Can Oral Conferencing Facilitate EFL Postgraduate Student Writing?

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Abstract

The importance of teacher feedback on compositions has been recognized by those working in the field of L2 student writing. This paper aims to explore how one-on-one oral conferencing can help postgraduate students write English papers in an academic community in Taiwan. Data of this study were mainly from questionnaires and interviews, examining the students' problems and the ways they adopted to cope with the problems, as well as the extent to which oral conferencing could assist them in completing their academic papers in English. Consequently, the results reveal that, through the processes of oral conferencing, these students could become more critically aware of language use in terms of *syntax* and *lexis*, as well as *organizational structure* of academic papers. Based on the research findings, some recommendations on EFL oral conferencing are discussed. It is hoped that this study will help English language teachers provide an efficient EFL writing pedagogy.

Keywords

Oral conferencing, teacher feedback, writing pedagogy, student writing

1. Introduction

Teacher feedback on compositions is widely seen in education as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating student learning in ESL/EFL contexts, and this significance has also been recognized by those working in the field of L2 student writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Kroll, 1990). Nevertheless, the types of feedback investigated by previous researchers were mostly teacher 'written' responses (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985). This paper examines how teacher 'oral' feedback (i.e. *oral conferencing*) can facilitate a group of Taiwanese MBA students through the processes of their academic English writing. The key issues this paper seeks to address include the problems the individual students encountered during the process of their EFL writing, the ways they adopted to help them cope with the problems, and the extent to which oral conferencing assisted the individuals in learning how to write academic papers in English. Having triangulated the research data collected from questionnaires and interviews, this paper discusses the cases of eight Taiwanese MBA students who recognized that their awareness of language use and structures of academic written work has been significantly raised through the processes of one-on-one oral conferencing. The current study is significant and relevant to second-language academic literacy education because it demonstrates a *dynamic* and *ongoing* process of L2 student writing which can generate new insights in the field of English language teaching (ELT), especially EFL writing instruction.

2. Research into L2 Student Writing

Since 1970s, process-oriented approaches have been significantly influential in the field of L2 student writing instruction (see Krapels, 1990; Leki, 2003, for an overview of L2 writing process research. Zamel and Raimes are deemed to be the most prominent advocates of the 'process-oriented' approach in the field of ESL.

Zamel in her initial work (1976) argues that organization, style and rhetoric are the crucial aspects of skill in writing; nevertheless, she later observes some limitations of 'text analysis' alone because "such analysis does not take into account the writer and the extent to which the writing event interacts with the writer's intention, involvement, or previous literacy experiences" (1987, p.709).

For Raimes (1985), writing is seen as a 'creative' set of behaviors in which the writer is the center of attention engaged in the discovery of meaning. In her later research focusing on the writer and the writer's processes, on academic content, and on the reader's expectation, Raimes (1991) suggests that "when we teach writing we have to balance the four elements of form, the writer, content, and the reader" (1991, p.421), and that the recognition of this complexity of composing is an essential basis for principled model building.

Among all the aforementioned issues that are related to process-oriented approach, teacher response, no matter which type of feedback – oral or written form, is one of the most frequently discussed topics in L2 writing instruction. In connection with research on teacher response to ESL/EFL student writing, Zamel (1985) observes that most responses written by the teachers were inconsistent, arbitrary, and often contradictory. Nevertheless, Fathman and Whalley (1990) in their research identify that "general comments giving encouragement and suggesting revisions helped improve the content of composition rewrites" (p.186). In Ferris' study (1995) of measuring ESL students' reactions to teacher feedback in multiple-draft composition classrooms, the results suggest that ESL writing teachers should give both positive comments and constructive criticism. Later, Ferris (1997) points out marginal and end comments written on ESL students' first drafts and revised drafts of papers, assessing whether the changes made in response to the teachers' comments actually improved the papers. Having considered the pragmatic goals for and the linguistic features of the teachers' responses, she identifies that a significant proportion of the comments could lead to substantive student revisions.

