

RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

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INTRODUCTION: FEEDBACK AND THE POLITICS OF PEDAGOGY

Feedback is traditionally seen as a linear process of providing input to a writer for the purpose of providing information for revision (Keh 1990: 194). However, the dawning of more process-oriented pedagogical theory in recent years has altered the way feedback is perceived. Far from being mere input from one person to another, the issue of feedback is now recognized as "...an interaction between responder and recipient through the medium of the written comment...a highly complex activity, constrained by the particular learning context in which it is embedded "(Freedman et al 1985:321). In other words, the notion of feedback is not limited to prescriptive interventions but is in fact a communicative activity employed within the context of interpersonal classroom relationships.

In recent years, the dynamic character of feedback as a medium of interaction has placed greater emphasis on the nature and content of teacher feedback. The underlying assumption is that teacher feedback reveals much about a person's own beliefs and biases on the nature and function of writing. As a result, it cannot be isolated from the issues of teacher behavior and student-teacher relationships.

In the past, many researches were too preoccupied with how to provide feedback that very little attention was paid to the nature of the responses. Following the trend of writing instruction from the mid-1960s, response strategies vacillated between various schools of thought – from form to content, product to process, single to multiple drafts – all with contradictory and inconclusive results (Leki 1990). Ferris (1995) goes even further to claim that research in both L1 and L2 writing provides little evidence that feedback can improve student writing.

Today we are no nearer in answering the question as to how feedback can be made more effective but perhaps the reason we are still grappling with the issue is that we have been looking for answers in the wrong place. Instead of looking for prescriptive writing strategies we should consider redirecting our efforts in terms of understanding what it is that we do when we respond to student writing. Perhaps the real question is not how should we respond to student writing but what in fact are we saying, for what purpose, and on behalf of whose interest?

FEEDBACK IN THE WRITING CLASSROOMS: L1 SCENARIO IN THE '80S AND '90S

Before we can look into the content of teacher feedback today, a brief look at feedback years ago helps to ground the issues at stake.

Even in the past it was recognized that teacher feedback does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by the teacher's own preconceived notions and attitudes towards the writing process which in turn is conditioned by the individual's learning experience.

In the 80s, such attitudes reflected a stringent view of writing despite the growing recognition of the dynamic nature of writing. As a consequence, teacher responses tended to be instructive, applying a fixed and uniform standard to all students. The focus then was not so much to recognize and encourage individual student thinking as to evaluate how well student writing approximated or deviated from accepted and existing norms. Murray's (1984:7) claim was that teachers were preoccupied with teaching students "to study what we plan for them to study and to learn what we or our teachers learned". The resulting feedback made it clear to students that what they had to say was not half as important as what teachers wanted them to say. In addition, the fixed and uniform attitude towards writing reinforced teachers' attitudes to view texts as being fixed and final and to apply the same standards when checking draft or final papers alike. As a result, surface-level errors were addressed alongside rhetorical concerns resulting in contradictory, unclear and ambiguous messages (Zamel 1985). Finally, teacher comments in the 80's also displayed a generic attitude toward student writing. Sommers (1982) claimed that teacher comments, while designed to encourage revision, rarely included text-specific strategies to carry out the

task. Instead, comments offered vague prescriptions that could be interchanged from one text to another.

Such teacher attitudes make it equally clear that the notion of feedback, then and now, is more than just an intervention tool. It is intrinsically entwined with the issue of power relations in the classroom. This is because student-teacher interactions, no matter how process-oriented, are never relationships between equals. Students, especially second language users, always see the teacher as the final arbiter in the classroom and this implied power hierarchy allows the teacher to decide when and what kind of feedback is necessary. In addition, although the social demands of the student-teacher interaction mitigate how much control is actually reasonable in the learning process, teachers still generally control how things are said in the feedback.

