

Original scientific paper

KAIZENA: A TOOL FOR INDIVIDUALIZED AUDIO FEEDBACK ON ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract. *Providing effective feedback through audio technology to promote academic writing has yet to be fully explored in higher education institutions today. This paper reports on an investigation of how the final level foundation students have perceived the impact of Kaizena as a digital audio feedback tool in the context of a higher education institution in Oman named the Middle East College (MEC). The Kaizena platform was more specifically evaluated in terms of its effectiveness as to foundation students' provision of personalized audio feedback concerning their academic writing. The paper adopted an interpretive epistemological stance with quantitative and qualitative inquiries to seek EFL students' perceptions. A set of questionnaires was distributed to 60 students at English foundation levels to collect their satisfaction on the tool in question while a focus group of 6 EFL students taking up an academic writing course were interviewed to elicit their deep analytical responses towards the investigated modality of feedback. Overall, the data-driven results revealed positive responses from the participants, assuring that Kaizena is an effective tool to be used to ultimately enhance their academic writing skills. Implications on the usefulness of the Kaizena and its potential applicability and dissemination in a wider context of HEIs worldwide are discussed.*

Key words: *audio feedback, individualized feedback, EFL academic writing, Kaizena, Sultanate of Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

As education has increasingly moved online, teacher-student communication in traditional classrooms has been replaced by new technologies (Dias and Victor 2022; Kohnke et al. 2021, 1). With the increasing number of students, we have yet to replace the way teachers provide feedback. It is argued that feedback comments should be understandable, sufficiently detailed, and usable to improve students' work (Ryan et al. 2019; Hepplestone and Chikwa 2016).

Researchers have noted that providing useful online formative feedback is a critical aspect of improving the writing and learning process and can be used to enhance student's academic performance (Sanosi 2022; Van Lo et al. 2018). However, giving written feedback to students

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in large online classes is probably the most time-consuming task for a writing instructor (Hill, 2019). According to Baker (2014), many students become dissatisfied and fail to acquire proficient academic writing skills as they ignore or misunderstand the formative written feedback. They also lack adequate personalized oral feedback on their academic writing projects. Hence, integrating audio feedback through the Kaizena tool could potentially be useful for giving formative feedback along with increasing engagement.

Kaizena is a web application that allows teachers to send voice comments (audio feedback), text comments, or video/web-based lessons (Pearson 2021). When a student submits her written assignment or project, the teacher highlights a specific sentence or paragraph within the assignment and leaves both audio and written constructive feedback on the student's work.

Middle East College was one of the first private higher education institutions to shift to emergency remote teaching in Oman in the spring of 2020. This huge change in the institution has led to an emphasis on online pedagogical technologies such as Socrative, Padlet, and Kahoot, to provide the best academic support possible to students and have significant impacts on their academic performance (Hill 2019). However, not much research has been done on the online tool known as Kaizena despite its reportedly highly important benefits and widespread use during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study, therefore, focuses on one aspect of unveiling the potential use of oral feedback via Kaizena, and its impact on providing efficient feedback on students' academic writings, as well as facilitating teacher-formative feedback in the writing skills. The paper addresses this gap by exploring the views of student-teachers in the Middle East College, which is the only higher educational institution in the country where the Kaizena app is applied to the best of our knowledge. The study aimed to investigate students' perception of how effective Kaizena app is in providing oral feedback, while exploring its advantages and drawbacks across GFP academic writing courses. The study also aimed to evaluate Kaizena's utility and its implications in dissemination across different sectors in HEIs. The following are the main research questions of the study.

- 1) What is the student's perception on the utility of Kaizena for providing oral feedback?
- 2) How effective is Kaizena in personifying and personalizing feedback on academic writing?
- 3) What are the implications of using such a technological tool and how it can be disseminated to different disciplines in the HEI sector?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. From traditional written to digital audio feedback

In the context of higher education institutions, providing students with formative feedback on draft assignments has become an important academic language support to make some revisions and to promote their understanding of academic writing. Feedback is described as processes, activities, and opportunities that not only satisfy students academically (Kyaruzi et al. 2019), but also extend developmental prospects for teachers (FERENCE et al. 2020). To become highly confident, competent, and independent writers, students need to compare the teacher's comments with their own work and generate internal feedback out of that comparison by using self-regulated writing (Nicol 2021).

