

Feedback to writing in the EFL composition class

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Views on the nature and characteristics of feedback may vary markedly among those who are concerned with the issue of feedback, but they would agree on the point that feedback is indispensable in any learning situations. And so is it in the writing classroom. Page (1958) emphasizes the importance of feedback in writing instruction, stating that written comments on student papers have a "potent effect upon student effort, or attention, or attitude, or whatever it is which causes learning to improve"(pp. 180-181). As Page says, feedback is a fundamental element which plays an important role in the process of student writers' making progress in their writing ability.

Regarding feedback, Kulhavy (1977) defines it as any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong. Keh (1990) defines feedback as "input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision"(pp. 294-295). Thus, feedback functions as a guide line for a revision. With effective

feedback, the writer could learn where he has confused the reader, and consequently, he can revise his text better to get his ideas through.

However, as saying goes, easier said than done. Both L1 and ESL writing teachers must well understand this pedagogically significant function of feedback, yet this would not mean that they always succeed to provide effective feedback which facilitates the student's writing skills. Conversely, teacher feedback might well thwart their intention.

Initially, it would be a good idea for us, therefore, to reflect upon what we, as writing teachers, are actually doing in responding to student papers. At the same time, we need to investigate what our students' reactions to feedback on their papers might be like, for teachers are apt to become too enthusiastic about teaching to notice what students are actually doing in the leaning process. In other words, a writing teacher may not have enough feedback from their students about his own feedback to them or students' writings. Indeed, a communication gap may exist between writing teachers and students about feedback.

To achieve the goal of a writing course, it is essential for writing teachers to look into ways to improve feedback and make it more effective. For this purpose, a review on feedback in the writing class will be made here from two perspectives, from the

teacher's side and from the student's side.

Teacher feedback

In what way do teachers in the writing classroom respond to student compositions? Are there any particular features and qualities found about teacher feedback? Sommers (1982), one of the early studies in this area in L1 writing instruction, analyzed the responses of thirty-five experienced teachers on content of three student papers, and Sommers found some distinctive characteristics there. Writing instructors' comments, as Sommers describes, are often contradicting, vague, prescriptive, and could easily be appended to any student text. Preceding Sommers' investigation in teacher feedback, Cohen (Cohen and Robbins, 1976) acknowledged that his own feedback to student papers was quite often unsystematic and inconsistent.

What might the consequences of such type of teacher comments be like? Sommers (1982) questions whether such feedback would be of any help for revision. Rather, she believes that such feedback has only negligible effect on student writing, saying that teachers "take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention in the teachers' purpose in commenting"(p. 149).

Examining this issue, Ziv (1984) compared the effects on revision of two types of comments, an explanatory and content

specific type and a prescriptive or corrective type. Her study revealed that more students responded to the former type of comments rather than to the latter type in their revised papers.

Zamel (1985) replicated the work of Sommers to examine the way ESL teachers provided feedback on content. Zamel analyzed comments given by fifteen ESL instructors on 105 learner essays. The results obtained were consistent with much of what Sommers and other researchers had found in L1 writing contexts. Zamel's study has confirmed that ESL teachers' comments on content were vague and contradicting. Zamel summarizes ESL teacher feedback in this manner: they were often inconsistent in reactions, misread student texts, imposed abstract rules, applied a single ideal standard, responded to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely made content-specific comments or offered specific strategies for revision. They usually provided arbitrary corrections, contradictory comments, and vague prescriptions (pp. 80-86).

Such responses from ESL teachers to student writings are due to a kind of attitude that the teachers have towards writing instruction. Zamel (1985) points out that the teachers "overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers" (p. 80). Consequently, they are distracted by language-related, local problems and surface-level features of writing while they "rarely referred directly to the actual ideas and content presented in student essays" (p. 86). They do not

play a role of a reader enough and, therefore, fail to take into account the writer's intention.

Zamel (1985) is critical about such responses, for they do not provide students with clear and explicit strategies for revising the text. Teacher comments are not content-specific and could easily be applicable to other texts.

