The Impact of Feedback and Explicit Rhetorical Instruction on EFL Students' Writing Proficiency in Higher Education

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The efficacy of feedback on EFL students' writing proficiency has been researched extensively and has also sparked off considerable controversy among detractors and supporters alike. However, there is still room for further investigation on how feedback can better contribute to students' writing performance and how it can be fully integrated into the learning process. This article empirically demonstrates the learning advantages of combining both feedback and explicit rhetorical instruction for improving EFL students' writing skills in the context of higher education. In a longitudinal study of the rhetorical competence of students' written production carried out over a semester, three treatment variables were investigated: the effect of feedback, the effect of explicit instruction and the combination of both, along with a control condition of no treatment at all. Students were allocated to a treatment group on the basis of their attendance and work profile and the results of the analysis of the written production of each group were compared. The findings confirm not only that the group that received the combined treatment achieved higher grades and displayed a better control of relevant microskills in their written production, but also that neither feedback nor explicit instruction alone proved as effective in terms of rhetorical competence as the combination of the two variables.

Keywords: feedback; explicit instruction; academic writing; higher education; EFL

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El impacto del *feedback* y de la instrucción retórica en la competencia escrita de los estudiantes de lengua extranjera en el marco de la educación superior

Aunque la eficacia del *feedback* sobre la competencia escrita de los estudiantes de una lengua extranjera ha sido ampliamente analizada y ha suscitado una gran controversia entre defensores y detractores, todavía es posible investigar en mayor profundidad cómo puede integrarse en el proceso de aprendizaje para mejorar la producción escrita del alumnado. Este artículo demuestra las ventajas de combinar el *feedback* con la instrucción explícita de las convenciones retóricas para mejorar la competencia escrita del alumnado en el contexto de la educación superior. En un estudio longitudinal de la producción escrita de cuatro grupos de estudiantes se investigaron tres variables: el efecto del *feedback*, el efecto de la instrucción explícita y la combinación de ambos, junto con un grupo de control que no recibió tratamiento. Los alumnos fueron asignados a cada grupo en base a la asistencia y a las tareas realizadas y se compararon los resultados de los análisis de la producción escrita de cada grupo, los cuales confirman que el grupo que recibió un tratamiento combinado obtuvo mejores notas y demostró un mayor dominio de las microdestrezas. Además, se demostró que ni el *feedback* ni la instrucción explícita por separado son tan eficaces para mejorar la competencia escrita como la combinación de ambos.

Palabras clave: retroalimentación; instrucción explícita; escritura académica; educación superior; adquisición de una lengua extranjera

1. Introduction

Most foreign language teachers acknowledge the difficulty of teaching students to write appropriate academic essays due to the complexity of producing coherent discourse that successfully matches a given topic and purpose. Among the different teaching procedures implemented to improve students' writing skills, providing explicit rhetorical instruction and constructive feedback are two of those most explored by teachers and researchers. Therefore, despite the ongoing controversy over the impact of both variables on student academic writing (Ferris 1999; Truscott 2007), this article, in consonance with K. James Hartshorn and Norman W. Evans (2015), addresses the need to further research the effect of these variables on ESL writing. In this study, carried out within a classroom context over the course of a fifteen-week semester, a process approach to EFL writing was adopted drawing on Icy Lee's remark that this type of approach calls for "a greater emphasis on prewriting instruction and postwriting feedback reinforcement" (2014, 208). This article provides a rationale and empirical data that demonstrate the positive effect of combining explicit prewriting instruction and constructive feedback on students' academic writing and rhetorical competence.

While many studies have examined the effectiveness of different feedback options in improving grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing (Bitchener 2008; Hartshorn et al. 2010), the impact of feedback on rhetorical competence and overall communicative effect still needs further exploration and research (Hartshorn and Evans 2015). As such, this study differs from previous ones in that it uses four different groups to explore the effect of feedback, explicit rhetorical instruction or the combination of both on tertiary education students' rhetorical competence. It also measures the effect of repeated feedback on improving the rhetorical quality of different pieces of writing, and explores the efficacy of the abovementioned variables in improving essay writing quality through the analysis of the better use of microskills that students demonstrate in the different parts of an academic essay. This longitudinal study evaluates the impact of the aforementioned variables on the writing outcomes of four groups of students (n = 126)—three groups received a treatment, while the fourth was a control group with no treatment at all—and the results of the analysis of the written production of each group were compared. The main aim was to investigate whether the combination of feedback and explicit rhetorical instruction has a greater predictive impact on students' written performance than either of the two variables used separately.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Formative Feedback

Providing written corrective feedback is considered an indispensable instructional strategy to help EFL students produce more effective written discourse (Ferris 2010). However, traditional feedback approaches have predominantly focused on linguistic

errors within product-oriented writing contexts (Bitchener and Ferris 2012; Polio and Shea 2014; Kurzer 2018) where students had a passive role and were not expected to revise their written assignments in order to improve content and/or organization (Lee 2014, 2016). This focus on form has led some researchers to underestimate the potential of feedback to improve and consolidate students' writing skills (Truscott 2007, 2010). Recent feedback approaches, however, have attempted to address this by extending the focus of feedback so as to include content and rhetorical discourse structure and consider rhetorical purposes in order to encourage students to revise the text as a whole (Ferris 2003; Midgette et al. 2008; Ferris 2010; Hartshorn and Evans 2015). They also use feedback to mediate the student learning experience in process-oriented classrooms so that students can actively participate in the feedback process and transfer their knowledge to new writing contexts (Lantolf and Thorne 2006; Lee 2014). These new approaches have also tried to address other issues, such as the lack of intentional teacher-student interaction during and after feedback, and they strongly advocate using feedback to build awareness among students about the writing strategies they need to use to overcome obstacles that arise during the writing process. In this vein, some researchers highlight the necessity of teaching revision strategies that involve focusing on the rhetorical purposes and overall structure of the assignment in order to help students become proficient writers (De la Paz and Sherman 2013). In higher education, feedback should also address future activity and help students acquire writing literacies that will contribute to their longitudinal development (Price et al. 2010). Feedback also needs to be perceived by students as a meaningful, relevant learning experience that makes them aware of their strengths and weaknesses and helps them remedy their writing difficulties (Lee 2014). Moreover, other researchers have reported on the advantages of encouraging students to revise their written texts immediately after they have been given feedback on their writing, and contend that this strategy helps them improve the quality of their writing (Ferris and Roberts 2001).

