lot of new information which will be useful later. Both in studies, and when the studies are finished*

S20: *I learned that it is essential to establish relevant assessment criteria in order to assess papers*

S2: *The feedback is helpful because I can use it as a measure for future assignments, and is, of course helpful when editing this task. The feedback can be used to prevent myself from making the same mistakes in other assignments*

One student's reflection pointed to the process of portfolio writing, which *created an environment where mistakes felt acceptable* (S21), while another stressed that the process dispelled fears of *letting others read and assess my work* (S2).

Learning from and attitudes towards teacher feedback

Generally, the students said they found the teacher's feedback helpful. There was a sense among the students that knowledge, experience, and authority are values that are attached to the teacher. Teacher feedback was frequently described as *helpful*, *useful*, *precise and good*, and *direct, honest*, and *motivating*.

S1: *receiving relevant feedback and revising the assignments had a positive effect on my language learning process*

S2: *I have learned very much from the feedback given to me*

S3: *the feedback I have been given has helped me progress even more*

S4: *We got teacher feedback on the first obligatory assignment which was direct and honest, but also motivating and understandable.*

Some students believed teacher feedback provided different perspectives on their work:

S5: *I have learned to look at my texts from another point of view*

S6: *The feedback was also very helpful, as it several times addressed problems that I did not consider at all myself.*

Students highlighted that guidance provided through teacher feedback made the revision process easier.

S6: *The teacher feedback was very helpful and provided a lot of guidance for me, making it a lot easier to know what I should focus on*

S7: *I think that the different teacher feedback I received were so precise and good that the job on revising these assignments got a lot easier.*

S8: *The teacher feedback helped with giving me ideas about what to improve and the weaknesses and strengths of my writing.*

Students sometimes stressed that they *agreed* with the teacher feedback they received:

S9: *I agreed with a lot of the feedback I got on the first assignment.*

Some students commented on being initially surprised or frustrated by critical feedback, before reconsidering the feedback and reassessing their assignment, as the following quote illustrates:

S10: *When I first received feedback for the first obligatory assignment (...) I was quite surprised to see that I had missed the point of the task (...) However, upon reading the task description once more, alongside the feedback I had gotten, I very much agreed to the feedback that was given*

The positive attitudes remained unchallenged even when the students disagreed with the feedback given:

S11: *Sometimes, I disagreed for various reasons but overall, I appreciated the feedback as it gave me another perspective on my texts and enabled me to improve both the assignments and my understanding of the task*

Students seemed to appreciate *good and long* (S26) feedback from the teachers and valued feedback which was specific, rather than formulated in terms of vague and general evaluations. This applied to both negative as well as positive feedback. Several students specifically mentioned teacher praise as being positive for their learning, as it reassured them that they were on the right path and gave them the feeling that the task was manageable:

S12: *Although I have not changed much I have been able to affirm some of my strong points and been able to identify weak points in my writing.*

S2*: I was satisfied with the feedback I was given as well as it was surprisingly positive. There are many areas in which I need to improve, but seeing that I did something right was really motivating.*

Learning from and attitudes towards peer feedback

Some students viewed peer feedback positively. Positive aspects that were highlighted included being made aware of how feedback should be provided and helping them improve their own skills as reviewers:

S13: *Overall, both the peer feedback and teacher feedback are what was the most helpful to me during my revision of this assignment.*

S14: *[I] learned a lot how I can give feedback to other fellow students after reading her feedback to me*

Students also expressed satisfaction with the way peer and teacher feedback was set up in the third assignment:

S15: *In the third obligatory assignment, I got peer feedback on language and teacher feedback on content. This was very useful, and I got some good ideas of what I would revise for the exam*

Students were positive about peer feedback when it was provided in addition to teacher feedback and with clearly defined areas for responsibility. On the other hand, several students viewed peer feedback negatively, especially when this was the only formal feedback they received on their work:

S2*: I didn't learn as much from the feedback on the second obligatory assignment, as it was written by peers.*

