

# Issues and Dilemmas: What conditions are necessary for effective teacher written feedback for ESL Learners?

Lindsay Mack

## Abstract

Providing feedback to students is often seen as one of the teacher's most important tasks. It is a chance for the teachers to provide information to students to help them understand their writing progress, weaknesses and strengths that is otherwise rarely possible under big classroom conditions. This article will tackle the difficult dilemma: is teacher written feedback effective? What does the research conclude are conditions necessary for effective teacher written feedback? First, I will give an overview of the important research done on written feedback, with a focus on: the dilemmas teachers face, ways to respond to ESL texts and the theoretical issues involved in giving feedback. Next, I will examine the present research on "effective written feedback." Finally, I will give some guidance as to what are generally conceived as the most effective practices of written feedback and error correction. I argue that indeed written feedback does matter, and there are some effective strategies to giving feedback.

**Key terms:** feedback, teacher written comments, ESL writers, ESL texts

## Introduction

Teachers spend countless hours evaluating, grading, and writing feedback on students' papers. These judgments provide information to the students to help them understand their writing progress, weaknesses and strengths. Teachers usually spend a fair amount of time and effort thinking about the best way to respond to students because of the value placed on giving feedback. Moreover, providing feedback to students is often seen as one of the teacher's most important tasks because it is a chance to offer individual attention that would otherwise rarely be possible under big classroom conditions.

Is the feedback always effective? Do students learn to minimize their error correction and maximize clarity through teacher's comments? Do students indeed become better writers? This paper will tackle these difficult questions with a search for answers to these two simple questions: does feedback matter and what does the research show are effective approaches to giving teacher generated written feedback? First, I will give an overview of the research done on written feedback, with a focus on: the dilemmas teachers face, ways to respond to ESL texts and the theoretical issues involved when giving feedback. I will also examine the present research on "effective written feedback." As well as giving some guidance as to what are generally conceived as the most effective practices of written feedback and error-correction. I argue that indeed written feedback does matter, and there are some effective strategies to giving feedback.

## What is "teacher written feedback"?

There are many types of feedback students receive, but for the purpose of this paper I will limit my research to an evaluation of teacher created written feedback on ESL student papers. I define teacher generated written

feedback as any comments, questions or error correction written on students' assignments. These written comments can range from questions about the author's intended meaning, praise for an interesting idea, grammar mistakes, corrections, and finally explicit corrections.

### **Overview of ESL the Different Approaches to Research on Feedback**

Written feedback in education has always been looked at as important for both encouraging and synthesizing learning. Interest in feedback emerged with the development of "learner center approaches" such as process writing in North American first language composition classes during the 1970s. This approach gave greater attention to teacher-student encounters around texts and "encouraged teachers to support writers through multiple drafts by providing feedback and suggesting revisions during the process of writing itself, rather than at the end of it" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 1). In other words, formative feedback was seen as more effective than summative feedback. Before the 1990s, most research on written feedback and response was done only on error correction. However, in the 1990s, with the advent of the genre-based approach, feedback became important to provide students the "rhetorical choices central to academic or professional literacy skills and as a way of assisting students in negotiating access to new knowledge and practices" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 2). Today many researchers analyze teacher written response from a "socio-cultural perspective" focusing on: teacher control, and political and social dominance (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

### **Overview of the different teacher styles of Feedback**

Responding to texts can be seen as a communicative act, the teacher is ultimately trying to give the student feedback on their strengths and weaknesses to help improve their writing. Every Teacher has a different style of giving feedback; some teachers do not leave a paragraph untouched and fill the paper with red comments pointing out error correction. Other teachers write very few comments on papers, some even write next to nothing. What can account for these very different styles of feedback? What underlying belief system or theories inform these teachers?

In "the Sociopolitical Implications of Response to Second Language and Second Dialect Writing," Carol Severino draws on Min-Zhan Lu's framework in describing three approaches that readers can take when responding to ESL texts: assimilationist, accommodationist, and separatist. She argues that an inexperienced reader looks at the writer's text through an assimilationist approach and that the reader's goal is to help the author error free and idiomatic English as soon as possible. (Serevino, 1993, p. 187). Therefore they read difference as "deficiency."

The accommodationist approach also tries to teach native English norms and still regards some differences as deficiencies. However, their goal is different than that of the assimilationist. Ultimately, they want the ESL writer to learn "new discourse patterns without completely losing the old, so that the writer can maintain both their L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) linguistic and cultural identities" (Matsuda & Cox, 2004, p. 42). The accomdationist approach acknowledges that genre and writing processes knowledge are necessary for ESL writers however it is not necessary for an ESL learner to adopt idiomatic English.

Finally, the separatist approach advocates not giving feedback with the purpose of changing the writing to sound more like a Native English Speaker. As cited in Matsuda and Cox (2004), the separarartist goal is to, "support the writer in maintaining separate linguistic and cultural identities, and to advocate for native English speaker readers to read ESL texts 'generously' with more appreciation for multicultural writing (p. 42). Moreover, the separatist reads to overlook and therefore preserve difference. In conclusion, these 3 different

ways of viewing feedback can be best described by Matsuda & Cox (2004) as whether the teacher should read to “correct” difference, explain difference, or overlook difference.

