



**MÄLARDALENS HÖGSKOLA  
ESKILSTUNA VÄSTERÅS**

# “I THINK THEY WANT US TO DO SOMETHING WITH IT, BUT I DON'T KNOW”

A qualitative study of how upper secondary school students in Sweden  
perceive English teachers' intentions with written feedback

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## ABSTRACT

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The study aims to investigate how teachers' intentions with written feedback and students' perceptions of it correlate. In total, three teachers and nine students from different study programs in an upper secondary school in Sweden participated in this study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. It emerged in the analysis that the teachers' intentions and students' perceptions correlated to some extent. However, there was a clear difference with regard to how the teachers intended the students to use the written feedback and how the students actually used it. The teachers wanted the students to use it to improve the development of their learning, whereas the students saw it as an evaluation of their results and rarely used it. If the teachers want to make sure that the students work with the feedback, they need to make it a planned activity.

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**Keywords:** *formative assessment, feedback, English as a second language, English education in Sweden, upper secondary school, qualitative study*

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# **1 Introduction**

During my teacher training placement at an upper secondary school in Sweden, I noticed that feedback was a recurring topic in the staff room. How feedback should be given, how much, and how often were issues that the teachers often discussed. This included the questions how much time the teachers should spend on writing what they thought might help their students improve their learning, how much the students actually cared about the feedback given, and how they perceived it. These discussions are what led me to investigate how students perceive written feedback and whether they do it the way that teachers intend, or if there is a gap that would need to be addressed. Therefore, the focus of this study will be on English teachers' written feedback and how the students perceive it.

One of the teachers' many tasks is to create a learning environment where "[a]ll students should be stimulated to grow through tasks and opportunities to develop in accordance with their potential", which is expressed in the curriculum for the upper secondary school in Sweden (Skolverket, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, school education "should promote the development and learning of students, and a lifelong desire to learn" (p. 4). One way for English teachers to help students develop is through feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), as research has shown that it aids students when learning a second language (Lee, 2013, p. 116). For students to be able to develop, one could argue that they must be aware of what they need to improve. Feedback could then be used to create awareness of possible improvement, and also as a tool that students can use by themselves to identify what they need to do to develop (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2004, p. 14). This approach also fulfils the goal expressed in the curriculum, namely, that all students should "take personal responsibility for their studies and their working environment" as well (Skolverket, 2011, p. 11).

## **1.1 Aim and research questions**

The aim of this study is to examine the intention behind upper secondary school English teachers' written feedback and how it is perceived by their students. It is hoped that the findings can contribute to increased insight in how English teachers in Sweden can formulate and give written feedback in relation to students' needs and perceptions. More specifically, the following research questions are asked:

1. What are the intentions behind the participating upper secondary school English teachers' written feedback on students' assignments?
2. How do the participating teachers describe their practice of giving written feedback?
3. What are the participating upper secondary school students' perceptions of their English teachers' intentions with written feedback?
4. How helpful do the participating students find written feedback given to them by their English teachers, and how do they use it?

## 2 Background

Since this study aims to explore the intentions and perceptions of teachers' written feedback, formative assessment will be the focus of this section, and specifically feedback. The first section will be on formative assessment and then how summative assessment can be used for a formative purpose. The succeeding sections will then focus on feedback. In the last subsection, a study by Havnes, Smith, Dysthe, and Ludvigsen (2012), which inspired the present study, will be presented briefly.

### 2.1 Assessment

Two of the most common types of assessment are formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is often used when the teacher wants to help the student to progress in his/her learning, i.e., assessment *for* learning, and summative assessment is often used when the teacher wants to find out what the students have learnt, i.e., assessment *of* learning (Black et al., 2004; Popham, 2008, p. 4). A main difference between the two different types of assessment is that, in contrast to summative assessment, formative assessment is an ongoing process (Brown, 2019, p. 6; Popham, 2008, p. 6).

#### 2.1.1 Formative assessment

A generally agreed-upon definition of formative assessment does not exist. Popham (2008) concisely describes the concept as a “planned process in which teachers or students use assessment-based evidence to adjust what they're currently doing” (p. 6). Black and Wiliam (2009) provide a longer and more precise definition of the concept, which is also the definition that will be used in this study:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in

instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)<sup>1</sup>

Their definition, in other words, means that the assessment becomes formative when its outcome is used to alter and improve future teaching, learning and student development. In the manner in which Black and Wiliam (2009) have formulated their definition, it is made clear that formative assessment involves three agents: the teacher, the learners, and their peers. Black and Wiliam (2009) have also identified five key strategies that formative assessment consists of, one of which is to provide “feedback that moves the learners forward” (p. 8).

As to implementing formative assessment practices in the classroom, it has shown to improve students’ learning and “their engagement with learning, their attainment as measured by tests, and most importantly their growth in becoming more self-regulating, autonomous learners” (Swaffield, 2011, p. 447). It is also indicated that these practices mostly helped *the low attainers* and “so reduced the spread of attainment while also raising it overall” (Black et al., 2003, p. 2).

These positive consequences of formative assessment also relate to the teachers’ tasks mentioned in the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). As mentioned before, the teacher is responsible for creating a learning environment in which the students have the opportunity to learn and grow (Skolverket, 2011, p. 7). Even if the teacher has created an optimal learning situation, learning cannot be forced on students, but they themselves have to do the work (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 22). Although there are many positive outcomes connected to formative assessment for both teachers and students, implementing new work procedures requires a lot of the teachers’ time, energy, and courage (Black et al., 2004, pp. 13, 20).

### ***Formative assessment vs Assessment for Learning***

The two concepts formative assessment and assessment *for* learning are sometimes used interchangeably (Swaffield, 2011, p. 443). However, that may partly be due to the fact that there is no general accepted definition of the term, but how they should be used and what each term should entail have been discussed within the field (Bennett, 2011, p. 9). In this study, the terms are used as synonyms, but in line with how Black et al. (2004) separates them, where assessment *for* learning is related to the purpose and formative assessment to function. To

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<sup>1</sup>By *instruction*, Black and Wiliam (2009) are referring “to any activity that is intended to create learning” (p. 10).

clarify, the purpose relates to the intended outcome of the assessment and function to the development process.

