
Responding to Student Writing (Feedback)

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Abstract:

The assessment of student's achievements is a pedagogical dialogue between teacher-student for the quality of teaching, learning and knowledge. The two-way directional communication ensures feedback which diagnoses the struggles that students face during the learning process, and also identifies the possible reasons that the struggles occur. It appropriately creates conditions for orienting and improving future learning and helps in successfully and dynamically adapting the teaching and presentation to the students' needs.

Feedback improves students' writing. It lets the student know how they progressed and what they need to improve in order to reach the set goals. This stimulates the student to invest even more energy and ability if needed. This paper examines the importance of feedback and when to give feedback, and focuses on providing effective feedback on students' written assignments by examining some of the most common types of feedback used by teachers and the reasons for their usage. It also looks at efficient ways of providing feedback as well as student preferences for feedback. The information gained will define the role of feedback in education, circumstances under which it could be used most effectively and the impact that it has on the student-teacher relationship.

Key words: teacher written feedback, teacher-student conferencing, peer feedback, computer-mediated feedback.

1. Introduction

Writing is a conscious, deliberate and planned activity. Teachers always say that one learns to write by writing. Many writers will become better writers simply by producing sufficient quantities of writing over an extended period. Both native and second language writers, often benefit most and make the most progress when teachers and students contribute to this goal through a variety of strategies available in classroom settings.

Feedback is a writing instructional technique which has been given a lot of attention and popularity in the learning process. Its goal is to teach skills that help students improve their writing proficiency and produce it with minimal errors and maximum clarity. Response to student writing and its effects on writers is the most important task for many teachers because teachers' comments shape student writers. Furthermore, the progress of the students, the engagement of the students in the learning process and the revision responses that are expected from the students are determined by the teacher. Students often take very seriously most of the things teachers say. Therefore, spending the time and thinking carefully about how to respond to them may be a worthwhile time investment.

2. The importance of feedback

Every input from reader to writer that gives information for revision is called feedback. "It is the single largest investment of teacher time and energy, much more than the time spent preparing for or conducting classroom sessions"(Ferris &Hedgcock 2005).

According to Sommers (1982), "Feedback shapes the way students learn to write, but feedback alone, even the best feedback, does not move students forward as writers if they are not open to its instruction and critique, or if they don't

understand how to use their instructors' comments as bridges to future writing assignments" (p.254).

Feedback is very important because students feel the need to get assistance by their teachers. It is thought to be as a dialogue between teachers and students. Then, it is important for the student's motivation in learning that they always receive feedback from the teacher for their progress in learning process. With its help the student assesses whether there is progress and to what degree he/she is reaching the foreseen goals.

Feedback also helps the student to become aware of the positive side of his/her learning process, to focus on the areas where they are not progressing or where they are not successful and to overcome the difficulties in progressing.

3. When to give feedback to students

One important aspect of feedback is that teachers should know 'how' and 'when' they should respond to students' writing. Feedback given in the earlier drafts is very important because it can stimulate the revision but also providing it at intermediate stages of the writing process is very effective. If it is given in the earlier drafts, feedback is formative, it means it helps students to see where their developing text can be improved whereas if it is given in the final drafts, feedback tends to be evaluative and summative, it means it informs students about what they did well, explains the grading and offers suggestions for subsequent assignments.

"Feedback should be informative and detailed enough to help the students writers return to the task of writing but not so overwhelming" (Reid, 1993).

It is also important to note what students want from feedback, some students want praise, some want a response to their ideas, some demand to have all their errors marked etc.

Teachers should provide feedback on many writing issues, it means that they should give feedback to all aspects of

student's text: structure, organization, style, content etc but not necessary to cover all aspects on every draft at every stage of the teaching-writing cycle.

ESL teachers see themselves as language teachers and intervene in formal aspects of writing and rarely make content-specific comments. "There is a contradiction among teachers, some give priority to form and other to content" (Zamel, 1985). According to Raimes (1983) writing response should focus on content throughout several drafts of a paper and leave the form to the final draft. However, according to Freedman (1987) it is better to deliver both kinds of feedback at intermediate stages of writing process when students are motivated to revise the text in subsequent drafts and can take into consideration teacher's suggestions.

Personally most of the feedback I have gotten as a student has been in the form of grades or marks. In primary school I remember getting comments on papers and exams. Once I wrote one essay and the professor's comments were something like "outstanding", "excellent" or "very good" and he also made some suggestions. I remember on one final exam, I answered the questions right but the professor said that I wrote like a layman and not a professional linguist. He didn't like my style of writing. That hurt my feelings. I wrote in a simple style, I figured that he was interested in knowing whether or not I had understood the concept.

As a teacher I give different kind of feedback. Mostly I give it in the form of grades or marks. Sometimes I give marks and comments like "well done" or "good job". Sometimes I am more aware of the value of feedback, so I try to make suggestions that would help my students improve their writing like suggestions of organizing a paragraph or essay, suggestions about the topic they had chosen or instructions on fixing grammar mistakes or choosing different words. Sometimes I just underline what is needed to be fixed and let them try to figure it out on their own or I might ask a question to make

them think of a solution. Sometimes students will learn better by trying to figure things out for themselves.