More recently, a collection of papers in the book, *Feedback in Second Language Writing*, edited by Hyland and Hyland in 2006, provides a variety of research-based perspectives on the status and practice of feedback in L2 writing, particularly in relation to writing in academic settings (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006, for an overview of key issues in feedback on L2 writing). Among all the discussions, in particular, Goldstein (2006) argues for the importance of understanding the individual teacher and student in different feedback contexts, highlighting the ways in which teachers construct feedback in terms of their perceptions of each student, how individual students interact with this feedback, and the factors that can influence students' using feedback effectively. Also, Weissberg (2006) points out the value of oral teacher feedback in one-on-one encounters with students in writing-center tutorial sessions and teacher-student conferences, examining how the instructor and student cooperate in building conversational scaffolds to develop advanced writing skills. Both Goldstein (2006) and Weissberg (2006) focus on the negotiation of feedback in the relationships between providers and receivers, addressing issues that arise in the social interactions around feedback itself.

Despite the wealth of research literature on L2 student writing, in particular on teachers' comments on compositions, the types of feedback investigated by previous researchers were mostly 'written' forms (see e.g. Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985). As Goldstein (2006, p.186) puts it, "Only a little more is known about the relationship between teacher feedback during conferences and student revision." Given that written commentary on student papers would be, to some extent, unclear, inaccurate, or even unbalanced, it is not always sufficiently structured to help L2 writers to develop their ideas and make progress in their academic English learning (Leki, 1990; Reid, 1993). In this regard, Zamel (1985) suggests that teachers need to hold conferences with students because "dynamic interchange and negotiation is most likely to take place when writers and readers work together face-to-face" (p.97). Accordingly, the current study was designed to examine teacher's 'oral' comments on student written work (i.e. teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing), exploring the ways in which oral conferencing can help Taiwanese MBA students learn how to write academic papers in English.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

This study was undertaken at a research-oriented university in northern Taiwan. The focus was on a group of 20 postgraduate students who undertook English Writing course as a compulsory subject required by the Management College at a university in Taiwan. The levels of English proficiency of this group of MBA students averaged from low to intermediate level. Although they have several years of English learning experiences, most of the students have very limited ability to write academic papers in English.

3.2 Research design

My intention of designing this research is to explore how my oral feedback on students' drafts could help a group of 20 Taiwanese MBA students learn to write academic papers in English more effectively. As a result, I invited the 20 students whom I taught to participate in my research project. And in order to understand the individual students' learning circumstances more thoroughly, 8 students (out of the group of 20) were selected on the basis of the good results they obtained for their EFL writing. These 8 students were highly-motivated and engaged in the processes of their writing. It is my initial hope that the findings of this study could provide an efficient EFL writing pedagogy directly supporting the MBA students in their learning on how to write academic papers in English.

Being the teacher as well as the researcher in this study, I was aware that I might be running the risk of self-fulfilling prophecies in reporting the findings of the study (see Cohen & Manion, 1994; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Silverman, 1993). In my situation, however, finding another person to conduct the interviews for me was not feasible. For an in-depth interview, the interviewer has to know the purpose and background of the research very well before useful follow-up questions can be asked. Given this consideration, I decided to conduct the interviews myself. In my attempt to increase the validity of the findings, several steps were taken (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Silverman, 2000). First, my questionnaire and interview questions were open-ended (see **Appendices A** and **B**; see also Oppenheim, 1992), and I let the students talk about their own learning on how to write academic papers in English, if any, avoiding leading questions. Second, I let the students read the preliminary analyses of the questionnaire and interview data in order to verify my interpretations and translations. Third, the interviews took place after all the grades for the English Writing course were released. Although there was still the possibility of the students saying things to please me, the fact that they would not be taught by me any more would have minimized the possibility (see Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Silverman, 1993).