### **2.1.2 Summative assessment**

Summative assessment is most often applied at the end of an educational process or project, when the teacher wants to measure, or to sum up, what the students have learnt, for example with the help of a final test (Kibble, 2017, p. 110).

Summative tests are, according to Kibble (2017), “high stakes” for the students since they know what they produce will be assessed (p. 110). Even so, summative tests can provide new learning opportunities as the summative assessment in turn can provide students with information of “what is and is not valued in a particular discipline, thus communicating a criteria for success” (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8).

Since the information elicited from summative tests can create new learning opportunities, it means that the test can be used to improve students’ learning. So, although a test is summative, it can be used for formative purposes (Black et al., 2004, p. 15). The teacher can also elicit information from the tests about what the students have learnt and adapt his or her teaching to better meet the students’ needs according to the new information, with the goal to create better learning possibilities and improve learning. The teacher can also, with the information from the summative test, give feedback to the students, which could guide them forward in their learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8).

Black et al. (2004) argue that for the students to view summative tests as something that will aid them in their learning process, the tests “should become a positive part” of it (p. 16). The authors suggest that an active student involvement in the testing process could result in an understanding that summative tests are beneficial for them (p. 16).

## **2.2 Feedback**

The definition of feedback used in this study is provided by Hattie and Timperley (2007): “Feedback is information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding. It occurs typically after instruction that seeks to provide knowledge and skills or to develop particular attitudes” (p. 102).

There are also different types and forms of feedback, for example collective, individual, written, and oral feedback. The focus in this study will be on written individual feedback, since the aim of the present study is to investigate how the participating teachers’ intention with their written feedback correlates with the students’ perceptions of it. Problems that can



occur in connection to feedback and grades and how feedback becomes effective will also be reviewed in this section.

### **2.2.1 Feedback and grades**

Grades fulfill the function of summing up what students know at a particular moment, and do not provide students with helpful information on how to improve their work (Black et al., 2004, p. 13; Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 89). Feedback, on the other hand, provides students with confirmation about what they know, as well as information on what they can improve and how to get there (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By giving students feedback, teachers create a learning possibility for students to develop their knowledge (Black et al., 2004, p. 13).

When feedback and grades are given together on the same assignment, Black et al. (2004) claim that students will ignore the feedback (p. 13). The authors mention that teachers who stopped giving grades and instead only gave feedback discovered that students then put more effort into improving their work (p. 13). A consequence of that way of working was that students began to see learning as a process, in which they had to actively engage (Black et al., 2004).

### **2.2.2 Different levels of and challenges with feedback**

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback can be given on four different levels: the task level, the process level, the self-regulation level, and the personal level (pp. 91-96). Feedback given on the task level concerns how a specific task has been carried out (ibid, 2007, p. 91). When it is given at the process level, it aims to help the students' process, and to help them find strategies to further their learning (ibid, 2007, p. 93). The goal with feedback given on the self-regulation level is for the students to be able to "create internal feedback and cognitive routines" (ibid, 2007, p. 94). Lastly, feedback given on the personal level is centered around the individual, and does not provide information on how, for example, students can improve an assignment (ibid, 2007, p. 96). What the effect of the given feedback will have is determined by which level it is given at (ibid, 2007, p. 90), which Black et al. (2004) agree with as they state that "it is the nature, rather than the amount, of commentary that is critical" (p. 13). Hattie and Timperley (2007) have identified different problems and challenges connected to the different levels. For example, when feedback is given at the task level, it often becomes too specific, and therefore the students are not able to apply it on other assignments (p. 91).

Another issue that Hattie and Timperley (2007) have identified is that students tend to think that they are just the receivers of feedback, and that they do not have to ask themselves the feedback questions, where am I going, how am I going, and where to next? (pp. 88, 101). Therefore, teachers need to be attentive to how they formulate their feedback and try to imagine how students will perceive it, so it also can give students the tools they need to ask the questions themselves when they are working with an assignment (p. 101). By doing that, teachers also help the students to learn about learning, which Black (2009) argues to be one of the main aims of education (p. 520). Furthermore, according to Hattie and Timperley (2007), “[t]eachers and parents often assume that students share a commitment to academic goals, whereas the reality is that developing this shared commitment needs to be nurtured and built” (p. 89). In other words, they believe that the students will use the tools they have been given to develop toward their goals.

For teachers to know whether the feedback given was effective or not, students need to, for example, rewrite the same assignment (Boud, 2000, p. 158). However, Boud (2000) also states that it is “unrealistic to expect students to redo all their work in the light of feedback” (p. 158). Consequently, when students are not given an opportunity to work with their own texts, errors and feedback, a learning possibility is lost (p. 158).

### **2.2.3 How feedback becomes effective**

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 88), feedback has to answer the questions “where am I going, how am I going, and where to next?” to become effective. The authors also state that for feedback to have an effect, it “needs to be clear, purposeful, meaningful, and compatible with students’ prior knowledge and to provide logical connections” (p. 104). Therefore, before feedback can be given and have an effect on students’ learning, the students have to have some basic understanding of the topic. If not, there is nothing that the feedback can build on, and the potential for the feedback to be useful for the student is very low (p. 104). Also, feedback needs to be what Wiliam (2011) expresses as “domain-specific”. To help students improve their work, teachers need to be specific about what type of errors students are making and give them guidance on how to correct those (p. 4). In line with Hattie and Timperley (2007), Black et al. (2004) agree that for feedback to become effective, it has to make students reflect on their work (p. 14).

