

Feedback Use with Preservice Teachers' Writings: Building Confident Writers and Effective Teachers of Writing

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Abstract: *Preservice teachers often arrive at teacher education programs with low self-perceptions about their personal writing abilities. Much literature has shown that preservice teachers' preexisting beliefs have a strong influence upon their future teaching practices with writing. Thus, teacher education programs must ensure that they infuse positive experiences with writing among preservice teachers, such as the use of feedback during writing. The purpose of this action research effort was to explore preservice teachers' responses to feedback as writers and as future teachers of writing, as well as how the use of feedback will affect my future teaching practices. A mixed methods research design was utilized and an inductive content analysis approach revealed five themes: Expressions of Gratitude, Answers to Questions/Comments, Previous Feedback Experiences, Feedback Helpfulness as a Writer, and Explicit Connections to Writing Pedagogy. Implications regarding my future teaching practices were also addressed.*

Calkins (1986) pointed out that writing is not an activity that typically excites students. As a former 4th and 5th grade classroom teacher, I have experienced the sighs, grimaces, and resistance that often accompanied the transition into writing time at the beginning of each school year. As a person who is passionate about writing, I was initially disheartened. However, I quickly realized that for many, their "whole diet" of writing in school consisted of flat, two-dimensional demonstrations of learning (Graves, 1994). Therefore, I approached the teaching of writing as a craft, removed "unnecessary road blocks," and provided my students with the time, space, and resources to engage with the craft of writing (Graves, 2003, p. 3).

Currently, I teach preservice teachers who are seeking elementary and middle school teaching certifications on how to implement language arts across the curriculum. A large part of the teaching of language arts involves the teaching of writing, and I have come to appreciate the challenges associated with my role. I immediately noted that my former elementary students' perceptions towards writing were congruous with my current preservice teachers' perceptions: writing was not a content area or activity that generated excitement. Surprised by this phenomenon, I conducted a study to explore the beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge for writing among a group of 80 preservice teachers. Findings from this study provided me with insight into my anecdotal observations: an overwhelmingly large number of preservice teachers reported that they had a low self-perception of their own writing abilities and did not perceive themselves as good writers (McAdams, 2013).

Chambless and Bass (1995) asserted that while learning how to teach writing, preservice teachers must encounter a wide range of positive experiences that develop their knowledge and confidence with writing. In doing so, preservice teachers will develop more positive attitudes towards writing and influence their future work in teaching children how to write (Chambless & Bass, 1995; Lapp & Flood, 1985). Essentially, while developing pedagogical understandings about the teaching of writing, teacher educators should also focus upon developing preservice teachers' understandings about their own writing (Morgan & Pytash, 2014).

Each writer is unique and possesses individualized abilities, approaches, and interests with writing. Effective teachers of writing should utilize an ongoing coaching approach with their students as they learn the craft of writing (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012). In doing so, teachers of writing may tailor feedback according to students' individual needs either verbally or through writing. In thinking about my prior experiences with teaching writing to my former elementary students, I realized that modeling this instructional approach with preservice teachers was paramount, particularly since many of their negative experiences with writing teachers tended to outnumber their positive experiences (Ferris, 2007).

Background Literature

For over 100 years, feedback has been documented as an important aspect of the learning process (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991). Feedback may be self-generated by the learner or provided to the learner from an external source, such as a teacher. In order to be effective, feedback must extend well beyond providing the learner with information regarding correctness or simplistic evaluative judgments (McMillan, 2014). Rather, effective feedback should be “presented as information that can guide the student’s meaningful construction of additional knowledge and understanding” (p. 122). Likewise, Bangert-Drowns et al. (1991) explained that when applied appropriately, feedback has the potential to “promote learning;” however, ineffective application of feedback may “inhibit learning” (p. 214). Teachers of writing must recognize that feedback should develop each student’s individual progress with the processes of writing, not facilitate the construction of the perfect text (Ferris, 2007).