Overall, the primary objective of doing this research was to identify how oral conferencing can facilitate a particular group of EFL postgraduate student writing, examining the individuals' problems and the ways they adopted to cope with the problems, as well as the extent to which oral conferencing could assist them in completing their academic papers in English. I consider this research as a *qualitative* study, focusing mainly on specific issues of the individual cases (see McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Silverman, 2000; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 1998). This is because "case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied" (Stake, 1998, p.86). Allied to this is the issue of how to generalize such a small number of individual cases. According to Schofield (1993, p.221):

> … for qualitative researchers generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study. This conceptualization makes thick descriptions crucial, since without them one does not have the information necessary for an informed judgement about the issue of fit. (Schofield, 1993, p.221)

In this regard, Cohen and Manion (1994) emphasize that "there is… no clear-cut answer, for the correct sample size depends upon the *purpose* of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny" (p.89; italic added).

3.3 Research questions
The research questions that guided the study were:
(1) What problems did each participant encounter when they wrote in English?
(2) How did the instructor help the individual participants cope with the problems through oral conferencing?
(3) To what extent did one-on-one oral conferencing help the individuals learn to write academic papers in English?

4. Data collection and analysis

Data of the study were from questionnaires with a group of 20 Taiwanese MBA students and in-depth individual interviews with 8 students (out of the group of 20). The questionnaires provided me with a general idea of how the 20 students learned to write in English (see **Appendix A**). The audio-taped interviews were then conducted in Chinese and lasted for about 40 minutes for each student. The main focus of interviewing was on the individual students' problems and the ways they utilized to cope with the problems, as well as the extent to which one-on-one oral conferencing could help them produce a piece of academic work in English (see **Appendix B**).

In reply to the research questions of this study, I subsequently discuss the results derived from the questionnaires and interviews (see Silverman, 1993) in the light of previous research on L2 student writing, especially on teacher response to ESL/EFL student writing (e.g. Goldstein, 2006; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Weissberg, 2006; Zamel, 1985). Overall, it is hoped that the findings of this study can shed light on a *dynamic* and *ongoing* learning process of EFL student writers in an academic institution in Taiwan.

4.1 What problems the students encountered when writing academic papers
In this section, I begin by providing a general idea of the problems/difficulties the group of 20 MBA students encountered when they learned to write academic papers in English (see **Table 1** below).

Table 1: Problems/Difficulties: Participants' written responses

Problems/Difficulties	Number of students (N=20)
I. Language use	
1.1 Linguistic features (e.g. spelling, grammar, etc.)	17
1.2 Summary/Paraphrase of the manuscripts	5
1.3 Argumentation (arguing for/against something)	6
II. Organization/Rhetorical structure	
2.1 Structure of a research paper	8
2.2 Abstract	9
2.3 Thesis statement	10
2.4 In-text citations/Quotes	13
2.5 References/Bibliography	10

Note:
The word "Argumentation" (1.3) here refers to words and phrases that are used to argue for/against something. Thus, it is categorized as the "Language Use" (I).

Table 1 shows that by generating the results and ranking the order, 17 out of the 20 questionnaire respondents regarded language barriers (e.g., mistakes in spelling, grammar, subject-verb agreement, etc.) as the most perplexed in their writing process. Whilst 13 out of the 20 students found that citing other people's work in their own papers was very difficult, 10 out of the 20 participants considered both writing a concise, explicit thesis statement and using correct quotes as a laborious task. Apparently, these are the unique rhetorical structures in academic writing in different disciplinary subjects. Because of the unfamiliarity of genre, how to write an abstract and use direct quotes and references to their writings became a very arduous task.

In order to understand the problems each individual participant encountered when writing their papers more thoroughly, I later conducted in-depth interviews with 8 out of the 20 questionnaire respondents to further describe the problems they had encountered during the processes of their writing. A brief summary of what the 8 participants said in the interview is depicted in the following **Table 2**:

Table 2: Problems/Difficulties: Eight interviewees' voices

Participants	Problems/Difficulties
S1	- difficult to choose an appropriate "title" to fit the content - find some relevant papers - use English to write a paper
S2	- appropriately use English to convey ideas - rarely write in English
S3	- express ideas in English - not good at English grammar
S4	- write papers more fluently and logically - use more appropriate words and phrases in English writing
S5	- rarely use English to write papers - difficult to narrow down the topic for a paper
S6	- unfamiliar with the organizational structure of a paper - correctly use quotations and referencing in a paper
S7	- know insufficient amount of English words and phrases - difficult to convey ideas in English when writing
S8	- have no experience of writing an abstract - difficult to integrate different ideas in an academic written work