Even today, there is evidence to suggest that teacher attitudes tend to be more negative than positive, product-than process-oriented, and directive than exploratory. Teachers continue to find it difficult to treat texts, even drafts, as works in progress thereby applying standards that are strict and stringent. Editing is often heavy-handed and authoritative as if teachers writing on the paper were forgetting the student on the other side of it (see Connors and Lunsford 1993).

Unfortunately, most of the research on teacher content is found primarily in first language classrooms; very little information is actually available on the nature of second language teachers' responses.

FEEDBACK ON STUDENT PAPERS IN AN L2 SETTING

In order to understand the nature of ESL teachers' comments on student papers in an L2 setting, samples of student papers with written feedback were randomly sampled from freshmen English classes in a Catholic university in the Philippines. Eighty-one papers were examined, representing the feedback styles of 15 English composition teachers on either a draft or final paper. The average size of a freshman composition class is about 25 to 30. Every fifth paper was taken from a sample batch so that approximately four to five papers could be taken to represent a cross section of each teacher's feedback style. Because the

teachers were not informed of the true purpose of the study and the papers were selected only after they had been checked but before they were returned to the students it can be assumed that the feedback on these papers represents the actual response styles of the teachers in an authentic setting. The written comments are used to characterize general trends or patterns of teacher behavior in these classrooms.

Table

Written Feedback on Student Papers

Type Of Feedback	No. of Papers	Percentage
<i>Total number of papers</i>	81	
Papers with local feedback only	9	11
Papers with global feedback only	30	37
Papers with local/ global feedback	39	48
No feedback given (grade only)	3	4
<i>Content of Feedback</i>		
Communication is generally poor (little or no content feedback, tendency to be irrelevant and vague, no terminal/ initial comments).	38	47
Some communication exists (presence of some content feedback, some tendency to be unclear or ambiguous, some effort to acknowledge student's strengths/ weaknesses in terminal or initial comments).	23	28
Communication is good or excellent (feedback addresses salient points, generally relevant and clear, provides concrete suggestions, directions or evaluations).	20	25
<i>Tone of Feedback</i>		
Papers with positive feedback (or feedback that tends to draw emotionally close to student)	15	18
Papers with neutrally phrased feedback.	26	32
Papers with negative feedback.	40	49
<i>Papers with Terminal/ Initial Comments</i>	48	
<i>Features of Terminal/ Initial Comments</i>		
Leads positively but ends negatively.	11	23
Leads negatively but ends positively.	1	2
All positive.	9	19
All negative.	14	29
Neutral	13	27

A. Global over local comments

In analyzing the written feedback, one striking pattern that emerges points to the preponderance of global, or meaning-related comments, alone or in combination with local or form-oriented comments, over local comments alone. This shows that teachers generally recognize the importance of responding to student writing on both the structural and content levels. In fact, most teachers revealed that a good portion of time is spent marking and responding to student writing. Many spend an average of 20 to 30 minutes poring over each paper. The time they spend assessing student performance is likewise indicative of the value they attach to feedback giving.

The written comments, however, seem to belie the time and effort teachers put in checking papers. Most of the comments present generic assessments or cursory remarks composed of few words and phrases. Only a handful of the papers contain terminal or initial comments that exceed 10 words.

Whereas in the past, the overwhelming impression was that teachers were primarily language teachers preoccupied with surface-level corrections, this time there is a change in their perceived functions. Although language concerns are still deemed important, there is greater concern for the content of the writing. There are more comments that ask students to revise the clarity of their ideas, provide more concrete support, and clarify the focus and organization of the paper, among other things. Such concerns, however, are also impeded by the vague, generic and sometimes confusing messages found on student papers.

B. Arbitrary, inconsistent, erroneous and confusing comments

A close analysis of the feedback on student papers reveals that teachers sometimes make arbitrary, inconsistent, and erroneous corrections. In more than one sample, teachers often correct one kind of error but ignore the same problem in a later section or another paper. Post interviews with the subjects confirm that because of time constraints and task schedules, corrections and comments tend to be more arbitrary than deliberate.