Students value feedback and view it as a vital part of successful learning (Harris, Brown, & Harnett, 2014; Rowe, 2011). McGrath, Taylor, and Pychyl (2011) explored students’ perceptions of developed feedback (i.e., feedback with explanations) and undeveloped feedback (i.e., feedback that is vague and succinct). McGrath et al. reported that students perceived constant and consistent developed feedback as “fairer and more developmentally helpful” than undeveloped feedback (p.7). In this same manner, Rowe’s (2011) findings emphasized several emotional aspects associated with developed feedback:

- Students perceived developed feedback were active, participatory interactions with their teacher.
- Developed feedback provided encouragement, reassurance, and motivation with learning.
- When given developed feedback that was personalized, students felt respected, supported, and valued.

Similar to undeveloped feedback, feedback that is over-specific may be equally ineffective (Willingham, 1990). Willingham asserted the importance of careful consideration as to “the degree of specificity” (p. 10). Since the goal of feedback is to improve students’ overall writing abilities, teachers of writing must provide feedback that encourages and empowers students to consider how they can improve their own writing (Siewert, 2011; Willingham, 1990).

Teachers of writing must be considerate of several factors when providing students with feedback on their writing. If feedback is in the form of written comments, readability of handwriting is an important consideration (Bruno & Santos, 2010). Placement of and space for feedback are also essential considerations. Teachers of writing must ensure they place feedback at precise places in students’ writing where revision is recommended and not feel constrained by the availability of space. In order to be relevant to students, feedback should also be timely. As students receive feedback more promptly, they are able to recall previous writing efforts and rationales for their choices with writing. Another consideration for teachers of writing is the amount of feedback to provide students (Bruno & Santos, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Rather than point out every mistake in a piece of writing, feedback should foster students’ ability to:

- identify their goals with writing;

- ascertain their progress towards meeting their writing goals; and
- determine strategies, behaviors, or activities that will advance efforts towards meeting their writing goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Finally, teachers of writing must be cognizant of the quality of feedback provided to students (Matsumura, Patthey-Chavez, Valdés, & Garnier, 2002). Studies have shown that the majority of feedback teachers provide students focuses upon surface features, such as grammar and mechanics, rather than content features, such as students' expressions of ideas (Matsumura et al., 2002; Stern & Solomon, 2006).

Numerous benefits for teachers of writing and students are linked to use of multiple forms of feedback. For example, coupling written feedback with oral feedback among students promotes a positive classroom climate and common understandings between the teacher and student regarding feedback (Bardine, 1999; Bruno & Santos, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Providing students with written feedback is an extremely time-consuming aspect for teachers of writing (Bruno & Santos, 2010; Dohrer, 1991; Siewert, 2011; Sommers, 1982), and audio feedback has been shown to be an effective tool that addresses issues with time (Bauer, 2011; Cavanaugh & Song, 2014). When using audio feedback, teachers of writing must have a level of comfort and knowledge with the technical aspects involved (Cavanaugh & Song, 2014). Bauer (2011) noted several benefits associated with use of audio feedback as students engaged with writing: (a) students' understanding of feedback was enhanced, (b) they had a convenient way to access feedback on multiple occasions, and (c) they perceived audio feedback as a personalized tool to aid with improvement in writing. Another form of feedback that teachers of writing may use is peer feedback (Peterson, 2014). Peer feedback provides students with an authentic audience, which enhances their motivation and self-esteem with writing. In order to maximize the potential benefits associated with peer feedback, teachers must model ways for students to provide and produce feedback.

Writing and the teaching of writing require stronger preparation efforts among preservice teachers (Fong, Williams, Schallert, & Warner, 2013; Nolen, McCutchen, & Berninger, 1990; Whittington, Glover, & Harley, 2004). Preservice teachers typically carry negative perceptions towards writing (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Morgan, 2010) and lack confidence in their own writing abilities (McAdams, 2013). Feedback has the potential to affect students' self-perceptions with writing, as well as their motivation to write (Ekholm, Zumbrunn, & Conklin, 2015). As teacher educators model how to provide positive feedback, they are also developing preservice teachers' self-efficacy as a writer, as well as their self-efficacy as a future teacher of writing (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011; Morgan & Pytash, 2014).