Bearing this in mind, this study tries to avoid the problems associated with giving, receiving and understanding feedback per se, and focuses mainly on three roles of feedback, namely, reinforcement, benchmarking and longitudinal development (Price et al. 2010). The main role, therefore, of the feedback given here was not only to help students identify the gap between their performance and the standards they were supposed to achieve, but also to boost student development by providing what some scholars call *feedforward* to address future written assignments (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Gibbs 2010; Reimann et al. 2016). In order to maximize the effectiveness of feedback and avoid any lack of student engagement, the feedback provided intentionally sought to draw the students' attention to content, organization and rhetorical features, with special emphasis on previously given explicit instruction on the conventions of academic discourse. Students were required to rewrite their essays using the feedback given by the teacher and to submit the new version.

This fostered dialogic teacher-student interaction and compelled students to use feedback at a teachable moment where they were more receptive to the teacher's recommendations. Moreover, students became actively engaged due not only to the interaction with the teacher, but also because of the possibility of transferring the knowledge acquired through explicit instruction and multiple rewriting to their future written assignments.

2.2. Explicit Rhetorical Instruction

The aversion developed during the twentieth century to the systematic instruction of the conventions of written discourse was mainly due to the assumption that rhetorical structures were not rule-governed and that this pedagogy limited creativity and personal growth (Moon 2012). There has also been considerable controversy as to whether a universal academic discourse can be taught (Downs and Wardle 2007), or whether explicit rhetorical instruction would help students effectively acquire and apply such conventions (Wilder 2012). However, it is now widely accepted that there are common characteristics in academic writing that can be explicitly taught so as to prepare students to write across the university curriculum (Thonney 2011). Moreover, some scholars contend that a lack of systematic rhetorical instruction might restrict the range of writing skills students are expected to have learnt at the end of their studies (Moon 2012). Research on rhetorically focused instruction suggests it has positive effects on student writing (De la Paz and Graham 2002; Fearn and Farnan 2005; De la Paz and Sherman 2013; Denman 2015; Sutphen 2015). These researchers have demonstrated that immediately following explicit rhetorical instruction, students were able to apply sophisticated writing skills to produce coherent, well-structured essays. Michael Hoey also highlights the importance of teaching overall patterns of textual organization, such as problem-solution, claim-counterclaim and general to specific, in order to help students compose well-organized academic texts (2001). In this vein, Ana Díaz Galán and Mª del Carmen Fumero Pérez have explored the advantages of explicitly teaching textual patterns to improve the organization of student written production (2003).

In this study, the rhetorical conventions were taught by adopting a top-down approach whereby special emphasis was put on teaching rhetorical patterns in order to promote the logical construction of discourse and familiarize students with macrostructures. Students were instructed on the characteristics of good essays, the structure of argumentative essays, as well as on particular writing skills, such as producing effective introductions and solid conclusions and developing coherent, well-structured paragraphs. They were also taught other writing subskills, such as constructing engaging thesis statements, producing clear paragraph leaders or concluding sentences and making their arguments persuasive by including evidence-supported points. Undergraduates were also exposed to good models of academic

writing so that they could identify and imitate exemplary rhetorical patterns when writing their essays. Rhetorical instruction also helped students implement corrections more effectively, since they acquired a better understanding of the form and function of each section of the essay, which provided them with a clear frame to formulate an improved version of their essays.

3. The Study

This is a longitudinal experimental study conducted over one semester with a group of 126 upper-intermediate tertiary-level EFL learners within an authentic educational setting. The study was motivated by a number of factors. The first is that most of these undergraduates had been studying English throughout their primary and secondary schooling, but did not seem to have acquired the necessary skills to produce coherent written discourse in the target language. Another factor is that they had not received explicit training to develop their writing skills in academic English and were not ready to write across the university. Therefore, this research sought to determine whether explicit rhetorical instruction could help them produce higher quality essays and whether the use of focused feedback could serve to further enhance the positive effects of rhetorical instruction.

3.1. Research Questions

The following five research questions guided this study:

RQ1 Does repeated feedback have a positive impact on students' writing skills?

RQ2 Does explicit rhetorical instruction contribute to improving students' writing skills?

RQ3 Does the combination of both factors have a greater impact on students' writing performance than either of the two variables used singly?

RQ4 Does students' writing benefit from repeated feedback and multiple rewriting?

RQ5 Does the combination of feedback and explicit instruction have an impact on the quality of students' written production? And if so, what microskills are better acquired?

3.2. Method

In order to investigate the effects of explicit instruction and feedback on students' writing performance over the course of a semester, students were assigned to four groups on the basis of class attendance and assignment submission (see section 3.3). The first outcome of the longitudinal study is the student's score in each writing assignment. To achieve our objective, a linear mixed-effects model was fitted to estimate and compare

mean student scores between groups. Explicit instruction and teacher feedback were considered as fixed factors while subjects (participating students) were included as random variables. A paired Student t-test was also used to assess the significance of the differences between means of the same group at different times over the course of the study in order to evaluate students' progress in writing different parts of the essay. A significance level of 0.05 was used to reject or accept the null hypothesis—i.e., $p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

3.3. Participants

Participants were a group of second-year undergraduates (n = 126) enrolled in a compulsory, six-ECTS-credit English course on an English Studies degree program. They were divided into four groups based on class attendance and written assignment submission. A record of student class attendance and assignment submission was kept and a threshold percentage of 65% was applied to assign students to each of the groups. The first group, Yes/Yes (n = 83), was composed of those students having attended at least 65% of the classes and submitted at least 65% of the written assignments. This group received a combined treatment of feedback and explicit rhetorical instruction. The second group, Yes/No (n = 5), comprising those who attended over 65% of classes but submitted less than 65% of the assignments, only received explicit instruction. The third group, No/Yes (n = 15), had an attendance below 65% but had handed in at least 65% of the written tasks, and they only received feedback. Finally, the fourth group, No/No (n = 23), composed of those students who had neither attended classes nor submitted written assignments, received no treatment and were, therefore, considered as the control group. In accordance with research ethics, all participants were informed about the research's aims and signed an informed consent form.