In addition to arbitrary corrections, text appropriations also occur when teachers try to rewrite student experiences:

(1) That night I felt good about myself. (2) I thought I just did something unusual and out of my routine satisfied me. (3) I had fun that day and proved to my friends that I was not different with all of them (4) But still, there was this part of me that felt guilty. (5) I knew I was wrong and yet I gave in. ~~(6) I disappointed not only my teachers but also my parents and also God. (7) It was something bad and uncalled for and very unlike me. (8) I tried to defend myself in my mind thinking that I was just trying to be like friends and my parents not knowing that will not disappoint them. (9) Well, that was what I thought until the day that I wished did not happen came.~~

You tend to explain more than you should tell a story. Focus on the story and let it explain itself.

Well, that was how my mind kept my conscience quiet.
my mind

The marginal comment explains the teacher's deletion of sentences six to nine which do 'tend to explain more than necessary'. Unfortunately, the action also alters the student's original meaning. Whereas the original version has the student musing about her thoughts at the end of the day, the revised sentence now reads as if the student has found a way to rationalize her fears. Since this idea is not found in the student's original text it is not part of her intentional message but is a result of the meaning imposed by teacher on the text.

This tendency to appropriate the writing process is perhaps one of the greatest dangers of feedback writing. Without a doubt, one of the teacher's roles is to interpret student writing but when the lines between interpretation and rewriting become blurred the feedback becomes more a tool for text appropriation than a response strategy. One reason that could explain this is that writing teachers frequently operate with an 'ideal text' in mind which sometimes interferes with their ability to read and interpret students' texts. This 'ideal text' is rooted in their own preconceived notions about how the topic should be written and is somehow transferred to students who take it to mean that their purpose is to meet their teacher's expectations by allowing him or her to direct and sometimes take control of the writing, a condition which Sperling and Freedman (1987) have termed the 'good girl syndrome'¹.

¹ In this case study, researchers studied the interaction between a student, Lisa, and her teacher, Mr. Peterson, as manifested in an exchange of drafts and written comments. The student was highly motivated with an equally high scholastic record but despite having above average critical thinking and writing skills, she still depended heavily on her teacher's

The concept of an ideal text can also lead to unclear, confusing, and inconsistent responses. For example, one student writes

...Martial law didn't make it any better, so why did Marcos start Martial law? It was because of the armed forces, student, labor, nationalist and other populist sectors in the 1971 constitutional convention and the Supreme Court.

wrong place, no sources documented

these may be irrelevant to your work

The contradictory statements on the margins are probably unintentional and represent the externalization of the teacher's thought processes as she marks the paper. However, since students are rarely privy to the teacher's thoughts, these comments appear unreasonable and misleading when in fact they result from the teacher's desire to help the student revise the work. Unfortunately, because the teacher addresses the text by simultaneously acting as editor and a writing coach, the result is a mixed-up message.

Externalizing spontaneous thought processes can be confusing because sometimes teachers fail to acknowledge that feedback giving is also a work in progress. As such, some teachers write impulsively, without thinking their thoughts through. For example, one teacher writes, "___, your purpose here is supposedly to discuss the Muslim secession problem. The thing is, you didn't really discuss it. You have researched on the problem but nothing about it per se" implying that that student has managed to both do and not do the research. In another terminal comment, another teacher writes, "needs more focus. Otherwise, you thought this out well." Sometimes a teacher's effort to provide some positive recognition of the student's efforts results in unintentionally ambiguous messages.

Other problems also arise when teachers combine global and local comments by asking students to edit for tense consistency while at the same time making them rewrite the paragraph to improve clarity. Comments like these are confusing for students because often times they are used to copying corrections verbatim and remain unsure in deciding which

comments because he was considered an authority and she aimed to please. As the study progressed it became increasingly clear that Lisa was using Mr. Peterson's comments to try and approximate what he had expected her to say and how to go about saying it.

comment requires priority. Also, they may recognize, even if the teacher does not, that to change the content of the text will necessarily alter or even disregard these surface errors.