### **An overview of the theoretical issues involved. Are our comments hopeless?**

As stated before, it wasn't until the 1990s that research started to be done on how to respond to ESL texts. Most research on feedback has been done on types of teacher feedback and subsequent revisions that students do or do not make. The issue of written feedback is contentious but most research agrees on 2 points: the importance of written feedback and value ESL students place on feedback. Feedback came to be viewed as having a powerful potential with the possibility for “a revision of cognition itself that stems from response” (Freedman, 1985). In fact, in research done by Kroll (2001) it was found that written feedback is one of the two components most central to any writing course, the other being the assignments the students are given. The research also agrees that ESL students greatly appreciate written feedback, as shown by ESL surveys. (Leki, 1991, Saito, 1994) In addition to these two points Ferris (2006) argues that researchers also agree that “accuracy in writing matters to academic and professional audiences and that obvious L2 error may stigmatize audiences in some contexts, and that L2 student writers themselves claim to need and value error judgment from their instructors” (pg. 81).

Although ESL students greatly appreciate feedback, is it beneficial to their writing development? In general there is a controversy among L2 writing researchers and teachers about whether teachers should provide any grammar correction at all to student writers and if the feedback has any value to improving the students writing. Ferris (1997) for instance found that “although three quarters of substantive teachers’ comments on drafts were used by students, only half of their revisions in response to these could be considered as improvements and a third actually made matters worse.” Conrad and Goldstein also found the same in their study.

Research on feedback has been discouraging. Students often find teacher comments unclear, confusing and inconsistent or vague (Zamel, 1985). Generally it is found that feedback that focuses on error correction without explicit teaching is ineffective. Early research in the 80's argued that error-correction feedback is unhelpful. Teachers should instead give priority to commenting on “meaning” not grammar. (Zamel, 1985) Truscott has gone so far as to argue for “correction-free approach” (Truscott, 1999). In his 1996 essay he concluded that error correction is ineffective in improving student writing, and later goes so far to argue for “correction-free approach” (Truscott, 1999). He argues that students revise their essays based on teachers’ comments but lack the understanding of why it was wrong in the first place. Furthermore, students change their writing and original ideas are lost rather than clarified.

Connected to this issue is the other important issue and dilemma: English variations: what is ‘correct’ English? There are many scholars who argue the recognition of the legitimacy of vernacular-based voices (Canagarajah, 2002). Belcher and Connor (2001) report that second language learners often feel alienation for common discourses that ESL classes force students to write in. These dominant discourses are informed by “western/north American” norms of standard English and force ESL learners to conform to the dominant various cultural values that come with it. If a teacher teaches these discourses, do teachers take away ownership of students writing or appropriate students’ writing? To appropriate another’s words means to take their words, add your own words to it and ultimately, “to take ownership of those words for one’s own purposes” (Tardy, 2006, p. 61). When you change a student’s English are you denying them agency or empowering them by giving them stronger, Native English words to use? The appropriator always has the power. Within the student-teacher relationship, it is the teacher who has the power, and students may feel pressured to follow teacher feedback,

even when students don't understand or agree with the feedback. Ultimately, it becomes, "this is what I want to say to this is what the teacher is asking me to do." (Sommers, 1982, p. 150)

Both of these issues further complicate how to give "effective feedback?" Today, many ESL teachers advocate for a broader definition of "good writing." Recent research (Silva & Brice, 2004) highlights a transition away from one-size-fits all (Native Speaker English) approach to a variety of English approach that recognizes variations among English. Leki (1992) argues that some ESL students might not ever sound like native speakers, therefore, "it is not the students texts that need to change; rather it is the native speaking readers and evaluators that need to learn to read more broadly, with a more cosmopolitan and less parochial eye" (p. 132).

### **What feedback does work?**

If students do not understand teacher's comments and the comments can be interpreted as "disempowering ESL students" but yet ESL students highly value teacher's feedback then what can the teacher do? ESL teachers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are facing a rather big dilemma. How can, we as ESL teachers, grapple with this information? What general consensus can we establish from the research?

Overall feedback does seem to help writers resolve writing problems. When a teacher gives feedback, he/she acts as an audience helping students understand the social and cultural context they are performing in. Sadler (1989) states that the benefits of feedback are that it possesses a concept of the goal/standard or reference being aimed at, and therefore engages in appropriate action which leads to closing the gap to achieving that standard. Therefore effective feedback provides useful information to both teacher and student to help them recognize these "gaps." (Carless, 2006). Feedback that recognizes the gaps is called, power feedback as outlined in "the Power of Feedback" in Hattie and Timperley. They report that effective feedback answers the questions: 1) where I am going, 2) How am I going, and finally 3) where to next (2007). Therefore, effective feedback assesses students' skills, and gives them clear guidance to how they can improve their essay. Moreover, Hyland stated, "perhaps the most effective written feedback seeks to reinforce the patterns which were taught when modeling the genre so that it becomes part of the process of learning to write rather than an extemporized solution to local errors." (Hyland, 2006, p. 103).