Context

In an effort to gain insights about my own teaching practices with preservice teachers, I engaged in a semester-long action research effort to gain an understanding of the connections between my own pedagogical practices and preservice teachers' learning. Specifically, I wanted to model use of the coaching approach as preservice teachers engaged with course-related writing tasks. I implemented the coaching approach as part of a 16-week undergraduate course that focused upon developing preservice teachers' pedagogy with language arts instruction. I taught two face-to-face sections of this course among 45 total preservice teachers. Of these students, 35 preservice teachers were seeking state-level teaching certification for Early Childhood – 6th grade, and ten preservice teachers were seeking state-level teaching certification for various content areas within the 4th – 8th grade levels.

Question/Problem/Issue

Through this action research effort, I hoped to arrive at understandings for the following questions:

1. How will preservice teachers respond to my use of feedback in relation to their personal writing abilities?
2. Will preservice teachers make an explicit connection between their experience with feedback as a writer and future application as future teachers of writing?
3. How will use of the feedback affect my future teaching practices?

Teaching and learning are interdependent processes, and reflecting upon my own actions as I model a literature-supported practice for the teaching of writing with preservice teachers is an authentic way “to investigate a phenomenon occurring in the natural environment” (Hong & Lawrence, 2011).

Method

The purpose of this action research effort was to explore the use feedback among preservice teachers as they learned how to implement language arts instruction in a semester-long university-based undergraduate course. The content of this course was divided into seven lessons through which preservice teachers developed understandings of theory and instructional strategies for language arts instruction in elementary and middle schools. At the end of each lesson, preservice teachers completed one major writing assignment to demonstrate their mastery of the lesson’s intended learning objectives.

After writing assignments were turned in, I provided preservice teachers with feedback on each of their writings in written, oral, or audio form using a coaching approach (Duke et al., 2012). Feedback provided to preservice served two purposes: (1) to promote preservice teachers’ growth as writers, and (2) to model evidence-based application of feedback techniques during the teaching of writing. With all preservice teachers’ writings, my feedback consisted of specific areas of strength within their writing, specific areas requiring improvement within their writing, suggestions, and questions. When I administered written feedback, I used colored ink pens (i.e., any color with the exception of red) and symbols, such as smiley faces, exclamation marks, and hearts.

This action research effort utilized a mixed methods research design with multiple data sources for purposes of triangulation to enhance interpretations of findings (Mettetal, 2002). Data sources were:

- *Written Responses:* Preservice teachers were provided with feedback on all of their submitted major writing assignments. To ascertain their response at the beginning of the course and end of the course, I encouraged preservice teachers to compose a written response to the feedback that they received. Therefore, preservice teachers’ written responses to written feedback received on the first major writing assignment and audio feedback received on the last major writing assignment served as pre- and post-measurements of their reaction to feedback.
- *Anecdotal Notes:* I maintained a notebook to document anecdotal notes for oral feedback that preservice teachers received during writing conferences that took place during class throughout the semester.
- *Teacher Journal:* I used a teacher journal to document my own thoughts, feelings, and reactions in relation to the times when I provided preservice teachers with feedback.
- *Course Evaluation Reports:* At the conclusion of the semester, students have access to an optional electronic evaluation administered by the university for each course in which they were enrolled. The university’s course evaluations seek students’ input regarding the quality of teaching through closed- and open-ended questions.

Analyses were conducted with the aforementioned data sources using an inductive content analysis approach. Quantitative analyses reported frequencies present in the data (Franzosi, 2008), and qualitative analyses identified recurring themes or patterns present in the data (Thomas, 2006). Trustworthiness of data was established through member checks among several of the preservice teachers to verify accuracy of data interpretations.