Finally, the liberal use of the term 'awkward' can be troublesome especially if teachers use the term as a blanket statement to cover up their failure to provide a more accurate diagnosis of the student's writing problems. In the following text, the term is used thrice to call attention to three different kinds of structural problems, from diction, phonetic misunderstanding, to vague ideas:

(1) First it is commented to destroy tradition. (2) Since time and memorial, the church has said that priest should be of this standard. (3) No change should take place, and sadly, this complaint is unheard of. (4) The fact of the matter is that times change and people change ... (5) Unless the church changes with the times, it will remain unpopular to the new generation of not deteriorate even more. (6) Tradition, when obsolete, should not be followed anymore.

awkward

awk/vague

This example illustrates how cryptic awkward comments can be. In fact, one teacher's candid admission was that "there are times when I can't make heads or tails of my student's sentences so I just mark them as awkward. I'm not entirely sure what is wrong but it just sounds wrong." This admission is also an acknowledgement that a teacher's position as instructor does not preclude his or her own share of uncertainties and apprehensions about language. At the same time, it may also be indicative of teachers' unwillingness to reveal the same apprehensions to the students lest it undermine their position in the classroom. Perhaps this attitude is rooted in the belief that most students, especially ESL ones, place an implicit trust in the expertise of their teachers as holders of absolute knowledge in the classroom. As a consequence, teachers generally feel obliged fulfill that function.

INITIAL, MARGINAL, AND TERMINAL COMMENTS: NEGATIVELY-INCLINED AND TEACHER-CENTERED

Another emerging pattern noted is although the value of positive feedback is not lost, teachers still tend to write more negative or neutrally-phrased comments. Some of these positive comments come in the form of non-verbal signals such as

check marks and smiling faces. Some teachers also address their students by name to add a personal touch to either their terminal or initial comment. However, most of the responses on student texts, whether draft or final papers, tend to gloss over the positive aspects of the text with generic statements. The general impression is that teachers are more comfortable assuming the role of evaluator, passing critical judgments on papers, rather than acting as interested readers or coach, helping students along a process. Hence, generic and negatively inclined responses dominate the papers.

Other responses reveal that teachers make board proclamations and assumptions about student texts and writing that are outside the scope of the current task. For instance, one teacher writes on a final paper: *OK but lacks editing. You should practice more or read more.* Certainly, there is no denying the truism behind such advice for developing long-term writing skills but it does not help fix the student's more immediate writing problems because it has no bearing on the overall evaluation of the present paper. On another student draft paper, a different teacher writes: *this paper has no focus, no organization, certainly no concrete support.* Here, the teacher assumes that the student ought to know better than to submit a paper lacking in form and substance, an assumption that the student obviously does not share or is not capable of sharing. Although there are students who will try to get away with shoddy writing, there are also those who are earnest enough to try but are limited in their capabilities. Thus, it is possible that what appears to a teacher as chaotic and unorganized thinking is actually the result of careful and deliberate action.

The comments found on these papers are similar in content to responses on other student papers checked by the same teachers. This same pattern is likewise evidenced in both draft and final papers, suggesting that like their L1 counterparts, ESL teachers make almost no distinctions when looking at draft or final papers and that their comments are virtually interchangeable between the two. Both are treated as fixed and final products and are given short evaluative statements that fail to concretize the shortcomings of each.

It also indicates that teachers find it difficult to respond to a text unless they can treat it as a finished product regardless of the writing stage it belongs to. Moreover, teachers tend to evaluate drafts and final papers not by weighing the pros and cons of what the students had

accomplished but by what they did not do. By focusing on the students' failures, such as failing to read more or provide sharper focus and better organization, the teacher fails to consider what the intention of the student actually is.

Only a handful of papers contain terminal or initial comments that detail the teacher's overall impression of the student's writing and provide concrete recommendations to improve the rhetorical and content aspects of the work. The papers, however, do not belong to one teacher but represent the work of three different teachers, which indicate that teachers themselves are not consistent when providing detailed feedback. Certainly, there are many factors that could explain why only a handful of papers receive quality responses such as time constraints, task schedules, teacher fatigue, class sizes and teaching load being only a few of them. But this fact certainly points to the arbitrary nature of feedback if teachers cannot maintain the same standard for all their students and yet subject all students to the same inflexible standards of the writing process.