3.4. Teaching and Research Procedure

Over the course of a fifteen-week semester (60 contact hours), students from groups Yes/Yes and Yes/No were given explicit instruction on the conventions of academic discourse in order to develop their rhetorical competence. A process approach was adopted to provide scaffolding steps for students to successfully acquire writing skills prior to starting writing their essays. Special emphasis was placed on the prewriting stage, during which students acquired ideas about the topic of each essay and learnt to plan before writing. During this stage, students practiced crucial writing microskills ranging from paraphrasing, rewriting for clarity and coherence, summarizing and organizing information, to adding information to a text, writing clear paragraph leaders and presenting supporting points for claims made. Prewriting activities served to make students reflect on how rhetorical

patterns, compositional techniques, discourse markers and academic vocabulary can be used to achieve a particular purpose or effect. Students from groups No/No and No/Yes did not receive explicit rhetorical instruction.

After receiving explicit rhetorical instruction and scaffolding practice, students from the Yes/Yes and Yes/No groups had to complete three consecutive writing assignments: (1) the introduction of an academic essay on "The impact of social networks on students' academic performance"; 2) an introduction and two body paragraphs on the topic of "Gender inequalities: improving or deteriorating"; and 3) a complete essay on the topic of "Damage to the environment is an inevitable consequence of worldwide improvements in the standard of living". After each of these assignments, students received written feedback that responded to content and structure, after which they were required to resubmit their essays through Moodle. Finally, students from all four groups had to write a complete essay on "The impact of education on gender stereotypes" as a part of the final exam.

While only groups Yes/Yes and No/Yes submitted all the essays and took the exam, groups No/No and Yes/No only wrote the exam essay. Therefore, only the data obtained from the groups that submitted the three essays—and took the exam—were analyzed in the longitudinal study to measure their progress in new pieces of writing after receiving repeated feedback. The data obtained from the students from all four groups' production in the exam essay were used to make comparisons between groups in order to explore the effect of the two variables—explicit instruction and feedback—separately and in combination on students' academic writing. In order to determine this, each group receiving feedback, explicit instruction or a combination of both was compared with each other as well as with the control group, which had received no treatment. The data obtained, in each part of the essay, from the groups submitting all the essays were analyzed to evaluate the effect of repeated feedback and whether extensive feedback helped to maximize the effects of focused rhetorical instruction.

3.5. Scoring Procedures

In order to measure students' progress over a semester, their essays were rated on a scale of 1 to 10 on four different occasions, except for Groups No/No and Yes/No, who only wrote the exam essay and were rated on one occasion: (1) only the introduction of the first essay was rated; (2) only the introduction and body paragraphs of the second essay were rated; (3) the introduction, body and conclusion of the third essay were rated; and (4) the introduction, body and conclusion of the exam essay were rated. Each section of the essay received an overall rating on a scale from 1 to 10 that was obtained by adding together five subratings based on five different criteria for each of the sections (table 1). Each of the five criteria was scored on a scale from 0 to 2.

TABLE 1. Criteria upon which each section of the essay was rated

Introduction	Body paragraphs	Conclusion
General information: GI	Clear paragraph leader: CPL	Summary of main point: SMP
General to specific pattern: GSP	Unity: U	Specific to general pattern: SGP
Sentences ordered in a logical order: LO	Development: D	Major deduction: MD
Thesis statement: TS	Logical pattern of arrangement: LA	Final statement: FS
Appropriate length: AL	Coherence: C	Appropriate length: AL

In order to evaluate the quality of students' essays, the five criteria upon which each section of the essay was rated were considered in detail. For each criterion, teachers decided whether students had successfully acquired that particular microskill or not, marking "Yes" if they considered that it had been acquired and "No" when they considered that it had not been fully consolidated or internalized (see section 4.4). This analysis seeks to provide an insight into the type of writing microskills that students had acquired during the period of instruction, as well as to determine the extent to which each treatment had contributed to students' consolidation of them. The results provided the percentages of students that had successfully acquired the studied microskills. The data obtained from groups Yes/Yes and No/Yes—both of which had submitted all the essays and received teacher feedback—were used in the longitudinal study, and the data obtained from all groups in the exam essay were used to make comparisons across groups in order to evaluate the impact of each treatment, or no treatment at all, on microskills acquisition.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the longitudinal study of student progress, the grades obtained by the groups who submitted all the essays (Groups Yes/Yes and No/Yes) were analyzed. These data allowed us to compare the effect of feedback or the combination of feedback and explicit instruction on student improvement. The analysis of the four groups' overall performance in the final exam essay provided important data on the effect of each treatment and the combination of both on students' performance and the quality of their essays.

4.1. Effect of Combining Explicit Instruction and Feedback

The results showed that the combination of both treatments had a positive impact on student progress and performance in terms of academic writing. Table 2 shows that the

mean scores obtained by group Yes/Yes in all the parts of the essays increased steadily. The paired t-tests revealed a statistically significant improvement on the basis of the marking criteria from the first introduction to the second, the second to the third and the third to the exam essay of 1.24 marks (p = 0.0003), 1.93 (p = 0.00000009) and 2.23 (p = 0.0000000004), respectively, in a 10-point grading system. A similar progression pattern in the mean scores of this group was observed from the body paragraphs of the second essay to those of the third (1.06, p = 0.004) and the exam essay (1.15, p = 0.0015), where the difference was also found to be highly significant (p < 0.05). In the conclusion, there is a slight improvement of 0.4 (p = 0.2668), which was not statistically significant.