Even when the feedback given is formulated according to Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) description, it will only have an effect on learning if the students work with it (Wiliam, 2011, p. 12). In particular, Black et al. (2004) suggest that letting students work with feedback

during lessons and rewrite their own work is helpful for their development (p. 13). Similarly, Boud (2000) states that “[u]nless students are able to use feedback to produce improved work, through for example redoing the same assignment, neither they nor those giving feedback will know that it has been effective” (p. 158). In conclusion, when feedback is just read, it has very little effect on students’ learning. To learn more about how students perceive and use feedback, Sadler (2010) stresses that the students’ perspective on feedback should be included in research about formative assessment.

#### **2.2.4 The Havnes et al. (2012) study**

Havnes, Smith, Dysthe, and Ludvigsen (2012) investigated how both teachers and students experienced feedback practices and if there was a difference across different subjects (English, Norwegian and mathematics) and programs (academic and vocational) in five upper secondary schools in Norway. In their study, they used both quantitative and qualitative methods, such as survey data and focus-group interviews.

Havnes et al. (2012, p. 23) found that feedback was often given together with a grade and almost always in connection with handing back assignments, and that just giving feedback and no grade was not very common. The participating teachers’ feedback practices seemed mostly to be connected to grading. Even though the teachers gave the students feedback on assignments, which the majority of the students found helpful, the latter rarely used it for other assignments or worked with it in any other way (p. 24). It also became apparent in the study that the teachers lacked “systematic strategies for implementing feedback they have given in their future teaching” (p. 24). A possible reason for not working with the feedback in class could be that teachers did not have enough time to follow up on all students. Also, it could be that they were concerned to what degree the students cared about the feedback, since some teachers observed that some students just threw it in the bin after class (p. 25). Furthermore, “the teachers believe that it is up to the students to use the feedback” (p. 26), which could explain why the teachers rarely spend any lesson time on working with feedback.

The students expressed that if the feedback was not readily understandable, they did not make an effort to understand the feedback. This could be related to teachers voicing concerns about the students being able to understand the feedback given (p. 25). Furthermore, the teachers’ overestimated how much use the students made of the feedback (p. 24).

Some conflicting results also emerged regarding the quality of the given feedback, in so far as the teachers thought of it as more useful than the students did (p. 23), and that the “teachers [found] their feedback useful and blame[d] the students for not using it, whereas the

students complain[ed] about the usefulness of the feedback they receive[d]” (p. 26). However, the student interviews suggested that the students did want to receive constructive feedback as they considered it to be helpful in their learning (p. 26). A determining factor for whether students viewed feedback as helpful was related to “the way and language in which it [was] given” (p. 24).

Lastly, it was also discovered in the analysis that the students received more feedback as they worked on an assignment in comparison to the finished product (p. 23), though it is not clear which type of feedback the students found to be most helpful.

To summarize, the result from the study indicates that the teachers would need to incorporate working with feedback in their lessons, since many of the students would not make use of it otherwise. Also, it seems that the teachers need to be very explicit when formulating the feedback for it to be understandable, and consequently useful for the students.

The Havnes et al. (2012) study only investigated the use of feedback in upper secondary schools in Norway. The present study, in contrast, will investigate how *Swedish* upper secondary school students perceive and use the teachers’ written feedback, in an attempt to understand how teachers can use, give and formulate their written feedback to better meet the students’ needs.

### **3 Method**

The present study, with the aim of investigating how the intentions of English teachers’ feedback correlates with students’ perceptions of it, was conducted on the basis of six interviews with both teachers and students. Information about the informants, and how the data was collected and analyzed, is provided in this section, including the ethical considerations that were made in connection with the study.

#### **3.1 Informants**

Three English teachers who worked at an upper secondary school in Sweden and nine students from the same school participated in this study. The teachers who were asked to participate in the study were teachers that I had come in contact with earlier during my education. Therefore, I knew that they work with written feedback to some extent. The teachers were asked to participate on the basis that feedback is a part of their teaching practice, so it would be possible to investigate the intentions they have when giving feedback to their students, and to see how the latter perceive it. The teachers in this study also aided in

helping to find students who were willing to participate. The teachers had between 4 to 20 years of experience in teaching English.

In upper secondary schools in Sweden, English 5 is compulsory for all students, English 6 is compulsory for students enrolled in academic study programs while English 7 is optional. Two of the students were enrolled in English 5, and the remaining seven in English 6. The students were enrolled in different study programs, all of which were academic rather than vocational. The students' English teachers are the teachers interviewed in this study. Just as in the study by Havnes et al. (2012, p. 23; see section 2.2.4), participation was based on self-recruitment, which *could* imply that most of the students were high achievers.

Since the analysis of the data suggested no correlation between the participants' gender and their views on feedback, the gender aspect will not be pursued further in this study. Also, the participants' genders will not be revealed to protect their identities. The participants will simply be referred to as Teacher/Student 1, 2, 3 and so on.

### **3.2 Data collection procedure**

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, and with the intention that the interviewees could develop their answers and arguments (Denscombe, 2018, p. 169). A qualitative method was chosen because the informants' experiences and interpretations were in focus and not quantifiable data (ibid, 2018, pp. 23-25). The selection of participants was based on convenience sampling, which means that accessibility and availability were the determining factors in the selection process (ibid, 2018, p. 71). One of the reasons why convenience sampling was used was the COVID-19 pandemic, and that many teachers, at the time the data was collected, had to adjust to distance teaching due to the restrictions.

The students were interviewed in groups of two, three and four, and the interviews with the teachers were conducted individually. The students were interviewed in groups because that would give them the opportunity to discuss the questions with each other and hear the other students' answers and opinions. That could make them feel comfortable to develop their own answers (Denscombe, 2018, p. 271). Group interviews also make for a more time efficient approach; one group interview results in answers from more informants than one individual interview would and can therefore be assumed to provide more comprehensive and representative data in less time (p. 271).

The interviews were conducted via Google Meets or Zoom, which are video conferencing tools, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions. All interviews were conducted in English, but the informants were informed that they could use Swedish at any time if they liked to, and/or if they needed to clarify something (see 3.3 for more information). The interviews were approximately 30-60 minutes long and all of them were recorded. The interviews were based on 23 and 19 prepared questions (see Appendix 1 and 2 for the interview guides), respectively, but, when needed, spontaneous follow up questions were asked.