S11: *I do not feel like I have gained much from peer feedback at all.*

S12: *The peer feedback on the second obligatory assignment was not much help.*

Some students questioned the ability of their peers to provide adequate feedback. Teacher feedback was seen as more reliable than peer feedback because teachers have more knowledge and experience than first-year students, as expressed in the following quotes:

S14: *I have personally learned the most from the feedback given from teachers rather than students*

S2: *I think it is best to get feedback from the teachers, because of their knowledge. In my opinion, getting feedback from first--year students on an assignment that is obligatory does not give me the feedback that I need to improve my assignment.*

S11: *I do not feel they [peers] can give me useful feedback for my own improvement.*

Though some students were distrustful of their peers' skills and knowledge, the most common objection related to the quality of peer feedback was the perceived lack of constructive criticism. Peer feedback was often described as too positive, not outlining areas in need of improvement and thus not offering any direction for the process of revision, as indicated by the following quotes:

S16: *I feel as if it was not taken as seriously, as it was very short and very positive.*

S12: *In the second assignment it was very hard to figure out what I should change when looking at the feedback. I think the feedback was very good when it came to what to keep, but it was a lot harder to figure out what was not working.*

S2: *The feedback was not very helpful, as it only gave praise, and very little constructive criticism.*

While students' reflection notes in the present study were often negative towards formalised peer feedback, students were overwhelmingly positive about informal peer discussions in and out of class. Several students stressed the positive contribution of peer discussion and peer revision sessions, as illustrated by the following quotes:

S15: *Discussions with peers were extremely helpful, and it really helped me improve my assignments.*

S2: *For the second obligatory assignment we worked in a group, and I found the constant discussions really engaging and think it really helped improve the task.*

Strategies for acting on feedback

In the category *strategies for acting on feedback,* we included student statements that shed light on how students engage with and utilise the feedback. This category is closely related to the previous three, but focuses on specific actions, or eventual inaction, prompted by the feedback.

The process nature of portfolio assessment impelled students to address the feedback and make revisions. This approach increased students' understanding of the writing process where drafting, revising and editing are important ingredients:

S1: [the process] *prompted me to revise*

S17: [we] *revised the assignment together after receiving feedback from our peers, and one of our lecturers*

S18: *giving me the opportunity to correct*

Several students reported to have revised their work following the teacher feedback point by point, but many of the students *go a little beyond* (S29) in their revisions. Even when using the feedback as a manual for corrections, students may enter into a negotiation with the feedback, taking into consideration their own understanding of both the task and the feedback provided:

S22: *Before revising my assignments, I read the teacher feedback on the first obligatory assignment multiple times. I picked out the feedback I felt was most important and focussed on fixing those issues first.*

The reflection notes showed that student revisions ranged from minor corrections to major changes:

S3: *I spent a lot of time reading through the texts while editing sentences, and correcting grammatical errors*

S1: *I have revised several of my texts, to quite a large extent*

S8: *As a result of the feedback and further reading I realised that the explanations and conclusions my essay makes were not correct. This made me write the essay all over again*

Some students stressed the importance of having access both to the feedback and the assessment criteria when revising their assignments:

S23: *When I revised the assignment, I worked with the feedback and the success criteria in front of me. I paid extra attention to the points that both put forth, and I think my work is better for it*

Strategies for acting on feedback depended on how students interpreted the feedback itself. The following quote illustrates the strategies that one student adopted in an attempt to understand the feedback:

S6: *I decided to approach the feedback I received in two different ways. For the first assignment I sat down with someone else … to get another perspective on what was lacking in my task. This was very helpful as we had different interpretations of what the feedback's main points were, and what was most relevant parts of the text to change.… For the third assignment I revised it on my own… This meant that I only had my own*

thoughts, and my own interpretation of the feedback to base my revisions on. This led to a

large difference in the amount of revision of the two assignments, as I ended up second

guessing myself a lot …, and several times ended up not changing anything, as I was

unsure if I had interpreted the feedback correctly.