Despite the significant impact of the traditional written feedback approach, paradoxical findings in the literature reveal that teachers struggle to keep up with the workload of providing formative written feedback on student assignment (Graham, Hebert, and Harris 2015). What is more is that students also fail to acquire proficient writing skills as they ignore or misunderstand the formative written feedback (Baker 2014; McGrath and Atkinson-Leadbetter 2016). Besides, it has been found that students with lower levels of language proficiency can feel overwhelmed by large amounts of written feedback (Lee 2014). Crook et al. (2012) suggest that written feedback is often incomprehensible, ambiguous, and not personalized enough. Therefore, alternative multimodal forms of feedback delivery have been advocated by many scholars (for example, Anson 2015; Di Biase and Kawaguchi 2014).

A potential alternative for written feedback includes the use of Kaizena as a digital audio feedback. After the student uploads his writing assignment in the Kaizena app, the teacher then records his voice and highlights exactly the sentences or paragraphs he wants to comment on. The teacher can also add written feedback or attach a YouTube link for more details. As the student registers using his college email, an immediate notification will be received in his inbox to check the audio feedback provided.

With regards to the students' perspectives on the use of Kaizena as an audio technology tool in the educational context, many studies have shown that students tend to find audio recorded feedback clear and easier to comprehend than written feedback (Anson 2015). Cavanaugh and Song (2015) investigated the students' views and concluded that they liked the audio feedback as it is comprehensible and personalized. Many students feel that greater quantity of feedback is received, as well as richer and more detailed information are provided when given audio feedback (Anson 2015; Stannard and Mann 2018). Besides, many students felt that audio recorded feedback is more personal, caring and engaging as it increased their social presence and caring of the teacher (Anson 2015; Harper, Green, and Fernandez-Toro, 2018; Stannard and Mann 2018). Research findings suggest that students, in some cases, prefer audio feedback over face-to-face feedback conversations as they can hear the audio multiply (Harper, Green, and Fernandez-Toro 2018).

Results from Ekinsmyth's (2010) study on teachers' opinions of digital audio feedback showed that some instructors were reluctant to use it because they communicated "a general feeling... the written method in providing feedback worked for them in the past and there is no need to change" (p. 76). According to Ekinsmyth, teachers must undergo "a culture shift" and "re-evaluate the purposes, types, possibilities, and value of feedback" (p. 76) to overcome this resistance and fully utilize the audio feedback modality.

Reviewing the literature on audio feedback, Killoran (2013) noted that the complexity of the technology, which some teachers find was intimidating, is one reason audio feedback has not been more frequently used. Despite this impression, audio feedback, according to Killoran "deserves to be used more broadly than it currently has" (p. 47) as a method of delivering feedback on students' writing.

2.2. The importance of audio individualized feedback in academic writing

Individualized formative feedback offers detailed comments that highlight the positive and negative aspects of student work. According to Shute's recommendation (2008), in his extensive review of formative feedback, teachers should use multimedia to its fullest extent when creating such feedback to reduce cognitive overload (p. 179). In a distance learning context, where face-to-face conferencing for individual tasks is practically

impossible, Shute (2008) suggested that multimedia may significantly enhance the feedback process. In fact, the ability to “establish a sense of community with constructive feedback and provide open forthcoming communications as well as recognizing membership and feelings of friendship, cohesion, and satisfaction among learners” is one of the biggest challenges for today’s educational institutions and teachers when designing and implementing online courses (Desai et al. 2008, 333).

One of the main issues with computer-mediated communication in general, according to Casey (2008), is the absence of social cues (p. 50). It minimizes the distance between the distant learner and the instructor, students, and other learners. (p. 328). More specifically, establishing students’ perceptions of social presence can be the aim of using enhanced feedback. Social presence was described as “the degree to which a person is recognized as a real person in a mediated context” (Short et al. 1976, 427). Feedback is more easily understood to be coming from a “real” person when an asynchronous educator is available as a recorded voice. As a result, students’ performance might be negatively affected when there is a lack of social presence as they do not accept the teacher’s comments as real.