The interview questions were based on the present study's research questions, but they were also inspired by the Havnes et al. (2012) study. A test interview was conducted with another English teacher to see if there were any questions that needed to be clarified. Some of the questions that were too general were rephrased to correspond more closely to the goals of the study. The interview questions were then sent to the supervisor twice for feedback, which was considered while editing the questions before the interviews. The questions were not sent to the participants in advance, but the aims of the study were shared with them beforehand.

### **3.3 Method of analysis**

The recorded material from the interviews was transcribed, and the few statements that were made in Swedish were translated into English. Pauses were not marked, as the intention was not to do a conversation analysis, but a content analysis. The quotes that are presented in the results section below have been edited, in the sense that fillers and repetitions have been deleted, and grammatical mistakes have been corrected to some extent.

The transcripts were printed out and analyzed with the help of qualitative content analysis (Denscombe, 2018, pp. 402-403). That type of analysis is used when one wants to discover common patterns and themes, for example in a text (ibid, 2018, pp. 402-403). When using content analysis, the content, in this case the transcripts, is divided into different themes, followed by further categorization based on the emerging themes. In the present study, recurring statements and issues that were connected to the research questions were marked and analyzed in the search for categories, resulting in two main categories each for the teacher and the student data.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical considerations outlined by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2007). Before each interview, the participants were informed about the aim of the study, its purpose, that participation was on a completely voluntary basis, and that they could end it at any time. Before the interviews, the students and the teachers gave their permission to be recorded, and they were promised that the recording, as well as their answers, would only be used for the purpose of the present study. The participants were also ensured that they would remain anonymous.

## 4 Analysis and results

The results of the content analysis will be presented in different categories in the sections below. They are based on the teachers' and students' claims and experiences concerning written feedback. The analysis of the teacher interviews will be presented first, followed by the student interviews.

### 4.1 Analysis of the teacher interviews

In this section the results of the content analysis regarding the first and the second research question will be presented. The questions were: *What are the intentions behind the participating upper secondary school English teachers' written feedback on students' assignments?* and *How do the participating teachers describe their practice of giving written feedback?* The analysis resulted in the categories 4.1.1 The teachers' intention with written feedback and 4.1.2 How the teachers claim to provide feedback in practice.

#### 4.1.1 The teachers' intentions with written feedback

It emerged in the content analysis that the teachers' intention with written feedback is to help the students forward in their learning process. By writing the feedback down, the teachers claimed that it also helps them and the students to see what the latter have achieved, and for the teachers to see the students' development and for both of them to see what the students can or need to work on:

I think it's necessary to put it down in writing for several reasons. Firstly, for [the teacher] to remember ... And also, [the students] can read it several times and go back. There can't be any misunderstandings really, when it comes to, you didn't say this, or you haven't mentioned this

before. In a way I feel like it's necessary to have some kind of written feedback. You don't know if they are able to take it in if you just do it orally. (Teacher 2)

In the same vein, Teacher 3 claimed that by writing the feedback down the students “are not able to come up to me and say: whoa I didn't know that, you didn't tell me this, I deserve a higher grade” and that writing the feedback down helps to avoid situations like that.

Moreover, an intention with written feedback that is shared by the teachers is for the students to be able to read it, reflect on it, and try to learn from it. The teachers have in common that they save and share the written feedback with the students, so that the latter can go back and remind themselves what they need to work on, and it also helps the teachers to keep track of the students' development. By writing the feedback down, saving and sharing it, the teachers also aim to raise awareness within the students, to elucidate what level they are at, and to target their specific needs. In other words, by documenting the students' development, the teachers want to promote an active learning process, instead of the students just being passive receivers of information. Teacher 1 claimed: “[the students] have to be active in their [learning] process ... [and] to make them actually use the feedback ... I mean passive feedback is almost equal to no feedback; it has very little effect.” In line with what Teacher 1 claimed, Teacher 3 explained that the feedback the students receive should be formulated so that the students should be able to work with it themselves:

I want them to be able to have something that they can actually do something with. I think that it is very difficult to do something with [general feedback]. I like it to be in detail because then you can actually fix those things.

In connection to the two quotes above, it emerged in the content analysis that written feedback can give the students, no matter their level, more guidance on what they can improve in comparison to just receiving a grade.

Another intention with written feedback is to help the students reach a specific grade, because that is the most important thing for them, according to Teacher 3, who further claimed:

At the end of the day, the students are ... interested in ... a [grade] or indication of that [grade]. ... Even though I give fruitful feedback in written form, they scroll down and have a look at the letter. ... We can fool ourselves talking about that [it's] the learning outcome that is the most important thing, and it is, but at the end of the day it is about the grade [for the students], because that is what is important to them, because they want to go to university and then they need a grade.



In contrast to Teacher 3, Teachers 1 and 2 expressed the opinion that feedback should be given to aid the students in their learning process, rather than giving feedback with the intention of helping them reach a certain grade.

In short, the teachers want their feedback to have an effect on the students' learning. When asked how they know if their feedback is effective, Teacher 2 stated that it can be difficult to know if it has the desired effect and added that s/he seldom follows up the feedback but "I leave that with the students". However, to see the students' improvement, Teacher 2 said that s/he is going to start to read the students' rewrites and compare them to the first draft. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating", Teacher 1 stated, in agreement with Teacher 3, who claimed that s/he can see if the feedback is effective if the students have shown progress over time and in subsequent assignments. If a student's work has not improved, the teachers try to help the individual and try to figure out why they are not progressing.

#### **4.1.2 How the teachers claim to provide written feedback in practice**

It became apparent in the content analysis that what all three teachers have in common is that they give a lot of feedback to their students. However, their feedback practices are different, and the feedback is given in different forms. Teacher 1, for example, works a lot with written feedback in the form of "personal specific directional feedback for each individual student". S/he comments on both the content and the language in the text and often asks the students questions and gives them pointers so "they have to do the work and figure out how; I give the clues and they work out the solution".