(Author's translation from Chinese)

From **Table 2** it is clearly seen that the problems which the eight interviewees encountered were different from one another. Nevertheless, the most common problem these eight participants faced is that they did not know how to use appropriate English words and phrases to convey their ideas (see S2, S3, S4, and S7). This might be because they rarely used English to write papers (see S2 and S5). Here are what S2 and S7 respectively said in the interviews, "Actually I rarely wrote in English, and I found it's very difficult to use appropriate English words to convey my ideas when writing." and "I strongly feel that I know very few English words and phrases. When I wrote my first draft, I did not know how to use the exact words and phrases to write what I really wanted to address." (author's translation from Chinese). In these circumstances, it is worth noting that the rhetorical consciousness is of importance and cannot be ignored. From the teaching point of view, far more attention can be paid to the general learning environment. As Grabe and Kaplan (1996, p.423) say:

> [T]he learning of writing is more likely to succeed in conditions in which extensive support is offered to the learner from prior text, in conditions in which there is *peer involvement* in the preparatory stages for writing, and in conditions in which there is also *support from the teacher*.
> (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p.423; italics added)

4.2 How the instructor helped the students cope with the problems through oral conferencing

Despite the problems the EFL student writers encountered, they seemed to have found some effective ways to help them cope with the obstacles. The results derived from the questionnaires reveal that besides depending on self-reliance to solve the problems by making use of the Internet, reading relevant papers, looking up the unknown words in dictionaries, and reviewing their notes and teacher-made handouts, much of the success and effectiveness of academic paper writing were attributed to consulting with capable peers and, in particular, with the instructor. Here it is noteworthy that, in the English writing class, the instructor gave this group of students some supplementary handouts and sample papers in order to facilitate their L2 writing. These students appeared to recognize the efficacy of the instructor as a significant part in the process of learning to write academic papers in English.

Similar responses were also found in the interview data, whereby all of the 8 participants voiced their opinions on the help provided by the instructor both in class and after class. Take what S4 said in the interview for an example.

Researcher: Do you think the instructor has assisted you in writing your paper?

S4: The first time I discussed with the instructor, I would like to ascertain the focus of my paper because at that time I was not sure whether or not what I wrote was too general. If the instructor agreed with what I wrote, I would then have more confidence in writing the whole paper more coherently and logically.

Researcher: How about the oral conferencing? Do you think it is helpful?

S4: Yes, it is. Discussing my work with the instructor individually could at least help me pick out the mistakes I had made in my earlier drafts and then produce a more focused paper. This is because I would not be able to recognize the mistakes and problems in the drafts by myself. (Author's translation from Chinese)

The aforementioned interview excerpt demonstrates the importance of teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing to consciousness-raising in learning to write papers in English. This in turn supports the work of Weissberg (2006, p.26) who identifies that tutorial conversations "play a role in finding solutions to the writing problems associated with them" (see also Goldstein, 2006; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985).

4.3 How one-on-one oral conferencing helped the individuals learn to write academic papers

From the research data with respect to what the participants wrote in the questionnaires and what they said in the interviews, the results reveal that all of these students not only had a *positive* attitude toward oral conferencing, but also perceived that one-on-one conferencing could benefit them in the process of becoming better writers of English. For example, in reply to one of the questions in the questionnaires: "*To what extent has individual conferencing helped you make progress in your academic writing?*", two students respectively jotted down in English: "A great deal!" and "Pretty much! Thank you!" More specifically, through oral conferencing, the instructor gave the student writers many directions to decide a proper topic. As one of the questionnaire respondents wrote in English, "Before submitting the paper, the instructor guided me to have a direction of my paper. After submitting the draft of paper, she helped me to check for error gave me some useful opinion." Furthermore, the face-to-face discussion helped the students write an outline

and construct the overall structure which had been very chaotic and messy before they came to the instructor.