Some students feel that they lack skills and knowledge needed to improve the work, as revealed

by the first quote below. In some cases, students fail to take action due to what they perceive is

the poor quality of feedback. This is particularly true of peer feedback, which left many without a

clear sense of direction on what to revise.

S24: *The feedback mentions that there could be another reason for why the pupil write*

'proof' instead of 'prove', which I am not able to elaborate.

S25: *I did not revise anything as my group didn't really get any feedback that enabled us*

to improve it.

As already noted in the section on peer feedback, informal discussion with peers were highly

valued by students and played a significant role in the process of revision.

S2: *I would read a lot of my paragraphs to my peers and have them revise them. I would*

also help revise other student's texts, and that could sometimes give me ideas for my own

text.

S12: *I did however not work with anyone when it came to the revisions, and I feel like I*

missed an opportunity there. I believe that If I were able to discuss some of the problems I

had with a classmate I could maybe have figured out more of my problems.

Discussion

Students in the present study were generally positive towards portfolio assessment and

appreciated having the possibility to work on the assignments throughout the course, as supported

by Burner (2014), López-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho (2017) and Sadler (1989, 1998). The reflection notes in the present study show that it is the multiple drafting aspect of the portfolio process that is most valued by the students. Students also expressed a sense of achievement gained through being able to improve their work. Students' responses to feedback might be hampered by their initial emotional responses, as noted by Quinton and Smallbone (2010). The process nature of portfolio assessment gives students the time to recover from this initial reaction and to re-evaluate their work in a more objective way. The portfolio assessment process meant that students produced final assignments that they were satisfied with. Students reflected on the transversal skills and knowledge gained by working on assignments throughout the course of a semester. These positive attitudes towards the portfolio process suggest that teachers should consider providing students with opportunities for revising and resubmitting assignments when designing higher education courses.

Price et al (2010) report that students were generally critical of teacher feedback, attributing dissatisfaction predominantly to the negative tone of the feedback and the fact that the feedback was often vague and ambiguous. By contrast, students in the present study appreciated teacher feedback, even when it was perceived as critical. This might be due to the fact that the course teachers in the present study paid particular attention to the provision of feedback, following the guidelines for formative feedback given in the literature (Biggs 2003; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Students explicitly commented that feedback that was specific and offered guidance on how to improve was particularly useful.

Student comments also revealed the importance of teacher praise. Teacher praise could indicate which aspects of the student work were in line with the requirements and could also boost the students' confidence in their own skills (Ferguson 2011). Wingate's (2010) study showed that students have little motivation to engage with feedback if they have low expectations

of being successful and that repeated critical comments were particularly discouraging for low-achieving students. In this respect, positive feedback has an important role to play in affirming or boosting the learners' self-perception of their capability and raising their expectancy of success on a task, as also suggested by the results in the present study.

The inclusion of peer feedback requires students to assume a more active role in the assessment design and has many potential benefits (Black and Wiliam 2018). Nevertheless, some students in the present study questioned the ability of their peers to provide adequate feedback (cf. Brammer and Rees 2007; Smith et al. 2002). The main objection raised against the peer feedback in the current study concerned the lack of constructive criticism, which leaves the students without guidance on what needs to be improved and how. Some students cited the lack of such guidance as the reason for not revising their assignments, thereby relinquishing any responsibility for identifying aspects of their work in need of improvement and assuming the role of rather passive participants in the revision process. Such attitudes hamper the students' development as autonomous writers and highlight the importance of developing the students' critical awareness and revision skills (see Walls and Kelley 2016). Observations such as these point to the need for clarifying students' expectations and beliefs as part of practising peer assessment (Evans 2015). The role and purpose of both teacher and peer feedback should be addressed. Teachers may also wish to explore whether and how students' reflections on teacher feedback could help improve peer feedback.