TABLE 2. Mean scores obtained by group Yes/Yes in the different parts of the essays

	Introduction	Body	Conclusion
First essay	4.025	-	-
Second essay	5.268	5.292	-
Third essay	5.956	6.359	5.089
Final exam essay	6.259	6.445	5.496

The most significant improvement was found in the introduction, where the Yes/Yes group increased their mean score by 2.23 in a 10-point grading system over the course of a semester. This may be due to the following two factors: they obtained lower grades in the introduction of the first essay than in the first body paragraphs or conclusion they wrote; and they had more opportunities to improve their writing of the introduction than for the other parts of the essay, which proves the efficacy of repeated feedback and practice. The results obtained in the body paragraphs, where mean scores rose by 1.15 over the semester, also corroborate this hypothesis. The slight improvement of 0.4 obtained by this group with respect to conclusion writing reveals that students did not benefit from feedback and multiple rewriting as much as in the other parts of the essay. Part of the reason for this might be that they only practiced conclusion writing once, and similarly used teacher's feedback to rewrite this part of the essay only once before the exam. That is, without opportunities for writing and rewriting, students are unable to transfer the knowledge they have acquired during explicit instruction. This also emphasizes the impact of postwriting feedback reinforcement on student writing. Another reason is that they obtained higher scores in the first conclusion than in the first introduction, which may explain the small improvement observed in this part of the essay. Conclusion writing may have benefitted from students having a better understanding of the conventions of academic discourse in general after the explicit instruction combined with feedback that they had received for the previous writing assignments earlier in the academic semester.

4.2. Effect of Explicit Instruction

The results in table 3 demonstrate that writing and handing in the essays and, therefore, receiving written corrective feedback had a noticeable impact on student written performance. The results obtained by group No/Yes—students who did not receive explicit instruction but did receive feedback—indicate that the feedback given by the teacher contributed to improving their writing skills. For the introduction, mean scores increased by 0.83 ($p = 0.29$) from the first essay to the exam; for the body of the essay, by 1.03 ($p = 0.24$) from the second essay to the exam; and in the conclusion, by 0.4 ($p = 0.47$) from the third essay to the exam. However, receiving feedback alone clearly did not prove to be as effective as the combination of feedback with explicit instruction, since the paired t-tests, with p-values greater than 0.05, did not demonstrate statistically significant improvement for group No/Yes. This means that, although this group experienced an improvement, the differences between the means obtained by this group at different times are not sufficient to reject the null hypothesis.

TABLE 3. Mean scores obtained by Group No/Yes in the different parts of the essays

	Introduction	Body	Conclusion
First essay	3.464	-	-
Second essay	3.566	3.6	-
Third essay	3.589	3.857	3.232
Final exam essay	4.299	4.633	3.666

In order to evaluate the effect of explicit instruction on students' writing performance, the means obtained by group No/Yes (table 3) and those obtained by group Yes/Yes (table 2) were compared and analyzed. As can be seen, the progress made by group No/Yes was not as pronounced and they underperformed compared to group Yes/Yes. Moreover, the former group of students, who did not attend class regularly, obtained lower means for all the parts of the essay, which indicates that even though they made some improvement, the group mean remained significantly lower than the scores of the Yes/Yes group, which received explicit instruction as well as feedback. While group Yes/Yes saw a statistically significant increase from 4.02 to 6.25 for the introduction, group No/Yes improved only from 3.46 to 4.29. Similar trends were observed for the two groups in the other parts of the essay. No/Yes group means increased from 3.6 to 4.63 in the body paragraphs, and from 3.23 to 3.66 in the conclusion, whereas the Yes/Yes group progressed from 5.29 to 6.44 in the body paragraphs and from 5.08 to 5.49 in the conclusion. The results clearly indicate that receiving explicit instruction helps students produce better academic essays and that students who received instruction may benefit even more from the teacher's feedback.

Moreover, the linear mixed-effects model established that certain differences between these groups were statistically significant. More specifically, only the introduction of the first essay showed nonstatistically significant differences between the two groups ($p = 0.336$). This was probably due to the fact that students had not yet received any feedback at this stage, and the slight difference may be attributable simply to the effect of explicit instruction on group Yes/Yes. As group Yes/Yes students started to implement their feedback and assimilate explicit rhetorical instruction, statistically significant differences between the two groups were identified in the introduction ($p = 0.011$) and body ($p = 0.014$) of the second essay as well as in the introduction ($p = 0.007$), body ($p = 0.0002$) and conclusion ($p = 0.0036$) of the third essay.

4.3. Analysis of the Four Groups' Overall Performance in the Final Exam Essay

4.3.1. Effect of Explicit Instruction (Group Yes/Yes versus No/Yes)
The results obtained by both groups in the final exam essay (table 4) reveal that group Yes/Yes outperformed group No/Yes by 1.96 in the introduction ($p = 0.0023$), 1.81 in the body ($p = 0.0053$), 1.83 in the conclusion ($p = 0.0036$) and 1.86 in the overall mean score of the essay ($p = 0.00077$). These differences suggest that explicit rhetorical instruction had a positive impact on students' writing performance and that the combination of feedback and explicit instruction contributed more to improving the quality of their essays than receiving feedback alone.

TABLE 4. Means obtained by Groups Yes/Yes and No/Yes
in the different parts of the final exam essay

Groups	Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Mean score
Yes/Yes	6.259	6.445	5.496	6.067
No/Yes	4.299	4.633	3.666	4.2

4.3.2. Effect of Feedback (Group Yes/Yes versus Yes/No)
In order to analyze the impact of feedback, the mean scores obtained by group Yes/Yes were compared to those obtained by group Yes/No. Both groups attended class regularly and received explicit instruction, but only the former received feedback. Since the latter did not submit any of the essays assigned during the course, only the results of the exam were compared. As can be observed in table 5, group Yes/No—who did not receive any feedback— underperformed compared to group Yes/Yes by 2.46 in the introduction ($p = 0.019$), 1.64 in the body ($p = 0.119$), 2.89 in the conclusion ($p = 0.005$) and 2.33 in the overall mean score of the final exam essay ($p = 0.009$). These results indicate that receiving feedback greatly contributed to improving students'

writing competence, since the group who did not receive feedback got a far lower mean score than the group that did. These differences were statistically significant as all P values, except for those of the body (p = 0.119), were < 0.05.