Another distinct benefit of one-on-one conferencing which was found from the questionnaire responses was that the instructor assisted the participants in pinpointing their exact problems and raising their awareness of unnoticed problems, such as picking out their language problems in terms of *syntactic forms* and *lexical items*, and giving them suggestions on the use of some appropriate expressions (see also Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985). In this instance, one of the questionnaire respondents wrote in English: "Quite useful, picking out most of my mistakes, and providing more information about quotation. Also changing my sentences into more clear one." Similarly, in one interview, S3 pointed out, "I would not take the organizational structure of my paper into close consideration. Yet, after individual conferencing with the instructor, I have become more aware of the structure of an essay. As my English grammar is not good, expressing my ideas in English is one of the biggest problems I have faced when writing in English. What I wrote often appears to be directly translating from Chinese to English (i.e. "Chinese-English" expressions) and the reader would not be able to exactly understand what I wrote." (author's translation from Chinese). From this, it would seem that one-on-one oral conferencing could, to a certain extent, help the students become more critically aware of their L2 writing (see also Clark & Ivanic, 1991).

In addition, the participants also found the teacher-made handouts and sample papers useful and helpful in their writing. As two of the questionnaire respondents respectively wrote in English, "Face to face teaching and useful handouts prepared by instructor. Make sure that my topic is OK, by discussing with my instructor." and "The instructor gave us a clear overview of the organization and structure of academic paper, also gave us some practical methods of writing reference, quotations and in-text citations." As a whole, the research findings in turn demonstrate that this group of EFL postgraduate students did learn from one-on-one oral conferencing, and that their L2 writing—planning, drafting, oral conferencing, revising, re-drafting, and editing—appeared to be a dynamic and ongoing process (see also Ferris, 1995, 1997).

Here, it is also worth pointing out the work of Jin and Cortazzi (1996) who found that Mainland Chinese students 'had strong conceptions that the way to acquire knowledge was to listen to their teachers' (1996, p.210). From the students' points of view, teachers were expected to be moral leaders, teachers to provide knowledge, guidance about methods of learning. Besides this, Jin and Cortazzi identify that, among the Chinese students, 'face' played an important role in academic interaction, as they put it:

> Having regarding to face, they [Chinese students] will not wish to interrupt others and may consequently miss turn-taking opportunities in seminars. Similarly, they will be reluctant to be seen making mistakes, so that they may only say things in seminar groups if they are quite sure of their ground. …they prefer to listen to the teacher, and, if they have understood the point, they see no need to talk about it any further. (Jin and Cortazzi, 1996, p.213)

A similar circumstance is also found in my research data—the interview transcript:

Researcher: In the class, to what extent, could you understand what the instructor said in English?

S7: I could roughly understand, and yet, sometimes I could not really understand. In fact sometimes I could not understand, probably because my listening ability is not very good. I know that you tried to use simple sentences to explain, and yet there have still been some words I could not understand. … But, in the class, I don't dare to raise my hand and ask the teacher: 'Teacher, what does the word mean?' Such a way of asking question is very odd! It seems like all of my classmates know the answer of

what I want to ask. So, I feel that it's okay to just roughly understand it. And this is one of the reasons why I like the individual conferencing… (Author's translation from Chinese)

In this instance, it would seem that the learning style of the MBA student (S7) and the group of Chinese students appear to be quite similar—having been affected by their academic cultural background. In fact, a similar learning style has been found in the work of Kohn (1992) and the work of Schneider and Fujishima (1995). Kohn (1992) focuses on literacy strategies for Chinese learners, pointing out the influence of the traditions and literacy in China on the learners; Schneider and Fujishima (1995) focus on a case study of a graduate student from Taiwan, pointing out the academic problems of this student in the United States. Nevertheless, I would consider such a learning phenomenon is found in each individual case, rather than in a whole group of students. In my view, there are a number of elements which may affect EFL Taiwanese postgraduate students learning. In addition to the level of English language proficiency and academic cultural background, an individual's previous experience, age, personality, interest and motivation may also possibly determine the styles of his/her learning (see also Lightbown and Spada, 2001). And this in turn provides the rationale in the present study for focusing on the group of 20 Taiwanese MBA students in general, and the case of the 8 students in particular.