Development of social presence was identified by Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007) as one of the major benefits of using audio feedback. “More than 450 students taught in online courses by these instructors received audio feedback”. Almost one-third of these students have indicated a strong preference for this strategy over text-based feedback. Such a preference was noted by the authors as “significant” (p. 18). According to Fitz et al (2020), the course delivery pedagogy, which incorporates feedback modalities, determines the quality of learning rather than the medium. Instructional feedback can be as succinct as a grade or as detailed as a page of paragraphs outlining a student’s strengths and weaknesses. What is more is that using asynchronous specific audio feedback through a variety of apps will not only allow teachers to provide unique, tailored feedback in response to student writing but will also enable students to project themselves socially and emotionally.

2.3. Kaizena application

As technology for sharing audio comments is advancing quickly, our research emphasizes the use of Kaizena voice comments that has proven suitable for asynchronous academic applications (Keane et al. 2018). Created in 2012, Kaizena is a highly practical web-application that can be integrated with Google docs. Its name comes from the Japanese “Kai•zen” reflecting the Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement or good change to make things better. To give high-quality feedback that is timely, personalized, actionable, and continuous, the Kaizena app was developed by Max Brodie and Edward Sun (2015) to provide teachers with an easy and efficient online platform. The Kaizena app is accessible using Chrome browser to install the plugin. Users can access the application (<https://app.kaizena.com/>) with just an email address and password by creating a free account. Groups and conversations are the central interactive features of the program. The following is a screenshot of Kaizena app captured to showcase its utility.

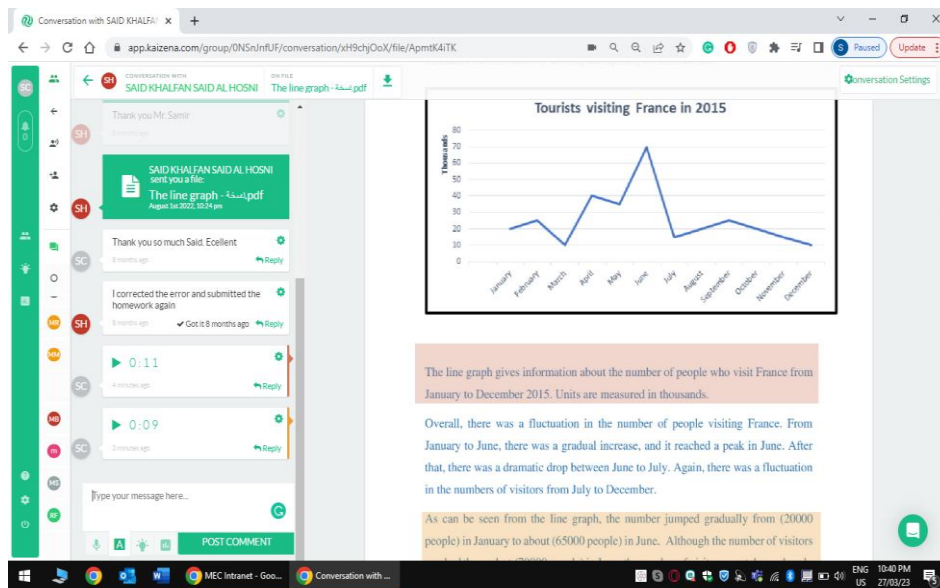


Fig 1. Screenshot of the highlighted paragraphs followed by audio feedback in Kaizena

3. METHODOLOGY

This research paper sought to explore students' perception on the effectiveness of the application Kaizena in giving them accurate and efficient feedback on their academic writing projects. The following are the research questions the paper intended to answer:

- 1) What is the students' perception of the utility of Kaizena for providing oral feedback?
- 2) How effective is Kaizena in personifying and personalizing feedback on academic writing?
- 3) What are the implications of using such a technological tool and how can it be disseminated to different disciplines in the HEI sector?

3.1. The use of quantitative method

The small-scale quantitative study in the designated HEI in Oman at the Center of Foundation Studies used a questionnaire as its primary source to collect data (Mathieson 2019). An online questionnaire was designed and sent to 60 foundation students who were in their final level of the foundation year prior entering specializations. The online questionnaire was used because it is commonly known to be an easy and a quick tool to collect results, especially online nowadays (Cohen et al. 2020). The scalability of the questionnaire is also abundant, as it can reach anywhere covering a larger number of audiences. Thus, the use of questionnaires in this research attained a larger coverage of participants ($n=60$), and facilitated easy analysis and visualization of results, which are discussed in the discussion section. The analytical tool also enhanced the respondent anonymity, and so no consent forms were needed to conceal identity.