In contrast to Teacher 1, Teacher 2 writes very few personal comments. Teacher 2 uses what s/he calls a feedback form, which is a checklist that s/he and the students create together for every assignment with the knowledge requirements as a basis. One reason why Teacher 2 does not give personal comments is that it is very time consuming, but s/he has lately considered doing it, because of studies confirming it being very motivational for the students to receive such comments.

Teacher 3's work procedure differs from that of the other two teachers in the aspect that the students receive more feedback during the work process as well as on the final product. S/he continually works with drafts, and because of that the students do not produce that many different texts during the year, but they work a lot with the texts they do produce. Teacher 3 explained that the students normally write two drafts and receive written feedback on both of them. Teacher 3's work procedure differs from that of the other two teachers in the aspect that

the students receive more feedback during the work process instead of mostly receiving it on the final product.

To make the students active in the learning process, all teachers work with the written feedback in class, but the manner of how they do it and the extent of it differs. All three teachers let the students work with the feedback and texts in class and provide explanations and guidance when needed. Teacher 3 claimed that the students also receive written feedback from their classmates during lessons: “I help them also with encouraging giving feedback themselves to [other classmates]”. Moreover, Teacher 1 gave the following reason as to why it is important to let the students work with the feedback in class:

a very wise headmaster told me many, many years ago that you can write as many texts as you like, but you get so much more from actually working on your own texts, and what I was finding out before, when they weren't doing rewrites, is that they just sort of looked at it and then chucked it in the bin pretty much.

By working with the feedback in class, Teacher 1 claimed that s/he can see that the students become more active in their learning process. However, working this way often means that the teacher has to do a lot of work when the texts are handed back to the students “because I have to go around and explain; A lot of the [students] can work it out, but sometimes they can't work it out, and then I have to explain and can kind of lead them to the water” (Teacher 1). The same teacher added, however, that because of the increasing class sizes it is “becoming more and more difficult” to find the time to help every student. Therefore, the students all too often receive written feedback on the final product only, even though the teacher would like to provide it to the students during the work process as well.

A theme that became apparent in the content analysis was the reluctance to give the students grades on assignments. In an attempt to make the students focus more on the learning process instead of the grade, Teacher 2 decided that s/he would not give a grade on any assignment during the fall semester 2020, and s/he claimed: “there's just too much focus on grades; I think that it prevents learning; they don't learn as much, because they focus on the wrong things, and they get stressed”. Teacher 2 added that another reason why s/he only gave feedback for one semester was that “from all studies and the research that I have looked at, it seems that when you have the grade together [with the feedback], [the students] might not focus as much on the feedback”. Like Teacher 2, Teacher 3 does not give the students grades on every assignment they hand in, but instead gives a lot of feedback. The semester, however, culminates in a major test, where the students can show Teacher 3 what they have learnt and

then they receive a grade; so that they know which level they are at. In agreement with the other teachers, Teacher 1 occasionally does not give the students grades, but instead gives the students written feedback on assignments, as s/he feels that the feedback then becomes more powerful and helpful. However, s/he sometimes feels:

like [I] have to [give the students a grade] because they need to know what level they're on [and] so that they know how much work they need to put in. So, reluctantly yes, I do quite often put a grade on, but I do try and also mark without a grade.

As mentioned above, Teacher 1 makes the students rewrite their texts, because s/he too has read studies confirming that students tend to ignore the feedback when it is given together with a grade. Teacher 1 also said: “if I were in their shoes, I would look first at the grade as well”. Even if the students look directly at the grade, by making the students work with their texts and hand it in again, Teacher 1 intends to make them work and reflect on the feedback, which otherwise probably would have been ignored.

As previously mentioned, all teachers save the written feedback that they give to the students. Teacher 3, for example, writes down the feedback in the students’ individual logbooks, in which the students also write down things that they have learned or things that the teacher wants them to reflect on. Teacher 3 also uses the logbook to:

write down my own estimation of what they have done. So, [there is] a lot of written material in there where you can also trace your progress along the way. It is just basically everything, where I try to keep score on everything that could be fruitful for their future learning outcomes, so I have it all in one document.

By writing the feedback down in the logbook, Teacher 3 said it is easier to give equal amounts of feedback, in comparison to giving the students oral feedback in the classroom. Teacher 1 on the other hand makes copies of the assignments, on which s/he has written down the feedback and gives one copy to the student and keeps one to her/himself. Teacher 2 saves the feedback form s/he has filled out, which is also shared with the students.

## **4.2 Analysis of the student interviews**

In the following section the results of the content analysis for the third and fourth research questions will be presented. The questions were: *What are the participating upper secondary school students’ perceptions of their English teachers’ intentions with written feedback?* and *How helpful do the participating students find written feedback given to them by their English*

*teachers, and how do they use it?* The analysis resulted in the categories 4.2.1 The students' perception of their teachers' intentions with written feedback and 2.1.2 The students' thoughts on the helpfulness of written feedback and their use of it.

#### **4.2.1 The students' perception of their teachers' intentions with written feedback**

The two quotes below reflect a general theme that emerged in the content analysis, namely, that the students' overall perception of the teachers' intentions with their feedback is for the students to learn and improve. Student 3 stated: "I think the teachers want us to think about the feedback that we have gotten and try to correct the mistakes we have done in the past. I think that's their intention with the feedback". In line with Student 3, Student 5 stated: "I think they want [us] to learn from our own mistakes and see what we can change and be aware of what we can improve". The shared opinion of the teachers' intentions indicates that the students experience that their teachers want them to reflect upon their own work and become aware of their learning process.