Results

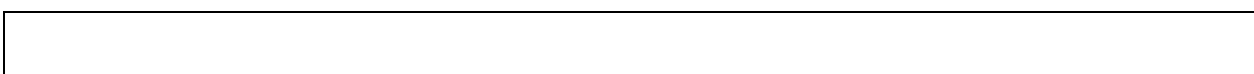
Part of the focus of this action research effort was to determine preservice teachers’ (a) responses to feedback in relation to their personal writing abilities, and (b) explicit connections made between their experience with feedback as a writer and future application as a future teacher of writing. After conducting an inductive content analysis approach, the written responses and end of course evaluations were rich data sources for findings. As shown in Table 1, preservice teachers’ written responses consisted of 3,644 words altogether. After I provided preservice teachers with written feedback on the first major writing assignment, all preservice teachers ($n = 45$) chose to respond to the written feedback that they received. Preservice teachers’ written responses averaged approximately 58 words each. Conversely, after I provided preservice teachers with audio feedback on their last major writing assignment, only 10 preservice teachers chose to respond back to audio feedback received. Although fewer preservice teachers responded, the average length of their responses was higher ($M = 104.90$). Based upon these findings, the data suggested a relationship between type of feedback provided and length of preservice teachers’ responses.

Table 1

Word Counts in Preservice Teachers’ Written Responses

	<i>n</i>	Total Words	<i>M</i>
Lesson 1:			
Written Feedback	45	2, 595	57.67
Lesson 7:	10	1,049	104.90
Audio Feedback			

Analyses conducted with my course evaluations reports also produced interesting findings. One of the closed-ended descriptions asks students to rate the course instructor on the following statement using a 5-point Likert-scale (i.e., Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree): *By providing helpful feedback on assignments/tests, my instructor encouraged me to actively participate in the learning process.* As shown in Figure 1, 87% ($n = 39$) of the preservice teachers completed a course evaluation and rated my performance of this closed-ended description as either Strongly Agree ($n = 36$) or Agree ($n = 3$).



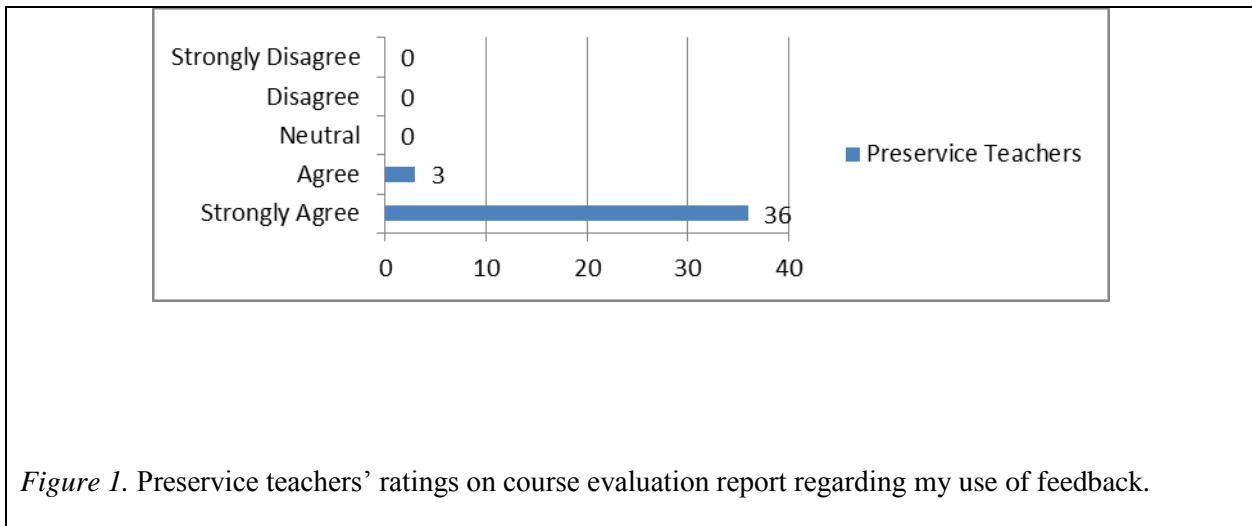


Figure 1. Preservice teachers' ratings on course evaluation report regarding my use of feedback.