TABLE 5. Means obtained by Groups Yes/ Yes and Yes/No
in the different parts of the final exam essay

Groups	Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Mean score
Yes/Yes	6.259	6.445	5.496	6.067
Yes/No	3.799	4.800	2.6	3.733

4.3.3. Effect of Feedback versus Explicit Rhetorical Instruction (Group Yes/No versus No/Yes)

In order to analyze the effect that each variable had by itself, group Yes/No was compared to group No/Yes (table 6). The results obtained indicate that there are no significant differences between the mean scores obtained by each group in the final exam essay. Group No/Yes— who received feedback but no instruction—slightly outperformed group Yes/No—who received explicit instruction but no feedback—by 0.5 in the introduction (p = 0.667), 1.06 in the conclusion (p = 0.349) and 0.46 in the overall mean score of the final exam essay (p = 0.640). It was also found that group Yes/No outperformed No/Yes by 0.16 in the body (p = 0.887). However, none of these differences achieved statistical significance. We can thus conclude that each variable acting separately had a similar impact on students' writing performance.

TABLE 6. Means obtained by Groups Yes/ No and No/Yes
in the different parts of the exam essay

Groups	Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Mean score
Yes/No	3.799	4.800	2.6	3.733
No/Yes	4.299	4.633	3.666	4.2

4.3.4. Effect of Combining Feedback and Explicit Instruction

In order to assess the combined effect of the two variables on students' academic essay writing, we first compared the mean scores of group Yes/Yes with those obtained by group No/No (table 7) and then compared group Yes/Yes to the rest of the groups (tables 8 and 9). As can be observed in table 7, group Yes/Yes consistently outperformed group No/No in all the parts of the essay, thus confirming the efficacy of the combination of both parameters. The

analysis reveals that receiving explicit rhetorical instruction prior to writing and postwriting feedback resulted in statistically significant improvement. Specifically, group Yes/Yes exceeded group No/No by 3.47 in the mean score for the introduction (p = 0.0000000014), 2.72 in the body (p = 0.0000013), 2.69 in the conclusion (p = 0.00000084) and 2.96 in the overall mean score of the final exam essay (p = 0.0000000016).

TABLE 7. Means obtained by Groups Yes/Yes and No/No
in the different parts of the final exam essay

Groups	Introduction	Body	Conclusion	Mean score
Yes/Yes	6.259	6.445	5.496	6.067
No/No	2.782	3.717	2.804	3.101

TABLE 8. Mean scores obtained by all the groups in the final exam essay

Groups	Number of students	Means (final exam essay)
Yes/Yes	83	6.067
No/Yes	15	4.2
Yes/No	5	3.733
No/No	23	3.101

TABLE 9. Mean scores obtained by Group Yes/Yes and the rest of the groups
combined in the final exam essay

Groups	Number of students	Means (final exam essay)
Yes/Yes	83	6.067
Rest of the groups combined	43	3.678

A comparison of the four groups (figure 1) showed significant differences in student performance in all the parts of the essay as well as in the overall mean scores obtained in the exam. Group Yes/Yes considerably exceeded the marks of the other groups, thus confirming the greater predictive impact of the combination of the two variables on students' written performance than either of the two variables individually. Groups No/Yes and Yes/No obtained similar results, suggesting that each variable independently produced comparable improvements in students' academic essays. As can be observed in figure 1, group No/No strongly underperformed the other groups in all the parts of the essay except for the conclusion, where this group outperformed group Yes/No. On comparing the mean scores obtained in the final exam essay across the four groups

(table 7), it can be noticed that the combination of both factors produced better results than receiving feedback or explicit instruction singly. More specifically, group Yes/Yes outperformed group No/No by 2.96, group No/Yes by 1.86 and group Yes/No by 2.33. While the data obtained suggest that the group that only received feedback (No/Yes) slightly outperformed the group that only received explicit instruction (Yes/No), by 0.46, it seems obvious that the combined effect of both treatments had a greater impact on student performance. Furthermore, when we compared group Yes/Yes to the rest of the groups (table 8), a striking difference of 2.38 was found, which corroborates the benefits of combining explicit instruction and feedback to develop students' writing skills.

FIGURE 1. Overall performance by group in the different parts of the final exam essay
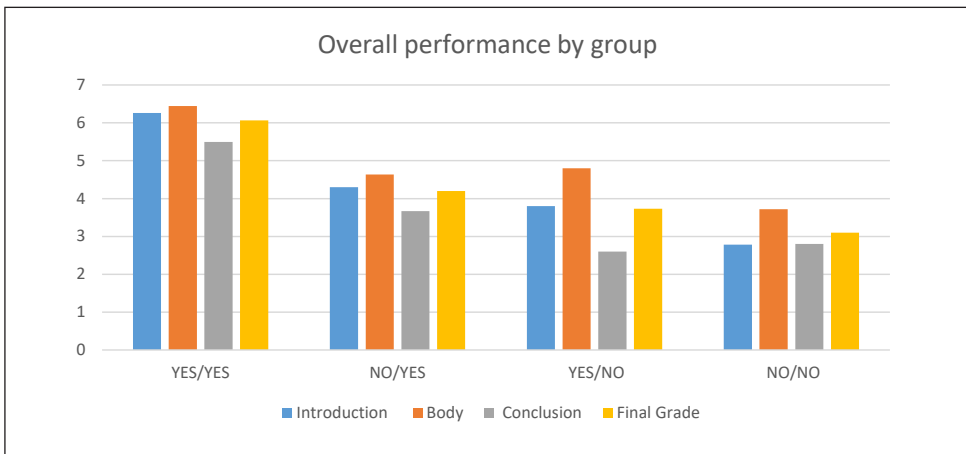
4.4. Student Development of Rhetorical Competence

In order to assess the impact of each treatment on the quality of students' essays, we analyzed five writing microskills for each part of the essay (section 3.3) and obtained the percentage of students from each group that had acquired each target microskill. Thus, first we analyzed the evolution of the five aforementioned criteria for each part of the essay in group Yes/Yes, and then we compared performance across the four groups in the final exam essay based on the same five specific criteria for each part of the essay.