Aside from confusing and erroneous content, most marginal and terminal comments also display varying tones of acceptance, appreciation, or rejection. Some negative reactions to student papers can be punitive or even hostile. In one paper, a student writes: Innocence and being free best characterizes a child of content and happiness. In response, the teacher scribbles the words "oh please!" in the margins, expressing distaste for the student's cliché ridden style without addressing the diction and agreement problems in the sentence.

Such heated response shows the teacher's active engagement with the student's text but it does not respond to the act of writing itself. Instead, such comments transform the text from a venue of exploratory writing to a kind of arena for one-sided rhetorical arguments from which students can put up little or no defense.

In some instances, it becomes apparent that although nothing pleases a teacher more than providing positive feedback on papers, he or she can also unwittingly reveal his or her own frustrations regarding the writing of other students. For instance, one teacher writes: _____ -- *your paper has much improved! Thank heaven for that! May the same happen to your classmates.* Other comments overflow with profuse emotions: "again – this is GREAT! A true masterpiece!" or "You did it! Yes! ☺!"

The preponderance of negative feedback also calls attention to the superiority of the teacher's position vis-à-vis the student. In some cases, the comments tend to polarize classroom relationships by calling specific attention to the teacher's dominant position as an authoritative and expert "I" entity versus the student's more passive and novice "you" status as seen in the following examples

Rewrite this research paper and follow the format I gave; Your introd was good – you followed the format I gave; You didn't follow the format I gave. Better rewrite this research paper and stick to the prescribed format.

In general, the dominance of negative and neutrally-phrased comments displays the teachers unwillingness to engage in more personal relationships with their students. Although the presence of neutrally phrased comments indicates that teachers recognize the harmful repercussions of too many negative comments, it also demonstrates that teachers prefer to err on the side of caution when responding to student writing. At the same time, they tend to curb overly positive responses to avoid making students feel too overconfident about their writing abilities and to force them to strive for greater excellence. Perhaps one other reason for the hesitation to bestow more positive responses is the perceived need to preserve social distance in the classroom as a means of maintaining class control. Polino (1973) reported in her study of student-teacher relationships that teachers view an ideal relationship as one where the teacher avoids drawing too close to the student for fear of undermining her own sense of authority. It is possible that this same reasoning finds its way, however subconsciously, into the feedback style of teachers.

Interestingly enough, there is a marked difference in the feedback styles of junior and senior faculty. While the subjects' age groups indicate no real differences in terms of the feedback's communicability, there is a noticeable difference in the degree of emotional distance and teacher status exhibited by both groups. The junior faculty, those 35 years and below with less than five years of teaching experience, tend to exhibit less emotional distance and their comments tend to foster a more peer-oriented relationship. In contrast, more senior teachers tend to be less personal and more distanced and objective in their relationships with students. This finding is consistent even when draft and final papers were compared. Junior teachers are more consistent in providing personalized and balanced comments on student

papers; senior teachers seem more inclined to maintain a strictly professional relationship with their students.

IMPLICATIONS TO ELT

In general, the overall findings of this study confirm Zamel's (1985, 86) earlier conclusions that teachers tend to

...misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, write contradictory statements, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.

After close examinations, it becomes apparent that problems encountered in an L1 setting are almost the same as the ones found in an L2 context. Although there is a genuine attempt on the teachers' part to communicate with their students, such responses are usually negatively inclined, product-oriented, limited, non-specific, and authoritative. Teachers prefer to maintain an objective, distanced and semi-formal relationship with their students and few try to cultivate more personal classroom relationships.