Despite the objections related to written peer commentary, oral peer discussion sessions were generally highly valued by the students (cf. Evans 2015). Through such activities, writing becomes social instead of a solitary activity (Vygotsky 1978). Interestingly, none of the students in our study used the term *feedback* to refer to this kind of informal peer review. This might relate to the expectations students have when entering higher education and their understanding of the

term 'feedback'. It seems that students limited the interpretation of the term *feedback* as applying to written comments formalised as teacher/peer feedback in the assignment design, but did not extend the use of the term to more informal contexts, such as oral discussions sessions (see also Carless 2006). It is important therefore to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the term *feedback* and to clarify the opportunities the students have for receiving and giving feedback.

Student reflection notes also revealed how they make sense of the feedback and take action to improve their work. The verbs *improve* and *revise* were used much more often than *correct* in the reflections, which is in alignment with the process-oriented focus (see Burner 2014) in the courses. The actual actions range from minor corrections to extensive changes. Even when using the feedback as a manual for corrections, students may enter into a negotiation with the feedback, taking into consideration their own understanding of both the task and the feedback provided (cf. Taras 2006). For feedback to be effective, teachers and students must have a shared understanding of the concepts of quality associated with a task (Sadler 1989). Students found it positive that they had access to assessment criteria associated with each assignment, as well as for the final portfolio, and used them to assess the quality of performance and make improvements.

A prerequisite for engaging with feedback is a clear understanding of that feedback (cf. Winstone et al. 2017). Student reflection notes in the present study reveal that the lack of such understanding could hinder successful revision of their assignments. In some cases, lack of understanding was the reason students decided not to take action on the feedback. It is therefore important to create opportunities for students to ask for clarification and/or further elaboration in the course of this process.

Peers might also play an important role when it comes to understanding feedback. Several students highlighted the significance of informal discussions with peers during the revision

process. Student 6 in the present study, for instance, reported gaining a greater understanding of the feedback after discussions with a peer, as this peer had different interpretation of the feedback and different suggestions for revision. This suggests that teachers should consider how students can be actively involved (see Black and Wiliam 2018), not only in providing feedback, but also in helping peers make sense of the feedback they receive.

Collaboration on group assignments and the emergence of multiple perspectives in informal discussions with peers may make formative feedback part of the creative process. Positive attitudes expressed towards peer discussion groups in this study suggest that this may be a more effective way of implementing peer assessment than requiring formalised, written peer commentary (cf. Evans 2015), and may not only be viewed more positively by the students, but also be more beneficial for learning. Instead of setting up peer feedback as a course requirement to be met, teachers should rather opt for group assignments or projects where peers would naturally enter into negotiations and discussions with each other towards a common goal and thus be a constant source of feedback and ideas for each other. Students can be an important resource to each other not only in providing feedback, but in helping each other make sense of the teacher feedback and in selecting the right revision strategies.

This study focused on student perceptions of formative feedback as part of their writing portfolios. A follow-up study could compare student texts in the portfolios to track the extent to which students improve their texts compared to what they write in the reflection notes. Furthermore, the teachers could be interviewed about their experiences of providing feedback on student texts, students' follow-up of teacher and peer feedback, and their evaluation of the portfolio process and its effectiveness in providing formative feedback.

In order for formative feedback to be effective, teachers and students need to have a shared understanding of what feedback is and how to use it formatively. This shared

understanding is only possible if teachers have insight into students' expectations and perceptions of feedback and a better understanding of how they act on feedback. Teachers should consider student perspectives and use them to enhance formative classroom practices. In Evans' (2013) comprehensive review study of assessment feedback, seven specific areas that need further research are mentioned. Our study has specifically addressed two of those in the context of English as a Foreign Language learning at two teacher education institutions in Norway. These areas are the nature and role of specific tools in assessment feedback (in our case portfolios) and the identification and interpretation of student learning with a focus on how they perceive feedback. As such, this study is a small contribution to the vast field of formative assessment feedback.

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