Additionally, most of the students also expressed that they think the teachers want them to use and work with the feedback given:

If I gave someone feedback in order to make them better and wanting to make them better, I would, of course, want them to use the feedback, and actually try to become better, so hopefully the teacher wants us to use it and wants us to become better. (Student 6)

Student 4 expressed that s/he too thought that the intention with the feedback was for the students to work with it, but it was expressed with some uncertainty: "I think they want us to do something with it, but I don't know" (Student 4). Furthermore, it was expressed by Student 7 that one of the intentions with the feedback is that the students should remember and take the previously received feedback into account when working with new assignments to improve and become better at English.

Another shared opinion that became apparent in the analysis was that the feedback given was also viewed as an indicator of the students' present level. This is supported by Student 2, who said: "because [the teacher] wants to make you aware of your level where you're at".

#### **4.2.2 The students' thoughts on the helpfulness of written feedback and their use of it**

A theme that became apparent in the analysis was that written feedback is perceived as helpful and furthers the students' learning, which is supported by Student 2, who claimed: "I think it's very helpful because then you remember what you need to work on or what you're good at". Most of the students point out that they can go back to the written feedback and read

it again, while oral feedback is easy to forget. Written feedback is also seen as helpful as it can give the students guidance that they are on the right track, and Student 1 stated:

As a student, I think it's good to receive [written] feedback, because especially if you have worked hard, it's like a confirmation that you are on the right way and that you're doing good in school and stuff, so it makes me as a student feel very good and proud of myself and my work.

Moreover, it also emerged in the analysis that someone else's opinion on one's work offers another perspective, which can aid the learning process, and it is expressed by Student 8 that "[Feedback is] everything if you want to improve, because then you know what you can do better, and maybe you don't have to listen to it, but you can always take it into account". This statement suggests that feedback is perceived as helpful when students want to improve their English and they can take it into consideration, but they do not always have to use it.

A majority of the students agree that working with written feedback in class is helpful. A common opinion that surfaced was that working with written feedback would provide more guidance:

I feel like I would like to do that, because sometimes when you get feedback you don't know what to do with it, like okay I could correct my mistakes in this assignment, but I maybe don't know if the same situation is going to come up in future assignments or something like that.  
(Student 3)

Even though the students expressed that they thought working with the written feedback was helpful, they also expressed a range of motivation against the task. The alternative position expressed was that working with feedback should not be a priority during lessons, and Student 4 stated that:

"I don't think you should put too much time into it, but I think it would be good to work with it afterwards, but not too much [...]; if you don't understand it, you ask, if you [have the energy], but you ask questions and you just learn from it".

Another reason for not wanting to work with the feedback was because, as Student 7 expressed it: "It feels like it it's unnecessary" and continued to explain:

Because if you get feedback on one assignment then, like I said before, there would probably not be one assignment that is the same as this one, and maybe you can take the feedback in general, but I don't know maybe, if the teacher says like something concrete, like misspelling a word or something then you can learn it, but not otherwise.

These statements suggest that the students perceive the written feedback to be task-specific, and to a large extent non-generalizable, and therefore it cannot be applied on subsequent assignments.

It surfaced in the analysis that when the students used the feedback, it was usually to correct their mistakes and improve their texts as Student 5 expressed it: “I correct my mistakes, bring the tips to the next assignment or next time I will do something similar”. A few of the students went back to the feedback after they had received it to see what they did wrong on some occasions. Students 1 and 2 added that they go back to previously given feedback when they are doing other assignments with the intention “to get better grades” and to see what they can develop. However, most of the students did not go back to the previously received feedback when writing other assignments, but just read it when they received it:

the only way I can use the feedback that I've gotten previously is just if I have it in mind, but I don't really take my time to go back to other assignments. But I think that's something you should do, but I don't know, I feel like I'm more excited into getting to know the new assignment instead. (Student 9)

Some, though not all, of the students agreed with that view, with Student 3, who stated: “if it's not in my mind [when I'm writing another assignment], I'm not going to think about it”. This suggests again that the students' attention seems to be focused on what they did wrong and how they can receive higher grades, and not on their learning process as such.

One aspect that appeared in the analysis, and that seems to affect whether the students go back and use the feedback or not, is how much they care about the assignment. Student 6 said, “it depends on how much you care about something; if you really care ... to become better and maybe get better grades, then I really take everything in and try to become better, but it depends [on how much I care]”.

What also surfaced was that many of the students prefer to receive feedback together with a grade, so they know what the grade means and how close to their goals they are. Student 4 stated:

I think it's bad when we only get a grade because ... if you get a grade you didn't want or I don't understand why [I] got the grade, I would like something written why, so I can understand what was wrong or if I don't agree then I can talk to the teacher about it.

In other words, the students think the written feedback serves the purpose of explaining the grade. Moreover, most of the students expressed that they also want a grade as a clarification as to what the teacher means by writing for example *good*: “because if you don't get the

grade, then you don't know what [the teacher] means by good" (Student 8), and Student 6 added "it can be good meaning an E, or it can be good meaning an A".

The students described two different approaches to written feedback when they do not understand it. One of the approaches is to ask the teacher in person or send an email asking what was meant with the feedback. Student 8 stated that s/he "ask[s] them what they mean, and what they think, if they can use different words to describe what they mean", when s/he does not understand it. The other approach is to ignore the feedback when they do not understand it, and Student 3 stated: "often I just ignore it because I'm lazy". The quote below from Student 9 exemplifies the opinions expressed:

I'm also a bit lazy on that part, but if I have time and I have the energy for it, I am going to ask the teacher what they mean ... there's often other people who did the same mistakes; I check with them if they have gotten a similar response to see if they understand what it means, but I would like to ask the teacher but as [Student 3] said, I'm a bit too lazy sometimes to actually do so.

In addition, Student 1 stated that the reason behind not asking it is that "like sometimes I don't really care", and Student 2 agreed: "I don't care really about it, because then maybe we're done with the project already".

## **5 Discussion**

In 5.1 the results of the analysis will be discussed in relation to the information provided in the background section in, and 5.2 provides a discussion of the method applied in this study.