4.4.1. Evolution of criteria GI, GSP, LO, TS and AL in the Introduction (Group Yes/Yes)

The results indicated that there was a steady increase in all studied criteria from the first to the third essay over the period of instruction (figure 2). More specifically, the percentage of students who acquired criterion GSP (general-to-specific pattern) increased by 40.9%, GI (general information) by 26%, TS (thesis statement) by 22.8%, LO (logical order) by 22.8% and AL (appropriate length)

by 8.4%. Surprisingly, a high percentage of students acquired complex writing microskills, which are difficult to attain, such as GSP (78.3%), GI (89.1%) and TS (73.4%) after receiving explicit rhetorical instruction and feedback, which proves the efficacy of the combination. There was also a significant increase in all microskills from the first and second essays to the final exam essay. Although the majority of students seemed to have acquired the selected microskills, there was a small decrease of 4.8% in GI and GSP and 10.8% in LO in the exam with respect to the third essay. This decline in the final exam may be due to anxiety or to the fact that students did not have as much time or access to as many resources as they did when writing the previous essays.

FIGURE 2. Evolution of criteria GI, GSP, LO, TS and AL in the introduction according to the percentage of students who acquired them (Group Yes/Yes)
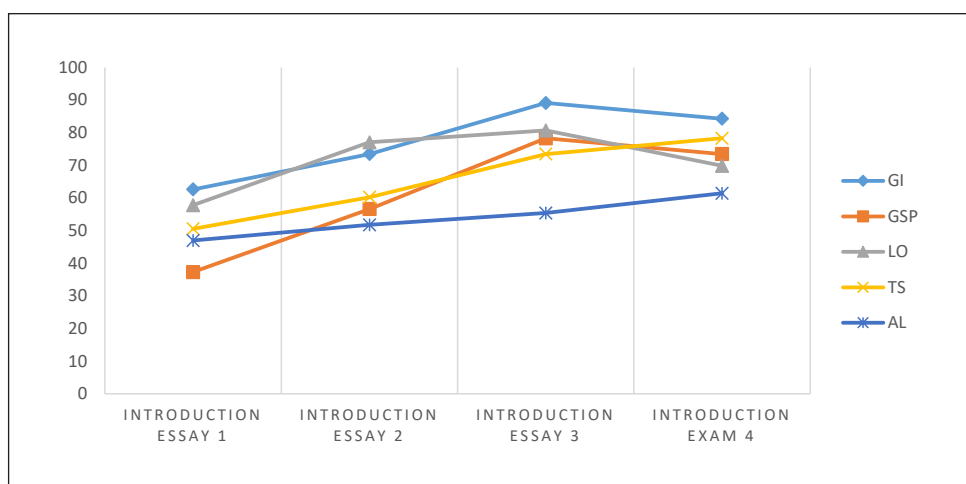

4.4.2. Evolution of Criteria CPL, U, D, LA and C in the Body (Group Yes/Yes)

As can be observed in figure 3, the percentage of students using all the microskills analyzed in the body of the essay increased from the second to the third essay. More specifically, criterion CPL (clear paragraph leader) improved by 8.1%, U (unity) by 14.4%, D (development) by 8.1%, LA (logical pattern of arrangement) by 27% and C (coherence) by 19.2%. Two microskills, U and CPL, continued to improve in the exam essay, resulting in an overall improvement of 19.2% and 14.4%, respectively. The other three criteria decreased slightly in the final exam essay with respect to the third essay but improved with respect to the second one. More specifically, the number of students who acquired microskills D and C increased by 4.8%, and those having internalized criterion LA increased by a striking 26.7%.

FIGURE 3. Evolution of criteria CPL, U, D, LA and C in the body
according to the percentage of students who acquired them (GroupYes/Yes)
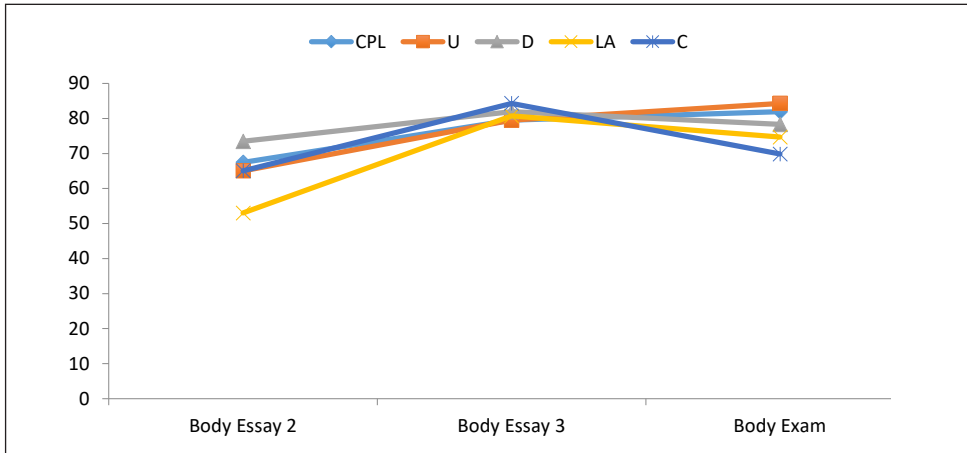
4.4.3. Evolution of Criteria SMP, SGP, MD, FS and AL in the Conclusion (Group Yes/Yes)

The results shown in figure 4 suggest that a high percentage of students seem to have consolidated parameters SMP (65.06%), MD (79.5%) and FS (78.3%) in the conclusion of the third essay, the first conclusion the students had written during the semester, presumably due to explicit rhetorical instruction. However, no significant improvement from the third to the exam essay is seen in some microskills. This could be attributable to exam anxiety or other factors, such as limited time and resources.