Students reactions

How do students, then, in a writing class react to teacher comments on their papers? To find out an answer to this question, as well as to learn how to make this written feedback more effective, Lynch and Klemans (1978) administered a questionnaire to ask students in L1 contexts about their attitudes and reactions to written comments on their papers. Their fruitful results demonstrate, first of all, that most of the students surveyed were generally willing to read and respond to teacher comments.

The results also revealed certain kinds of comments that students found most useful; such comments that explained why their sentences, choice of words, or tactic of organization were good or bad, that indicated what was done correctly or incorrectly, and that pointed out where and how the paper was deficient. Naturally, students preferred a positive tone of the comments. They appreciated the encouraging comments that gave students some sort of praise for their good ideas, original thought, etc.

Further, Lynch and Klemens (1978) add that the most helpful comments are those spoken directly to a student himself, rather than comments that are written down on a paper.

The least useful were those that concerned grammatical errors, including spelling. Students in Lynch and Klemens' (1978) study expressed a feeling of uselessness about certain ambiguous marks, especially the question mark, as well as marks on their habitual grammar and spelling errors.

Comparable results have been found in recent researches done in the same area. Keh's (1990) study, for example, tells us student reactions which have some significant value for writing teachers. Students in Keh's study considered one-word comments such as "ood", "vague", or "why?" less helpful. What they appreciated and regarded most helpful, on the other hand, were those which pointed out specific problems and provided suggestions, examples, or guide-lines.

Regarding those "one-word comment", Schwarts (1984) cautions against using generalized dictums such as "choppy" or "vague". Schwarts calls our attention to a fact that writing instructors "have strong and varied stylistic preferences" (p. 61) which they believe are universal enough to be shared with students. Naturally, these preferences affect their responses as readers when they evaluate student papers. Thus, writing teachers tend to assume that their code words such as "clear," "wordy," and

“descriptive” have universally-accepted definitions and transmit these values, but they do not. Schwarts has advised teachers that they should better articulate their rhetorical values.

Towards more effective feedback

What implications would emerge from the aforementioned studies for the ESL teachers of writing who have been nagging at their time-consuming efforts of error corrections with little return in terms of effect on the students or on their writing?

We would say, first of all, that it is essential for writing teachers to give positive, encouraging feedback first (Lynch & Klemans, 1978). Praise first, and then, if necessary, address problem areas. The focus should be put on content and organization. Zamel (1985) emphasizes the point that meaning-level issues are to be addressed first before surface-level problems. She holds that effective feedback includes probing, challenging, raising questions, and pinpointing ambiguities. This type of feedback helps “students understand that meaning-level issues are to be addressed first” (p. 96).

In order to make feedback effective, we need to pay attention to the following points. Any improvement should be noted with detailed reasons why. Feedback must be phrased clearly so that students understand what problems are; providing detailed examples is always helpful. Teachers should refer to a specific

problem with adding strategy for revision. Write questions with enough information for students to answer. Schwartz (1984, p. 61) recommends a question such as "I don't understand why ..." rather than making pronouncements such as "too vague" or "too wordy". Feedback in the form of question is particularly a useful instructional way not only of letting the student know the locations and nature of problems the reader has, but also of encouraging him to think more about a particular point (Chenoweth, 1987; Keh, 1990). Feedback does not need to be limited in the form of written comment. Lynch and Klemans (1978) propose to have a personal conference, which is an ideal vehicle for teacher-reader and student-writer communication.

Keh (1990), Schwartz (1984), and Zamel (1985) stress that it is very important for teachers to respond as genuine and interested readers rather than as judges and evaluators. Zamel urges writing teachers to respond not to secretaries, but to authors, not so much to student writing but to student writers. Similarly, Schwartz emphasizes the important role of composition teachers as a reader, claiming that only in this way will students seek to fine-tune their texts for real readers and their real questions and confusions. Keh suggests that the teacher should ask "honest" questions as a concerned reader to a writer, not a grammarian or grade-giver whose statements assume too much about the writer's intention.

To equip writing teachers well, there must be quite a few effective ways and beneficial suggestions which could not be touched upon here. However, the most effective feedback necessarily shows sincere interest in the student's improvement as a writer, provides praise, encouragement and honest criticism of ideas expressed by the student writer. Feedback which utilizes these approaches must make writing enjoyable and productive learning experience for the student writer.

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