Furthermore, the questionnaire comprised of two parts. Part A was to elicit students' perspectives before using Kaizena as a personalized feedback tool provided and Part B which was to elicit students' perspective after using the application Kaizena. The statements in the survey were categorized in agreement scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Following that, further qualitative questions were asked to understand students' views at a deeper level and collect their recommendations to enhance the use of the application (Patton 1990).

3.2. Purposive sampling

This research purposefully selected potential participants that were heavily involved in academic research writing as a pre-requisite to undergo higher education specializations. Those participants deemed as important variables (Cohen et al. 2020), as they were directly involved with the experience of receiving online feedback through Kaizena application. The sample of 60 participants was considered sufficient to obtain abundant and rich data since they were drawn from heterogeneous backgrounds of different nationalities, mainly Omani, though with mixed genders, i.e., females and males. The use of the Kaizena application for providing feedback on those participants academic work facilitated the research to act as a gateway to learn the respondents' experience from receiving such mode of online feedback (Creswell and Creswell 2019).

3.3. Ethical considerations

This research paper sought all the ethical considerations from the HEI's ethical research committee, where the ethical form was submitted to be approved to conduct the research (Lenton et al. 2021). The research objectives and rationale were explained to the respondents and their participation was communicated to them to be voluntarily. Anonymity and discretion were ensured to the participants and that the data will only be used for research purposes. All the participants were informed of their freedom to withdraw during any time of the research course.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire results were tabulated and analyzed into bar graphs revealing EFL students' perspectives before and after receiving feedback on their written academic work from the application used (Kaizena). Overall, there have been positive responses and views regarding the experience of this application. The following diagrams demonstrate accurate results of the respondents as shown below:

Figure 2 illustrates responses from participants who received only written feedback from the Learning Management System (LMS) Moodle to their written academic work. Overall, the majority have agreed to classifying receiving written feedback from Moodle as detailed and specific, enjoyable, and timely, clear, and understandable, yet not very personal. Many of the respondents complained that the feedback was not personified to reflect and construct their own needs and progress. Most of the feedback comments were generalized and thematized to common errors produced by most of the learners.

Congruent with studies done by (Di Biase et al. 2014), results show that the written feedback comments were highly directive and often did not contain explanations, which

may affect the usefulness of the feedback (McGrath & Atkinson-Leadbetter 2016). Most of the written feedback did not contain an explanation and was generalized to fit and/or cover the most common errors made by all the EFL learners. As such, no successful uptake of the comments took place since there was no larger engagement with the personal and encouraging nature of feedback. The lack of interpersonal comments hindered EFL students' comprehension of the feedback. Therefore, there was a need of a sense of personalization in the feedback, such as the extensive use of personal pronouns, hedges, and praises with verbal greeting of the student by name, thanking them for sending the draft and offering positive reinforcement (Cavaleri et al. 2019).

On the other hand, the higher engagement feedback (Kaizena tool) which provided personal and encouraging nature of the feedback created a less distant discourse stance and a stronger interpersonal feel (Berman 2016). Many of the verbal comments were framed in a developmental context, such as the use of hedging and offering encouragement which helped positioning the student as an apprentice, while constructing the advisor as a colleague providing feedback in a more formative nature.

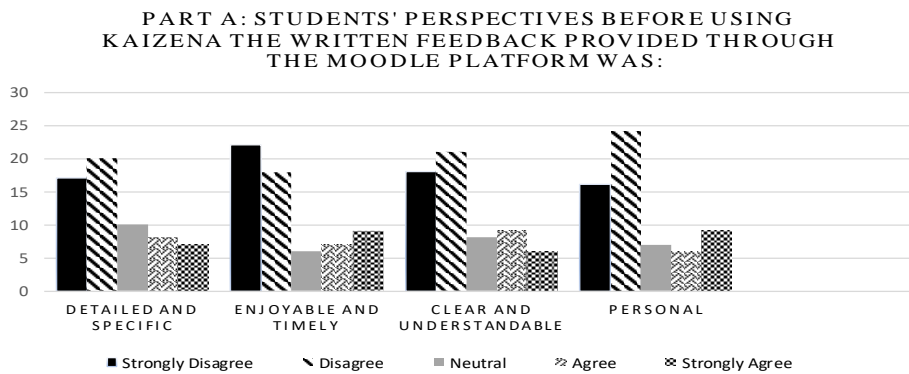


Fig. 2 Students' opinions on the impact of LMS feedback on their writing skills (%)