The course evaluation reports also contained two open-ended responses that were specific to feedback provided in the course:

- . . . *The professor provided valuable and encouraging feedback on assignments, corrected mistakes for future references . . .*
- *The professor provided amazing feedback with a quick turn-around.*

Further quantitative content analyses with preservice teachers' written responses also revealed how preservice teachers responded to my use of feedback. As shown in Table 2, five themes emerged: Expressions of Gratitude, Answers to Questions/Comments, Previous Feedback Experiences, Feedback Helpfulness as a Writer, and Explicit Connections to Writing Pedagogy.

Table 2

Frequencies in Statements within Themes among Preservice Teachers' Written Responses

Themes	Lesson 1: Written Feedback	Lesson 2: Audio Feedback	Total
	Expressions of Gratitude	16	
Answers to Questions/Comments	42	-	42
Previous Feedback Experiences	13	1	14
Feedback Helpfulness as a Writer	29	10	39
Explicit Connections to Writing Pedagogy	1	16	17

Qualitative analyses within preservice teachers' written responses contextualized the themes that emerged. Within the Expressions of Gratitude theme, preservice teachers made 27 statements that expressed appreciation for feedback that had been provided (see Table 2). These statements relayed preservice teachers'

gratefulness for feedback that was encouraging, positive, and plentiful. One preservice teacher extended a tremendous compliment and stated:

- . . . *you've ignited a passion within me that I had no idea I even had!*

Within the Answers to Questions/Comments theme, preservice teachers made 42 statements that answered questions I posed, responded to comments I made, or continued the discourse between their originally written ideas and my feedback. As shown in Table 2, all statements were made with preservice teachers' responses to written feedback I provided on their first major writing assignment at the beginning of the semester. Each of these statements was individualized and resembled the beginning of a partnership between each writer and myself. Examples of preservice teachers' statements were:

- *I completely agree with your comment in class about providing feedback even when someone scores a 100 because they need to know why they received that grade. I feel like that may have played a big part in why I am not as confident in my writing now.*
- *Letters are my favorite & I think its awesome that you & your husband communicate with letters. It irritates my boyfriend that I write it rather than just talking to him but for me I feel I can more clearly write what I want to say.*
- *I think the words I selected for my writing were very true and I'm glad they helped you. :)*
- *To answer your question about what would help with me understanding feedback better, it would be to give a direction as to where the teacher thought I should go.*
- *You asked, "I wonder why," to my statement in paragraph two. I would like to respond to that. I felt silly thinking about it mainly because I have never been asked that question before. Once I analyzed it though, I found it was a great question to ask. It made me get to know myself on a different level.*

Preservice teachers made 14 statements within the Previous Feedback Experiences theme, and the majority of these statements were also in response to the written feedback I provided on their first major writing assignment (see Table 2). Of these statements, 12 referred to prior negative experiences with feedback, such as:

- *Many times teachers will just write "not what I was looking for." That can be very confusing and frustrating so I do not know how to change my paper.*
- *Most teachers leave only negative feedback.*
- *My teacher who "set us up for failure" was definitely the opposite of supportive. Her approach to correction was discouraging and ruined the appeal of writing for most of her students.*
- *I felt awful & very embarrassed.*

Within the Feedback Helpfulness as a Writer theme, preservice teachers made 39 statements that articulated how they felt feedback I provided was beneficial to their personal writing abilities. Preservice teachers noted that written feedback was *motivating, helpful, provided encouragement, kind*, created enjoyment with the writing task, and enhanced their confidence with writing. Preservice teachers also noted that they liked the absence of red ink and use of symbols with my written feedback. Several preservice teachers also referenced the emotional impact that resulted from my feedback:

- *Your feedback made me feel so good! I especially loved your comments about my mom because she actually passed away one year ago.*
- *It allows me to know you were not just reading my paper for a grade but also because you truly wanted to know more about [NAME NAME] as a writer.*

- *I enjoy all of the positive feedback and encouragement given to me. It helps me as a writer become more confident in my work. I feel like it's a team effort.*

Similarly, preservice teachers detailed that audio notes were *personal, effective, encouraging*, and provided a deeper sense of clarity with feedback. Two preservice teachers explicitly noted that listening to feedback was a beneficial experience, and another preservice teacher commented that hearing the positivity in my voice was valuable. Several preservice teachers described how audio notes enabled the provision of comprehensive feedback:

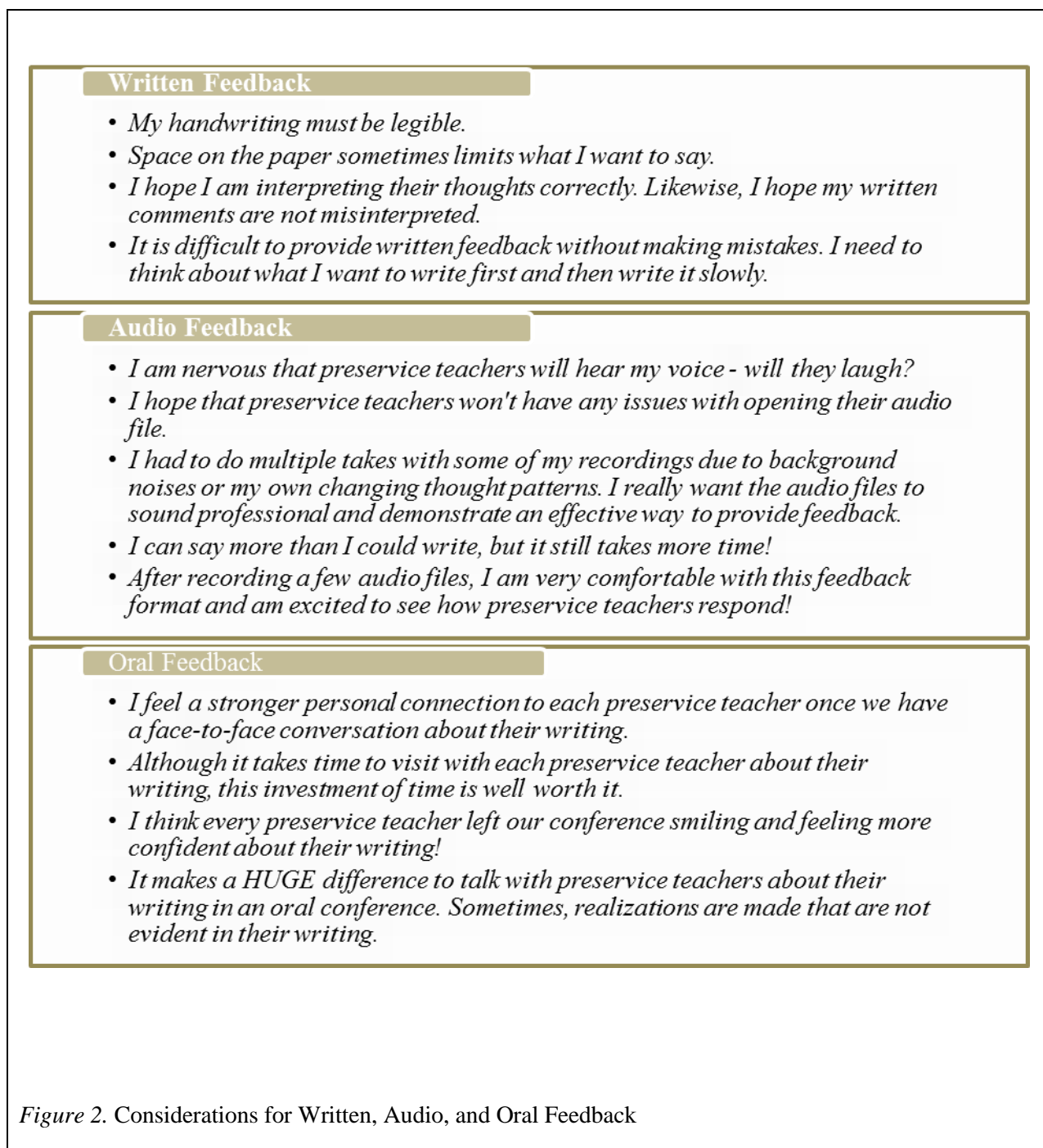
- *I thought the audio feedback was very effective. I like that it went beyond comments that are typically written on assignments; the audio feedback gave more in-depth responses. It also gave me a clear understanding of your feedback. Often times, written feedback leaves me curious about more specific aspects of assignments, but this feedback did not leave any curiosity.*
- *You were right in class when you said that it was a lot easier to go in more depth with your feedback because you could just say it and not have to write it in the limited space on our papers.*