Overall, it would seem appropriate to conclude that one-on-one conferencing is considered an effective approach to writing instruction, whereby each learner gained a lot of profit by consulting with the instructor individually. As S4 pointed out in the interview, "I feel that individual conferencing is an effective way of teaching, as it could help every learner to cope with his or her problems. The instructor could specifically pick out the individual's problems and s/he would then learn from the mistakes s/he made." (author's translation from Chinese). The findings here support the work of Weissberg (2006) who points out that "tutor feedback delivered in a one-to-one setting through scaffolded dialogue tailored to a particular student writer constitutes an unparalleled opportunity to provide targeted, individualized instruction" (p.261), and the work of Goldstein (2006) who considers oral conferencing as "the unique constellation and interaction of variables—contextual, teacher and student—that must be looked at to truly understand what happens in the commentary and revision process and to understand what may or may not motivate students when they revised in reaction to this commentary" (p.203).

5. Implications and conclusion

Despite the small sample in the present study, which makes generalization of the findings impossible, the findings of the study suggest that teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing plays an important role in helping EFL students become more effective writers, and that individual conferencing is valuable because it allows each student to actively participate and clarify his/her instructor's responses. This in turn demonstrates that the ways in which EFL students learn in class differ from the ways in which they learn in individual conferencing with their instructor, and that their experiences in both of these contexts should connect and support the *process* of drafting, re-drafting, and revising their English papers and the *product* of their academic written work.

In view of that, it is important for EFL teachers to incorporate teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing with other classroom activities in writing instruction, providing scaffolding for their students whenever possible during the process of their writing. As Weissberg (2006) puts it, "Scaffolding in L2 writing tutorials is… a purposeful kind if instructional conversation resulting in a unique form of feedback otherwise unavailable to student writers" (p.261). Given that conducting oral conferencing may consume a considerable amount of time and require good interaction skills (see Hyland, 2003), the present study incorporated Hyland's (2003) and Reid's (1993) suggestions with the findings of the study to develop the following **Table 3,** which demonstrates some recommendations on how oral conferencing can be carefully planned to help EFL students learn to

write academic papers in English.

Table 3: Recommendations on EFL oral conferencing

Stages	EFL Oral Conferencing: A teacher-student one-on-one approach
Teacher's Introduction	- Give lecture on how to write academic papers in English - Analyze sample papers in terms of *structure* and *content*, as well as *key expressions* often utilized in academic written work
Planning	- Select one topic - Think carefully about the central idea of the paper - Write an outline
Data Collection	- Find readings relevant to the selected topic - Select texts closely relevant to the central idea of the paper
Oral Conferencing (1)	- Discuss the outlines - Give some suggestions on how to link the texts each individual student found with his/her own paper
Drafting	- Write the first draft
Oral Conferencing (2)	- Give each student feedback on the first draft of his/her paper in terms of *structure* and *content* - Raising students' awareness of language use in terms of *syntax* and *lexis*
Re-drafting	- Revise the first draft and re-drafting a revised version (the second draft)
Oral Conferencing (3)	- Give each student feedback on the second draft of his/her paper in terms of *structure* and *content*, as well as *quotations* and *referencing* - Remind students to pay close attention to issues of *plagiarism* and the use of language in terms of *summarizing* and *paraphrasing*
Writing Up	- Try to be *critically* aware of the language use in terms of *syntactic forms* and *lexical items* and the organizational structure in terms of *logic*, *unity* and *coherence*