4. Types of feedback

There are some types of feedback such as: teacher written feedback, teacher-student conferencing, peer feedback and computer-mediated feedback.

Teacher written feedback- plays a central role in most writing classes. It is more effective when it is given at intermediate stages of the writing process; teachers should provide feedback on all aspects of student texts, including content, organization, grammar, style, vocabulary; feedback should be clear and concrete to assist students with revision. According to Sommers, Connors and Lunsford written feedback is of poor quality and frequently misunderstood by students, being too vague and inconsistent and often “authoritarian” formalist” and “insensitive” (as cited in Hyland, 2003, p.178).

Forms of teacher written feedback are: Commentary- this means responding to students’ work rather than evaluating what they have done, stating how the text appears to us as readers, how successful we think it has been and how it could be improved; Rubrics- is the use of cover sheets which set out the criteria that have been used to assess the assignment and how the student has performed in relation to these criteria; Minimal marking- this refers to the type of text, form-based feedback. It indicates the location and type of error; Taped commentary- an alternative to marginal comments is recording remarks on a tape recorder and writing a number on the student paper to indicate what the comment refers to (Hyland, 1990); Electronic feedback- this means providing feedback by email.

Teacher student conferencing- this means giving feedback on student writing through face to face conferencing. According to McCarthey conferencing has important advantages as it can supplement the limitations of one-way

written feedback with opportunities for “the teacher and the student to negotiate the meaning of a text through dialogue” (as cited in Hyland, 2003, p. 192).

According to Riley written conferences give students a clearer idea of their strengths and weaknesses, develop their autonomy skills, allow them to raise questions on their written feedback, and help them construct a revision plan (as cited in Hyland, 2003, p.192).

However while learners have the opportunity to get individual attention and fully discuss their writing face-to-face with their teacher, second language students are not always in a good position to make the most of this because they may lack the experience, interactive abilities, aural comprehension skills, they may process and use feedback better in written than oral forms etc. This means that ESL students have different cultures and languages which affect how students conference and how their teachers respond to them.

Peer feedback- means responding with appreciation and positive criticism to the classmates’ writing. Some advantages of peer feedback are: active learner participation, nonjudgmental environment, development of critical reading skills, reduces teacher’s workload etc. Whereas disadvantages are: tendency to focus on surface forms, weakness of reader’s knowledge, students may prefer teacher feedback, students may not use feedback in revisions etc. Peer response takes different forms, the teacher assigns students to group of three or four who exchange completed first drafts and give comments on each other’s work before they revise them.

According to Leki, Mangelsdorf, Mendonca& Johnson peer response is well received by student writers and that they enjoy the process (as cited in Kroll, 2003).

Computer-mediated feedback means getting feedback electronically which has been produced by an unseen tutor or by the computer itself. The role of the computer has become more visible in both delivering and mediating feedback with the developing of technology. Warschauer, Turbee & Roberts

(1996), suggest that computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows students to take a more active and autonomous role when seeking feedback, since they can raise questions when they want to and take the initiative in discussions (as cited in Hyland, 2006, p.93). One major advantage of electronic feedback is that comments are automatically stored for later retrieval, allowing instructors to print out the transcripts for in-class discussion. According to Swaffar et al. 1998; Lamy & Goodfellow 1999; Sengupta 2001 this kind of analysis of student writing can help build metacognitive awareness of particular linguistic, interactional and rhetorical features (as cited in Hyland, 2006, p.94). By using this database students' autonomy is increased in correcting errors and in reflecting on their writing. Disadvantages are that students may be overwhelmed by the commentary they receive on their work, making meaningful revisions more difficult and they may also have difficulties in following the rush of multiple discussion threads of online writing.

5. Conclusion

By the way of conclusion I think that feedback must be viewed as a critical component in the education process. It is the central part of learning to write. Without feedback, the sharing of information is totally one-sided and there is no forum for change.

The most important role of feedback is to help students to develop into independent writers who are able to critique and improve their own writing. It appears that students also appreciate and value feedback and feel that it helps them to improve their writing. They consider and use feedback in constructing revisions of their texts which occur on both global and surface levels. Revision means when students make changes in their writing process.

Teachers should provide feedback themselves, they should examine their own responding practices to see whether

their feedback is clear, constructive and responsive to the needs of students, they should help students to revise in order to understand and make sure that the students are taking the response and revision process seriously, they should ask students for their feedback preferences, they should offer all kinds of feedback, they should prioritize the responses of every draft separately etc. The teacher who gives effective feedback creates an environment of support for the student, assuring them of their progress, their strengths, the areas that need additional attention and, ideally, the teacher's commitment to assisting them. So teachers are the right people to ensure that students are assessed meaningfully and fairly.

6. REFERENCES

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