It has been established that feedback is important, but there are some conditions under which feedback supports learning. The following are the conditions:

1. First, feedback needs to be formative. Shute (2008) outlines the importance of formative feedback defining it as "information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner's thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning"(p. 1). Master (1995) and White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta's (1991) research shows that feedback that is linked to revisions can result in both improvements to the current text and a reduction in errors in later assignments (Ferris, 2002). Under the condition that feedback must be formative it also must not focus on marks but instead focus on learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2007). Finally this formative feedback must be attended to by the students, and acted on to improve performance (Carless, 2007).

It is emphasized that teachers should respond to all parts of the process of the students' writing: brainstorming, outline, rough draft and final draft. One way to give this formative feedback besides writing comments on papers is to have individual feedback conferences where teachers can talk with students and thus better understand the student's intended meaning. These conferences are also important because they clarify the students' meaning and give the student more ownership over their writing. (Tardy, 2006).

2. Second it is important that the formative feedback is timely (Gibbs & Simpson, Wiggins, 1998). The

feedback must be given back to the student not long after they have written the assignment. Research suggests that giving feedback one week after the student has written the assignment is too late (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The feedback must be provided quickly enough to be useful to students.

3. Third, feedback needs to draw attention to the error. There is still a debate about whether the feedback should be direct or indirect. In a recent article, Dana Ferris (2007) shows that error correction feedback is effective. She examines more than 200 preliminary and revised drafts by 92 L2 undergraduates in ESL composition classes. She uses this data to explore teacher feedback strategies and their effectiveness in improving students' immediate and long-term writing accuracy. She found that 80% of the students were indeed able to successfully edit their errors marked by the teachers. Only 9.3% of the students made no change. Short-term the student was indeed able to correct the error, but does that mean that the learner has acquired the new skill. However, long term it was found that students made significant progress in accuracy through out the semester. Overall though there was huge variability in students ability to benefit from grammar instruction and feedback.

The teachers used different strategies for the students to correct their errors. Students did utilize direct feedback more consistently and effectively than any other type, 88%. But surprisingly, the other less explicit forms of feedback also led to accurate revisions most of the time. Indirect feedback, in which errors were underlined, led to correct edits 77% of time. In conclusion Ferris found, "strong relationship between teachers' error markings and successful student revisions on the subsequent drafts of their essays. Only 9.3% did not change their essays." (Ferris, 2006, p. 98). It was found that students were able to utilize both direct and indirect feedback successfully in their revisions. Overall though the findings made a strong case for indirect feedback over direct feedback for facilitating student writing improvement.

4. Forth, teachers should avoid appropriation and line by line correcting a text. Indirect feedback is generally preferable because it forces the student to engage in problem solving and avoid appropriation. It avoids disempowering. It also builds their skills as self-editors. However it has been noted that students with lower L2 lack the cognitive know how to deal with indirect feedback and self-correction (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). It has been argued that both indirect and direct feedback combination may be the most helpful to the students. "Provide primarily indirect feedback, locate errors rather than labeling or coding them, vary feedback approaches for treatable an untreatable error types; use a relatively small number or error categories when providing feedback." (Ferris, 2006, p. 99)

5. Fifth, make sure the feedback is linked to an assessment that is linked to criteria and specific outcomes. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Therefore, it is advised to use rubrics and an established set of criteria. According to Hyland (2004) current theories of language assessment emphasize the importance of assessing student writing with a set of clear criteria created by the teacher. The rubric allows for standardized evaluation according to the specific criteria such as, grammar, organization, or cohesive links. This makes grading papers more transparent for the ESL learner. A rubric, or criteria guide helps teachers "apply consistent standards to judge each task performance fairly but also so that they can communicate to the student." (Hyland, 2004, p. 163). This explicit criterion is called, "criterion-referenced" assessment. It allows not only teachers but also students to assess "subjective essays" in a more objective manner. A criterion-referenced scoring procedure is holistic, analytical, or trait-based.

Often the teacher shares the rubric with the students so that they know how they will be assessed and what they have to do to be successful. This transparent process allows for ESL writers to understand what is expected of them. It also helps teachers identify the problems that the student has and allows them to target that

feedback precisely. It is important to identify exactly what is expected in any writing task. If you have a good rubric, then in a sense you do not need to make written comments. By using a rubric that has been taught to the students, “teachers can therefore refer back to specific knowledge and strategies and can respond from position of shared knowledge with students concerning what writing the genre requires, rather than simply offering de-contextualized and ad hoc reactions to errors.” (Hyland, 2004, p 181).

In conclusion, I have outlined 5 conditions to give effective teacher feedback:

- 1) Feedback must be formative
- 2) Feedback must be timely
- 3) Feedback must draw attention to the error
- 4) Feedback must avoid appropriation
- 5) Feedback must have a criterion

If feedback is done following these conditions then the students will be able to maximize their learning hence create better writers, not just better writing. Following these guidelines for feedback will help students improve their writing proficiency to produce writing with minimal errors and maximum clarity.

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