FIGURE 4. Evolution of criteria SMP, SGP, MD, FS and AL in the conclusion
according to the percentage of students who acquired them (group Yes/Yes)
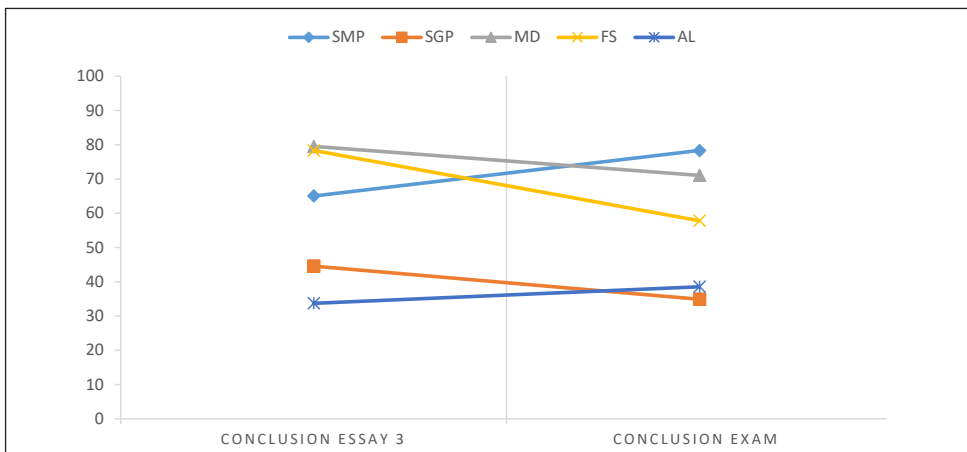
However, in the exam scenario, two microskills, SMP and AL, improved by 13.2% and 4%, respectively, compared to the third essay. Two other microskills, SGP and MD, decreased slightly. However, 71% of students internalized microskill MD in the final exam essay, even if this percentage was slightly inferior to that of the third essay. Finally, microskill FS fell by 20.4%, suggesting that it had not been fully consolidated.

4.4.4. Comparison of Criteria across the Four Groups in the Final Exam Essay

Data from the exam clearly show that the combination of explicit instruction and formative feedback (Yes/Yes) is more effective than either of the two variables alone (Yes/No and No/Yes) (figure 5). Except for parameter GI, a higher percentage of students in group Yes/Yes successfully acquired the writing microskills under study than in the other groups, thus corroborating the idea that combining both variables has a greater impact on improving the quality of students' essays. The percentage of group Yes/Yes students who satisfactorily internalized the microskills ranges from 61.4% for parameter AL to 88.3% for GI. Receiving only feedback also contributed to improving the quality of students' writing, but to a lesser extent than in group Yes/Yes. More specifically, the percentage of No/Yes students who acquired a specific microskill only exceeds 50% in GI (73.3%) and TS (60%), although most of these percentages are higher than those in groups Yes/No and No/No. Receiving only explicit instruction (group Yes/No) had an inconsequential effect on the acquisition of the studied microskills, since only 20% of the students in this group seem to have acquired GSP, LO, TS and AL. However, 100% of these students consolidated parameter GI. The percentage of group No/No students who acquired the microskills was remarkably lower for GI (60.8%), GSP (8.6%) and AL (17.3%), but a higher percentage of students acquired TS (30.4%) than those in group Yes/No (20%) and the number of students who internalized LO (60.4%) exceeded the percentages in groups Yes/No (20%) and No/Yes (40%).

FIGURE 5. Comparison of criteria SMP, SPG, MD, FS and AL across groups
in the introduction according to the percentage of students who acquired them (final exam essay)
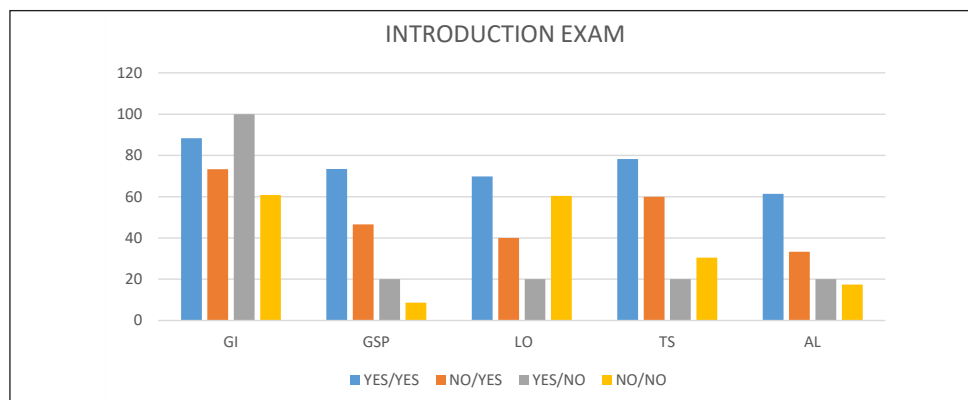
As can be seen in figure 6, a higher percentage of group Yes/Yes students developed the five microskills studied in the body than in the other groups. In this group, percentages oscillate from 69.8% for C to 84.3% for U, which clearly indicates that combining feedback and explicit instruction is more effective in helping students acquire certain writing microskills. More than 50% of group No/Yes students—those who only received feedback—consolidated the skills studied, 60% for CPL and U and 80% for D. This also confirms the hypothesis that feedback alone contributes to the quality of student writing, though to a lesser extent than combining feedback with explicit instruction (group Yes/Yes). The percentage of group Yes/No students having acquired the skills is 40% for parameters U, D and LA and 60% for CPL and C. Except for C, the effect of feedback seems to be more effective than that of explicit instruction. Moreover, group No/No consistently underperformed compared to the other groups, and the percentage of students in this group who demonstrated that they possessed the writing skills under study here is below 40% for four out of the five parameters.