Within the final theme, Explicit Connections to Writing Pedagogy, preservice teachers made 17 statements (see Table 2). Almost all of these statements were made during preservice teachers' written responses to the audio feedback provided on their final major writing assignment. When I emailed preservice teachers their audio file, I also included Bauer's (2011) journal article, which described her use of audio notes with high school English students. Four preservice teachers made an explicit connection between this journal article and their intention to use audio notes as a form of feedback with their future students:

- *As the article suggested, audio comments are much more personal and allow the teacher to be more thorough in her feedback.*
- *I would like to say I also really liked the article you included. The students from the article are right. The comments are really more personal and when spoken with emotion can really connect with the students (like they did with me). I like the whole concept of audio comments.*
- *I will keep this article as a reference for the future because I would like to use this strategy in my classroom.*
- *The teacher in the article said she was very comfortable and relaxed while she recorded herself. This kind of commitment and time you take with your students is encouraging to me as a future educator.*

The final focus of this action research effort was to ascertain how the use of feedback might affect my future teaching practices. Content analyses of data within my anecdotal notes and teacher journal revealed several implications for my role as a teacher educator among future teachers of writing. While teaching this course, I maintained a commitment to fostering preservice teachers' growth as writers, as well as their growth as future teachers of writing. In doing so, I sometimes abandoned or adapted planned lessons and adjusted my instruction according to the needs of preservice teachers. For example, during one of our scheduled class sessions, I conducted oral conferences with each preservice teacher regarding their prewriting completed for the final major writing assignment. These conferences resulted in extremely rich discussions during which preservice teachers set writing goals, shared intended writing strategies, and elicited feedback on how to move forward with this piece of writing. I had originally intended for preservice teachers to turn in their drafts during the subsequent class session. However, I realized that many needed more time to implement the ideas and feedback that had transpired during oral conferences. Therefore, I extended the due date for this piece of writing so that preservice teachers had the additional time needed to improve upon their writing.

Another implication that arose related specific considerations with each type of feedback. In my teacher journal, I specifically noted that providing written feedback was less time-consuming than audio and oral feedback. As shown in Figure 2, I also expressed different considerations and perspectives I had with respect to each type of feedback.



As shown in Figure 2, the different types of feedback used affected my own teaching practices. When written feedback was used, I was most concerned with preservice teachers' perspectives after feedback was given: Would they be able to read my handwriting? Would they interpret my comments accurately? I was also concerned with the limitations associated with the provision of written feedback, such as the availability of space for comments and the production of error-free comments. Further analyses with my teacher journal

showed that my use of audio feedback was more time consuming; however, I was able to provide preservice teachers with more extensive feedback. With audio feedback, my teacher journal also showed that I recognized the potential for preservice teachers to make an explicit connection between their experience with feedback as a writer and future application of this type of feedback as future teachers of writing. Finally, analyses with my teacher journal showed that my use of oral feedback enabled me to strengthen relationships, promote positivity, and foster self-confidence among preservice teachers towards their writing. Moreover, use of face-to-face oral conferences also provided me with the opportunity to seek immediate clarifications about preservice teachers' writing.