These findings indicate that response styles have changed little in the last fifteen years. The same teacher habits have persisted to the present and seem difficult to unlearn. Perhaps this observation tells us that teachers are products of habit and experience more than trends and theories and therefore, we find it so difficult, on some subconscious level, to let go of certain practices. The authoritative and teacher-centered responses recorded in this study suggest that certain teaching practices still echo the teacher-fronted pedagogy that dominated ELT for several decades. For the most part, we teach the way we were taught and for many of us, years of product-approach methodology are difficult to unlearn. As Kennedy (1991, 16 in Bailey et al. 1996: 16) has stated

The conventional images of teaching that derive from [teachers'] childhood experiences make it difficult to alter teaching practices and explain in part why teaching has remained so constant over many decades of reform movements.

Understanding what teachers are saying in their feedback imposes certain challenges to second language teaching.

The first challenge lies in recognizing that feedback, like any writing process, is a chaotic procedure hindered by faulty, ambiguous or mixed messages. Thus, as composition teachers we need to pay closer attention to the messages we pass on to our students and be more critical and accurate in our diagnosis of student writing. At the same time, we need to examine our personal histories and determine if and to what extent our present practices have been influenced by past experiences.

Such self-exploration might help us to come to terms with the roles that we assume in the writing classroom. Perhaps one way of making feedback more attuned to our students' needs is to diversify the roles we play in the classroom. Instead of always acting as a judge or evaluator, we can act as interested readers, designated audience, or even a writing coach to suit the particular needs of each writing stage. Nevertheless, we must remain careful that our roles do not overlap with one another. In other words, we cannot be both judge and coach at the same time. Internalizing our different roles may help to clarify the way we respond to student texts.

The second challenge is to recognize that feedback is more than just an intervention tool. It is first and foremost a point of interaction, of communication between student and teacher. It is a way to help students negotiate and evaluate meaning and is, therefore, both process- and product-oriented. This recognition does not overlook the unique cognitive and social forces surrounding each student-teacher relationship, which vary from class to class and student to student as Sperling and Freedman (1987) have claimed. On the contrary, it recognizes that such forces dictate the acceptable parameters and reasonableness of feedback content and tone, whether positive or negative, general or specific. In other words, what might seem as negatively charged feedback in one student-teacher relationship might be perfectly acceptable in another. By taking into consideration the individual relationships we share with our students we can decide when and what kind of feedback is warranted without obscuring meaning or intent. For instance, it is possible to write critical statements to one

student but not to another because we know that the former is not one to take things personally.

In the end, it is only the individual teacher who can identify what an ideal student-teacher feedback relationship entails. The patterns discussed here are by no means generalizations about the nature of all teacher responses. At best they provide a starting point with which to evaluate existing practices by acknowledging the fallibility and limitations posed by written feedback.

One practice that needs review is our habit of writing generic responses. These findings suggest that for teacher feedback to be more effective, responses need to cater to individual needs. But given that teachers seldom have time for detailed written feedback, we need to find ways to supplement written feedback with other forms of oral feedback to facilitate classroom dialogue, clarify statements and downplay the negative impact of some responses. We can also ask students if they share the same understanding of the feedback as we had intended and explore other strategies to see how students respond to the feedback we give and whether or not they understand what they are being told to do.

Accepting the limitations of written feedback implies that we are also more willing to make less assumptions about the text, differentiate between the feedback we give on drafts and final papers and adopt a more flexible means of responding to student writing, one that takes into consideration task constraints, task designs, individual and stylistic differences, writing contexts, among others. In other words, we should not limit the notion of feedback to its written form, which tends to be uni-directional, but explore all aspects of this dynamic exchange as a means of negotiating meaning.

These challenges all demand for greater reflective practice on our parts. They demand an introspective look at the values we hold when we respond to student texts and a willingness to break established practices and old habits. They dare us to research into our own classroom practices and analyze the data that confront us by asking what it reveals about our teaching styles and our selves. Perhaps we might discover that by changing our feedback behavior we can help students clarify and revise their writing. By re-examining what we say

in our feedback we can refocus the learning from the student's perspective and learn alongside our students.

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