FIGURE 6. Comparison of parameters CPL, U, D, LA and C in the body according to the percentage of students who acquired them (final exam essay)
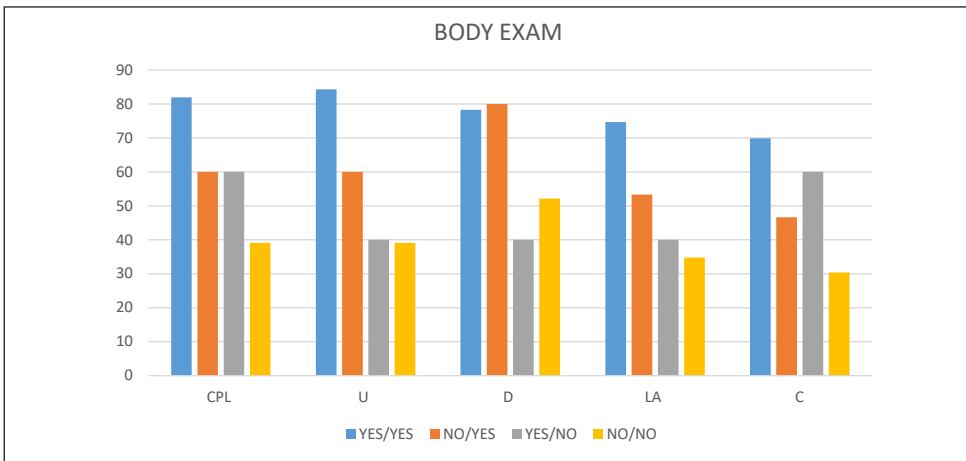
The results indicate that, even though group Yes/Yes students only had the opportunity to practice conclusion writing once and only received feedback once prior to the exam, the combination of feedback and explicit instruction was highly effective in their acquisition of three out of the five microskills studied in the conclusion (figure 7). The percentage of Yes/Yes students who acquired SMP (78.3%), MD (71%) and FS (57.8%) is outstanding, while percentages for SGP (34.9%) and AL (38.5%) are lower than might be expected. Results for group No/Yes—those who only received feedback—showed that this intervention was also relatively effective for the acquisition of three microskills, SMP (53.3%), MD (46.6%) and FS 40%, though to a lesser extent than the combination of feedback with explicit

instruction. Explicit instruction was only shown to be effective for SMP, where the percentage of group Yes/No having acquired this skill reached 80%. The percentage of students who had attained the five microskills was highest among group Yes/Yes, followed by group No/Yes, and lowest among groups Yes/No and No/No, which proves that receiving only explicit instruction and no feedback seems to be almost as ineffective for improving essay writing quality as receiving neither instruction nor feedback.

FIGURE 7. Comparison of criteria (microskills) SMP, SGP, MD, FS and AL in the conclusion according to the percentage of students who acquired them (final exam essay)
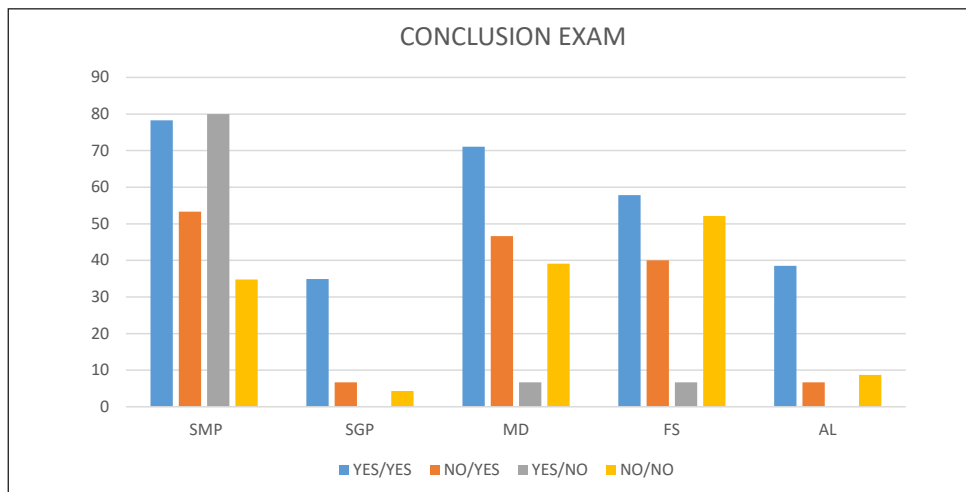
The data obtained show a progressive improvement in most parameters over time for group Yes/Yes. Improvement increased with practice and repeated feedback, so that a higher percentage of students consolidated the parameters studied in the introduction than those evaluated in the body and the conclusion. This suggests that the more feedback they receive, the greater the probability that students attain the microskills under study. In general terms, the combined effect of feedback and explicit instruction proved to be more effective for acquiring the studied microskills than each of the variables alone. Group No/No underperformed groups Yes/No and No/Yes in the introduction and the body. However, in the conclusion the percentages of students having acquired those microskills are similar in groups Yes/No and No/No.

5. CONCLUSION

This research focused on feedback as a holistic, ongoing process that needs to be integrated into teaching-learning practices to prove fully effective. Our results demonstrate that providing sucessful feedback or explicit instruction separately has a positive effect on improving students' writing competence, but they also indicate that when feedback is

coupled with rhetorical instruction it affords opportunities for greater improvement. The paired t-tests reveal that whereas the progress obtained by students receiving each individual treatment was not statistically significant, the gains observed in the group that received the combined treatment were strongly significant and consistent. The statistical data also corroborate the beneficial effects of ongoing feedback and multiple rewriting in new pieces of writing (feedforward). The greatest improvement was observed in the introduction, where students had more extensive practice opportunities, and to a lesser extent, in the body. However, students scored lower in the conclusion due to limited practice opportunities. This means that the impact of the combination of both factors increases with repeated feedback opportunities, since this allows students to transfer the knowledge acquired during explicit instruction to future essays.

The combined effect of feedback and explicit instruction also proved to be effective for developing students' writing microskills and to have contributed to improving both students' scores and the quality of their writing. Moreover, the combined treatment helped increase the percentage of students who successfully acquired the five target microskills in each part of their essays. It can be concluded that, even though receiving feedback or explicit instruction independently helped to improve both students' scores and rhetorical competence in new pieces of academic writing, only the combined treatment of both variables resulted in statistically significant improvement. Nevertheless, more research is needed to assess which microskills can be better acquired in order to improve prewriting instruction and postwriting feedback reinforcement. This study may be useful for both teachers and researchers, as it provides a theoretical framework and a longitudinal study that focus on controversial questions that can be addressed by adopting a process approach to the teaching of writing that integrates both prewriting and postwriting teacher intervention.

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