Conclusion

I conducted this action research effort to explore preservice teachers' responses to feedback as writers and as future teachers of writing, as well as how the use of feedback will affect my future teaching practices. I collected data from multiple sources, and qualitative analyses revealed five themes (i.e., Expressions of Gratitude, Answers to Questions/Comments, Previous Feedback Experiences, Feedback Helpfulness as a Writer, and Explicit Connections to Writing Pedagogy), and qualitative analyses provided further insights that contextualized these themes.

With respect to the first research question, *How will preservice teachers respond to my use of feedback in relation to their personal writing abilities?*, findings showed that preservice teachers responded very positively to my use of feedback on their writings. Many preservice teachers shared previous negative experiences with feedback that led to loss of confidence and feelings of anxiety, fear, and embarrassment towards writing. As I provided each preservice teacher with feedback using the coaching approach, I was able to build a relationship with each preservice teacher that was grounded in trust and emphasized a team effort towards their growth as writers. These findings support Morgan and Pytash's (2014) assertion that preservice teachers must first explore their current beliefs towards themselves as writers, which are often negative. Morgan and Pytash contended that when "unexamined," these negative beliefs "permeate their feelings and beliefs about how they will teach writing" (p. 28). Findings also suggested a relationship between the type of feedback (i.e., written, audio) used and the length of preservice teachers' responses, and it is recommended that additional analyses be conducted to explore this relationship.

With respect to the second research question, *Will preservice teachers make an explicit connection between their experience with feedback as a writer and future application as future teachers of writing?*, analyses of preservice teachers' written responses also suggested a continuum of development among preservice teachers resulting from the provision of feedback. At the beginning of the semester, preservice teachers' responses focused on themselves as writers. However, at the end of the semester, several preservice teachers made explicit connections between their experiences with feedback and future teaching practices they intend to implement as a teacher of writing. Much literature has pointed to the importance of writing methods courses, which enables preservice teachers to apply learned pedagogical techniques within authentic classroom settings among K-12 students (e.g., Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Morgan & Pytash, 2014). Since my findings showed that preservice teachers' formulation of explicit connections resulted from my coaching approach with feedback, it is recommended that teacher education programs look for ways to support preservice teachers' continued growth as teachers of writing within authentic classroom settings.

Finally, findings from this action research effort also carried several implications regarding my own teaching practices, which addressed the third research question that guided this study: *How will use of the feedback affect my future teaching practices?* As a teacher educator who models effective pedagogical teaching practices with writing, I must also observe them. I must continue to exercise flexibility with lesson planning

and adapt instruction according to preservice teachers' writing needs. Through reflection of my own teaching practices with different types of feedback, I was able to recognize limitations and benefits associated with use of each type of feedback, which enabled me to exercise intentionality with writing assessment methods. In doing so, I am placing value on preservice teachers' development with writing, while also reinforcing effective writing instructional practices. Moreover, my use of feedback with preservice teachers facilitated "a community of learners" that assisted "the performance of each member" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1989, pp. 51-52).

As a teacher educator, I aim to tap into preservice teachers' "writing selves," which have been shaped by one's previous experiences with writing (Kinloch, 2009, p. 103). Teachers of writing have a tremendous influence on preservice teachers' writing selves, which often carry suitcases packed with prior negative experiences with writing (Mathers, Benson, & Newton, 2006). It is imperative for teacher educators to be strong models for the teaching of writing and expose preservice teachers' to positive experiences with writing, such as effective uses of feedback. As preservice teachers unpack their suitcases and become more confident writers, they are also developing their pedagogy for the teaching writing and "building their vision for the possibility of new practices" with writing (Morgan, 2010, p. 362).

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