To illustrate the results further, Figure 2 indicates how EFL learners perceived the impact of the audio feedback on their writing skills. In general, it shows highly positive impacts as to their experience with the Kaizena tool. As shown, 84% of the students reported that the Kaizena tool has improved the accuracy of their writing and boosted greater confidence. More than 86% stated that they enjoyed the personal connection of the voice comments of the teacher. Most of the respondents (95%) indicated that the teacher provided high quality and personalized feedback in a limited period compared to the written feedback.

The researchers were also interested in whether students enjoyed using the audio feedback. Many EFL learners appreciated the specific feedback and the individual attention, they also enjoyed participating in their revision process via asynchronous communication. Many students who received audio feedback indicated that it was helpful to go back to the feedback, listen to it, and review it again (Cann 2014). Very few reported that they prefer to have both spoken and written feedback to complete each other. Furthermore, the learners who were encouraged to share their experiences and observations said that the tool was very interactive as it increased flexibility in receiving feedback for their academic writing. Following are some excerpts from the EFL learners which demonstrated this:

Through my use of this application, I noticed a significant improvement in the level of my English language skills in terms of writing speed, as well as learning the rules, as the quick response by the teacher contributed to the upgrading of my learning level". [A]

"The application can use the voice response feature, and this helps in speed of response, quick response, and knowledge of notes first, and this in itself is a feature that makes the program popular and accepted by students, and it has contributed greatly to correcting my writing errors quickly". [B]

Interestingly, those students were millennials who were already familiar with IT tools, and so required no instructions to use the Kaizena tool. As such, teachers must invest time to integrate technology not just in their instruction delivery, but also into their feedback which will greatly facilitate students' learning (Wu and Yuan 2017). Students expressed how easy they operated Kaizena as the following:

"The advantages are the quick voice response, clarity in the response, and overall, it is pleasant. I do not think that there are negatives at the present time that may be apparent, but in the future, it is possible to add some improvements to the program, such as video chats, for example, or joint group communications". [C]

"I used it for a short period, but it is an easy-to-use program that any student can learn and deal with easily, and it has great features for students". [D]

"This was an easy app to use, and it has contributed to raising my level of learning English language skills from various aspects". [E]

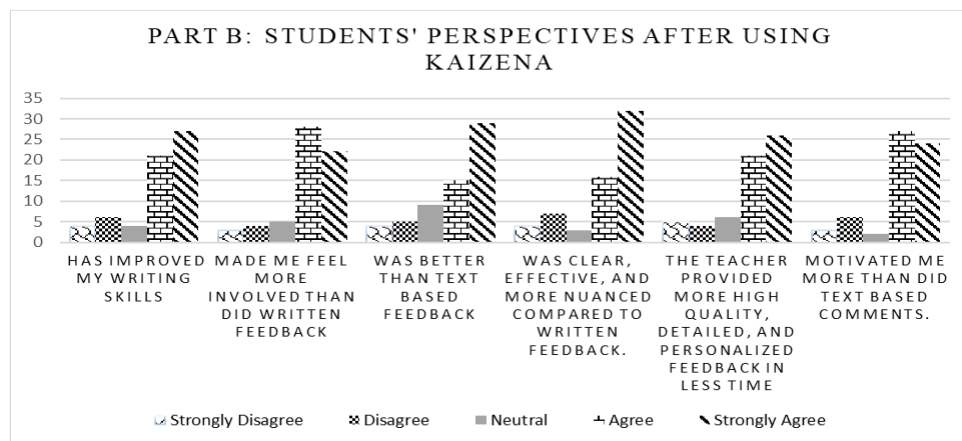


Fig. 3 Students' opinions on the impact of online audio feedback on their writing skills (%)

It is apparent that the results of this study suggest that audio feedback is an effective tool for providing detailed and humanized feedback to students to improve their writing as well as having the ability to decrease teachers' workloads, save their time, and reduce their stress levels (Hill 2019). Besides, Kaizena is considered as a quality feedback tool since it provided instant feedback system that enabled not just the teachers to promptly understand their students level of writing, but also helped those students to understand their learning process in academic writing (Wu and Yuan 2017). More importantly, the

concept of teachers providing feedback in the form of inserting audio recordings directly into students' assignments facilitated student-teacher interaction and strengthened their relationship further. One of the students commented on this saying:

“Through my simple experience with the teacher, he has contributed to improving my English language skills, and I think that he will also contribute to helping me improve and raise my level during my studies of the specialization by communicating with the teacher in a fast, easy and comfortable way”. [F]

Furthermore, feedback mobility is one of the critical characteristics that teachers and students became aware of as more emphasis has been given in this to facilitate teaching and learning. Software and mobile devices enabled teachers to give feedback to students virtually and this elevated students' interactivity and engagement in receiving the feedback which promoted their autonomous learning and overall improved teaching and learning outcomes (Cavaleri et al. 2019). The audio-visual mode which incorporated video feedback accompanying written comments demonstrated that both modes of feedback incorporated in one tool led to a high proportion of successful revisions. In the context of academic language, these findings are encouraging since they confirmed that students found it advantageous and made good use of the tool to revise and improve their work (Cavaleri et al. 2019). The findings also revealed that the mode of feedback did affect the extent to which the participants successfully revised their work which resonates with the findings of (Cavaleri et al. 2019, Wu and Yuan, 2017, Hill 2019). In addition, the combination of the audio-visual feedback approach greatly helped the learners to process information, as posited by multimedia learning theory (Mayer 2019).

In contrast to the written feedback (the conventional way of giving feedback), the audio feedback (Kaizena tool) comprised commentary as well as text and movement on screen which all contributed to the meaning making process. As such, the multimodal format of feedback appeared to benefit the majority of the EFL learners in the General Foundation Program (GFP) who were doing academic writing projects. This is where they exploited this audio-visual aspect of the feedback to understand the verbal explanations and visual models that were provided by their subsequent teachers. This had a very positive effect on the EFL students' understanding and subsequent successful uptake of the feedback since Kaizena has the feature to repeat and recycle information, which helped reinforcing points and clarify the intended meaning (Cavaleri et al. 2019). Moreover, students were able to utilize the audio feedback as they revised which supported the concept of people learning more deeply from information presented in a conversational style compared to a formal style (Mayer 2019). This enhanced deeper understanding since the modality of feedback was much easier to follow with the clarity of messages the teacher tried to convey (Anson 2015).

Overall, the Kaizena tool conveyed that the teacher invested effort into reading and evaluating GFP students' written work and cared about their learning, which was motivating. Thus, motivational and encouraging feedback positively influenced the students' emotional response to feedback which affected their readiness to engage with it (Winstone et al. 2017). Therefore, increased engagement with the feedback and revision process explained why the written comments that accompanied the audio feedback within the Kaizena tool had more successful uptake than the written-only feedback. However, some students recommended that they would like to get introduced to more features for feedback including video calls to have more personalized feedback, enabling all Kaizena users to operate on the tool with ease, efficiency, and interactivity.

4. CONCLUSION

The use of Kaizena as an audio feedback tool is found to be highly effective in contributing to the success of the teaching and learning processes of students enrolled in the Centre for Foundation Studies in the Middle East College. Furthermore, the tool was a welcome addition to the teaching and learning methodologies adopted in the HEI understudy, especially when courses were delivered both synchronously and asynchronously. Generally, the research findings concluded that audio feedback can be a valuable tool for providing feedback in a variety of contexts and may be particularly effective in situations where personalization and immediacy are important. It is highly recommended that the audio feedback be used in conjunction with other forms of feedback such as written or visual feedback. This can help provide not only a more complete picture of the individual's performance but also a range of perspectives on how to improve.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the limitations of the study where it was only conducted geographically in one HEI with a very specific group of EFL learners. Further research could explore how audio feedback impacts different learners from wider disciplines, and with those from diverse cultural backgrounds. This could help determine the effectiveness of audio feedback from different groups and identify ways to make it more accessible and inclusive. how to support students with low language proficiency.

Future implications of the research could also investigate the long-term impact of audio feedback on learning, motivation, and performance. This could involve conducting longitudinal studies to track the effects of audio feedback over time to determine how best it works in different disciplines evaluating its potential transferability and its long-term benefits in terms of facilitating teaching and learning in the context of HEIs worldwide.

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