### **5.1 Discussion of results**

It became apparent in the analysis of the teacher interviews that one of the teachers' intentions with giving feedback was to enhance learning, which also corresponded with the students' perception of their teachers' intentions. Although the perceived intention correlated, the students rarely used the feedback on their own accord, however, and instead saw it as a clarification of the grade or an evaluation of their results. This corresponds to some extent with the result of the Havnes et al. (2012) study, where the students seldom used the feedback given.

The participating teachers gave feedback with the intention to improve learning. They wanted the students to share their perception of the feedback given and their commitment to

academic goals. It could also be that the teachers believe that the commitment was already shared, but Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim that the commitment to academic goals needs to be encouraged and not taken for granted. For the students to use the feedback the way the teachers intended them to, the latter might need to focus more on what the students can use the feedback for, and how they can use it. One of the main aims of teaching, according to Black (2009), is for the students to learn about learning. The teachers might therefore need to focus on that before they give the students feedback for it to have the effect they desire.

The teachers wanted the students to be active in their learning process and viewed their feedback as process-specific, as they wanted it to aid the students in their future learning. The result, on the other hand, indicated that the students often viewed the feedback as task-specific. Therefore, the students did not see the feedback as transferrable to other assignments and was consequently of little use. It might be because teachers have a tendency to give feedback on the task level and not the process level, even though they intend to give feedback that aids the learning process. Feedback that is given on the task level is described by Hattie and Timperley (2007) as having a low generalizability in relation to other assignments as a result of it being too specific. That also seemed to be in line with the participating students' opinions, as they did not generally use the feedback for other assignments. In this regard, the teachers' intention with their feedback and the students' use of it did not correspond.

How the feedback is given and on which level determine its effect according to Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Black et al. (2004). Therefore, the teachers might also need to focus on giving feedback on the self-regulation level, so the students can develop strategies to lead themselves forward when working with the feedback given. That could help the students to work with the feedback more on their own accord. In line with what Black (2009) claims, this also supports the idea that the teachers need to focus on what the students can use the feedback for, and how they can use it before they actually give it to the students. Additionally, giving feedback on the self-regulation level could help change the view, which Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe, of students just being receivers of feedback. By helping the students to create strategies to help themselves, it could lead to the students working with the feedback on their own accord and not only reading or ignoring it.

When the participating students received feedback on the final product, they mostly regarded it as task-specific or as a grade clarification. Similarly, the students in the Havnes et al. (2012) study rarely used the feedback for subsequent assignments, nor did they work with the feedback on their own accord. Moreover, the students in both the present study and the Havnes et al. (2012) study claimed to find the feedback helpful but did not actively use it. It



could be that the students did not use the feedback because it was given on the task level and was too specific, either because they did not understand how to use it, or because they did not care enough to use it. However, it became apparent in both studies that the students' opinions of the feedback and their use of it did not align.

Even though the students in this study and in the Havnes et al. (2012) study claimed to find the feedback given helpful, it surfaced in the analysis that the students have a tendency to ignore it if they do not understand it. The students in this study also claimed that if they did not care about the assignment, they would not work with the feedback, which supports the claim that students think of feedback as being task-specific and not generalizable.

In the analysis, it became apparent that the students' main focus is the assignment at hand and the outcome of it, i.e., the grade, and not the learning process. The students' focus also corresponds to what Black et al. (2004) state regarding students ignoring the feedback when it is given together with a grade. The grade then becomes the object of their focus and not the feedback. Furthermore, the students in this study thought it was "bad" when they just received a grade, as they did not get to know what was wrong, indicating that they wanted the feedback to explain what was needed to reach a higher grade. On the other hand, they did not just want to receive feedback without the grade either, because then they did not know which level their work was at. Statements along these lines support the claim that the students focus more on the task at hand and the grade than on the learning process. It could also be that the teachers need to be more explicit when giving feedback, and to make it clearer for the students how they are doing and where they ought to be going next according to Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback questions. Additionally, the teachers need to provide the students with the means to work effectively with feedback as mentioned above. Black et al. (2004), Boud (2000), and Wiliam (2011) state that if the students do not use the feedback, it simply becomes useless. In short, feedback left unused loses its function as feedback and becomes information. The analysis of the data suggested that when the feedback is given affects how much the students will use it. If the goal is to enhance learning, the teachers might need to consider giving feedback when the students will be most receptive to it, and when it will have the most effect on their learning. In the present study, that does not seem to be at the end of a unit, but instead during the process.

The teachers and the students have different foci of feedback, where the teachers focus on the learning process and the students on the outcome. The participating teachers expressed a reluctance to give the students grades on assignments during the semester, as they wanted the students to focus on improving their learning and not solely on the grade. Black et al. (2004)

and Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim that feedback creates new learning opportunities for students. It could be why the teachers wanted to work more with feedback, hoping to shift the students' focus from grades to the learning process, which in turn could lead the students to their goal in the end.

Moreover, the analysis suggests that the teachers need to communicate more clearly to the students why the feedback is given and how it can aid them in their learning process. By doing so, it could be possible to change the students' perception of the grade being the most important thing. The change of focus might help the students to become more aware that if they increase their focus on the learning process, they could reach a higher grade as a consequence. They would, as a result, be more aware of their own learning practices and how they could reach the grade they wish for.

In the Havnes et al. (2012) study, it was reported that the teachers did not have "systematic strategies for implementing feedback they have given in their future teaching" (p. 24). Even though the participating teachers in the present study had implemented systematic ways of working with feedback, their students, like the students in the Havnes et al. (2012) study, only worked actively with the feedback given on their own accord to a very small extent. In addition, the number of students wanting to work with the feedback during lessons was not very high in the present study. In both studies, the teachers often gave the students feedback on the final product, and their practices of giving written feedback were mostly connected to grading. Therefore, lending the feedback a summative characteristic. That could be the reason why the students regarded the feedback as a clarification of the grade and why they did not actively work with it. As the students in the present study expressed, if they did not have the previously received feedback in mind when they were writing new assignments, they were not going to use it. This suggests that new working methods need to be implemented. Boud (2000) highlights the need for students to produce improved work. His suggestion for this is to redo the same assignment (ibid, 2000, p. 158). An additional suggestion is that, rather than working with feedback at the end of a unit, the students should start the new one by reflecting and working with previously received feedback to see what they can improve for the new assignment. In that way, it could become easier for students to develop their understanding of how to generalize the feedback, and how it can be transferred from one assignment to another, provided that the feedback is given on the process level and not the task level.