Briefly summarized, teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing can be used as an integral part of the EFL writing classroom (see Belcher & Braine, 1995; Hyland, 2003; Reid, 1993; see also Breen, 2001). L2 writing teachers may assign their students to write multiple drafts of academic papers and have a scheduled 20-minute conference every other week to discuss the draft they are working on (see **Table 3**: the *Stages* column of **Oral Conferencing (1)**, **(2)** and **(3)** for example). Such an approach, which may allow scaffolding to be shaped and maximized in oral conferencing, can provide the teachers with a better understanding of each individual student's learning and writing circumstances, and thus help the individuals learn how to produce a good piece of academic written work more efficiently through different stages of writing and revising their papers. These different stages of EFL writing instruction will support student writers through multiple drafts by providing teacher feedback and suggesting revisions during the process of writing (see also Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Here teacher feedback is important in providing students with the rhetorical choices central to new academic writing skills and as a way of assisting students in negotiating access to new

knowledge and practices. Such a pedagogic approach will help the students become more *critically aware* of language use in terms of *lexical items* and *syntactic forms*, as well as the *organizational structure* of academic written work (see the aforementioned Section 4.3; see also Ferris, 1995, 1997; Leki, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Zamel, 1985). Overall, I hope that this will help English language teachers provide an efficient L2 writing pedagogy which directly supports EFL students in their learning to write academic papers in English.

I was aware that this study presents only a group of Taiwanese MBA students learning how to write in English, as it analyzes one specific group of EFL learners in an academic community in Taiwan. Although the limited data collection might constrain the generalizability of the present study, this does not overshadow the importance of the above findings and implications, which can be viewed as the preliminary step for further research on how *teacher-student one-on-one oral conferencing* can be administered as part of the classroom tasks (Schofield, 1993). I was also aware that the applicability would, to a certain extent, be limited due to the research design recruited only 8 students (out of the group of 20). Nevertheless, Cohen and Manion (1994) state that "there is… no clear-cut answer, for the correct sample size depends upon the *purpose* of the study and the nature of the population under scrutiny" (p.89; italics added).

Future research can probe into how the EFL student writers negotiate meaning in the oral conferences, looking at the students' texts to determine how students dealt with the revisions discussed in the conferences and the role negotiation of meaning played in the success of such revisions (see e.g. Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Despite the results derived from this study reveal that the MBA students affirmed the value of teacher-student one-on-one oral conferences, future research can explore how different groups of EFL learners negotiate meaning in different contexts of oral conferences, which are culturally embedded and socially constructed in different academic communities of practice.

Finally, I would like to conclude this paper by quoting from the work of Goldstein and Conrad (1990) as follows:

> There may be, for example, many student characteristics, such as culture, that potentially affect how students conference or how their teachers respond to them. For that matter, teachers may differ greatly from each other in how they interact with their students in conferences… These factors, among many others, need to be *systematically* studied since writing conferences are not stable entities but rather, *dynamic* events affected by context and participants. (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990, p.459; italics added)

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Appendix

Appendix A: Questionnaire Survey

This questionnaire is designed to help you identify how oral conferencing could facilitate your English writing. This also includes the obstacles you encountered when you wrote in English and the ways your instructor helped you cope with the problems.

1. What problems did you encounter when you wrote in English? Check (√) the <u>ones</u> you agree with.

    _____ Language problems
           (e.g. mistakes in *spelling*, *grammar*, *subject-verb agreement*, etc.)
    _____ Unclear *thesis statement*
    _____ Unclear *argumentation*

_____	Unclear *summary* and/or *paraphrase* of the manuscripts
_____	Unclear *organizational structure* of a research paper
_____	Unclear *abstract* of a research paper
_____	Mistake in use of *in-text citations*
_____	Mistake in use of *quotations* or *referencing*
_____	Others: _____

2. How did you cope with the obstacles?
   _____
   _____

3. Do you think the instructor helped you cope with the problems? In what way?
   _____
   _____

4. To what extent did individual conferencing help you make progress in your English writing?
   _____
   _____

Appendix B: Interview
Sample questions on oral conferencing:
1. Do you have any previous experience of *oral conferencing*? If so, how was your experience?
2. What problems did you encounter when you wrote your paper? Did you notice any problems that you made in your paper drafts? And how did you cope with the problems?
3. Do you think the instructor helped you cope with the problems? In what way?
4. Do you think *one-on-one oral conferencing* was necessary for your English writing? In what way?
5. Overall, what do you think the instructor did to assist you in producing a piece of academic written work in English?

   Note: When interviewing, the researcher also asks the participants to further explain their answers in the questionnaire survey.