## 5.2 Discussion of method

The students who participated in the study were all enrolled in academic study programs. If students from vocational study programs had participated as well, the results could have been different. Also, the student participation was based on self-recruitment and it could be discussed that the data might have been more nuanced if another type of selection method had been used.

The interviews were conducted via a video conferencing tool, and it is possible that the students would have been more comfortable expressing and elaborating their thoughts and opinions in a more traditional, personal setting, making it more natural for them to discuss their answers with each other. Also, it is possible that the students could have elaborated their answers more if the interviews had been held in Swedish.

The second part of the interview guide about feedback in general in the English subject could have been used to answer an additional research question (for example: What is the purpose of your feedback provided in the English subject in general?). However, the data from those questions were not presented in the results section because they functioned as warm up questions before the questions regarding written feedback were asked. It is possible that the questions in the second part may have enabled the participants to elaborate on their answers in the third part.

The aim of the study and its research questions were suitable for a qualitative approach, as the study aimed to research teachers' intentions with written feedback and students' perceptions of written feedback. The qualitative content analysis used made it possible to extract recurring themes in the collected data and answer the study's research questions.

Lastly, if more participants had been included in the study, more representative data could have been collected and the results would have been more generalizable.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a correlation between the students' perception and the teachers' intentions. Even though it correlates, and the students understand that the feedback is given to help them improve their learning, they seldom make use of it. It seems like the students lack the necessary strategies to independently work with the feedback. The students claim to want feedback and regard it as helpful, although they read it, they did not show a real interest in wanting to work with it. Furthermore, the result of the study suggests that it is mostly up to teachers to make sure that students work with the feedback given, because the latter will not

do it on their own accord. Implementing lessons that focus on working with the feedback given during lessons seems to be the most effective way of working to get the students to use it. The most beneficial point for students to work with feedback needs to be further researched.

It might be possible to change the students' focus from the grade to the process, if the teachers make changes in their practices of working with feedback. It seems that the feedback should not be given together with a grade as students then saw it as clarification rather than a suggestion for further development. Lastly, the teachers need to be very explicit when formulating the feedback for it to be understandable, and consequently useful for the students.

## **6.1 Future research**

To give students the means they need to effectively work with feedback and for them to see its usefulness, it seems that teachers need to teach students about learning first. Thus, in future research, it would be interesting to study how teachers can give students the means they need to be able further their understanding of the usefulness of written feedback and how they can work with it successfully.

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## Appendix 1 – Interview guide – Teachers

### Part 1 – Background information about the interviewee

1. For how many years have you worked as an English teacher?
2. Do you teach any other subject than English? If yes, which?
3. What formal education do you have?

### Part 2 – Feedback provided in the English subject in general

4. To what extent do you give students feedback?
5. How do you give students feedback?
6. What is the purpose of your feedback?
7. How do you work with learning criteria and knowledge requirements?  
Follow up: Do you share learning criteria and knowledge requirements with the students? If yes, when and how? If not, why not?

### Part 3 – Written feedback

8. How do you feel about working with written feedback?
9. To what extent do you give written feedback to your students?
10. When do you usually give written feedback to your students? During the work process or on the final product?
11. What would you say characterizes your written feedback?
12. What are your intentions when giving written feedback?
13. Do you give written feedback together with a grade or do you sometimes just give feedback to the students without giving a grade at the same time? Why/why not?
14. Do you sometimes withhold the grade until the students have worked with the feedback? Why/Why not?
15. How do you follow up on the feedback given?
16. Do you use feedback as a follow up activity during lessons or do you use it as a self-study activity they should follow up on at home?
17. How do you know your feedback is effective?
18. In what ways do you expect the students to use and work with your feedback?
19. How willing are the students to consider and work with the feedback they receive?
20. Can you see a difference in how different types of students make use of the feedback?  
Follow up: Do all students manage to work with the feedback independently and effectively?
21. To what extent do the students give each other written feedback in the form of peer review?
22. Do you have enough time to develop your feedback practice? To what extent is time a factor?
23. Describe the ideal feedback practice from your point of view.

## **Appendix 2 – Interview guide – Students**

### **Part 1 – Background information about the participants**

1. Which program are you enrolled in?
2. Which English course are you studying?

### **Part 2 – Feedback received in the English subject in general**

3. Have you ever received feedback from a teacher?
4. Do/Would you like to receive feedback? Why/Why not?
5. Do/Would you think feedback is helpful for your learning? Why/Why not?
6. Do/Would you prefer that the teacher gives you written feedback or spoken feedback?
7. Do/Would you like to receive feedback during the work process or on the final product?

### **Part 3 – Written feedback**

8. Have you received written feedback on an assignment in any of your English courses?
9. If you have received written feedback on an assignment, when was that? During the work process or on the final product?
10. Do you think written feedback is helpful? If yes, why? If not, why not?
11. If you don't understand the written feedback, what do you do?
12. How do you use the written feedback that the teacher gives you?
13. Do you go back to the given feedback when writing other assignments? Why/Why not?
14. How do you think your teacher wants you to work with the given feedback?
15. Do you work with written feedback during lessons in some way?
16. Would you like to work more with feedback in class? Why/Why not?
17. Do you receive feedback together with a grade or just feedback? Which do you prefer and why?
18. Have you ever received feedback from, or given feedback to, a classmate? If yes, how often and in what contexts? During lessons, for example? If no, would you like to try? Why/Why not?
19. What do you think would be the ideal situation when it comes to feedback in school and specifically in English courses?