

Teacher Written Feedback on L2 Student Writings

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Abstract—In the past few decades, a great number of researches have been conducted on the teacher written feedback and its influence on L2 student writings. The researches are mainly concerned with the major types, and the characteristics of the feedback as well as student reactions to the feedback, or the impact of teacher written feedback and that of peer feedback, indicating that feedback is still a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. This paper has taken a further consideration on the appropriate, effective and efficient teacher written feedback on L2 student writings by engaging students' mind with minimal marking and by ensuring students' positive feelings with demonstrated improvement, which enables students to expand their language and ideas, the ultimate goal of their learning in writing. Thus, the paper presents the four principles of producing effective teacher written feedback.

Index Terms—teacher written feedback, L2 students, English writings

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing, as an important communicative activity, has been paid much more attention to recently. Researches home and abroad into feedback on L2 student writings have covered the teacher written feedback (Cumming, 1985; Guo & Qin, 2006; Hyland, 1998; Jacobs, 1998; Kepner, 1991; Li, 2011; Master, 1995; Wang, 2006; Wang, 2007; Zamel, 1985), and L2 student response to teacher written feedback (Chen, 1998; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris et al., 1997; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Straub, 1997; Yu, 2000). The necessity and specific techniques of teacher written feedback on student writing in English have always been a heated and challenging topic of improving student writing proficiency. Up to now, the research findings are different, inconclusive, even contradictory, and in L2 writing, sparse (Leki, 1990). Even though the research results lead to some questions about the usefulness and effectiveness of teacher written feedback, we can't deny the fact that students want feedback and teachers feel obliged to provide it. So this paper discusses what kind of teacher written feedback is appropriate, effective and efficient, and how to enable students to really benefit from it for the sake of achieving writing proficiency.

II. PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON STUDENT ENGLISH WRITINGS

Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. It may have a definition of input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision, usually in the form of comments, questions, and suggestions (Keh, 1990). Through feedback, the writer may learn the reader's confusion caused by the writer's insufficient information, illogical organization, poor development of ideas, or even inaccurate usage and choice of words and tense. Students are motivated to continue a series of revisions especially through positive feedback. Hence, it is feedback that drives the writer polishing their drafts again and again to bring expression closer and closer to intention in successive drafts and eventually accomplish the final end-product. Just as the saying goes, learning writing is through writing. Major types of feedback in a writing process approach are: peer feedback (Dheram, 1995; Keh, 1990; Mei & Yuan, 2010), conference and comment (sometimes, evaluation, and error correction are included).

Among them, teacher written feedback is the most important feedback that L2 students expect to receive. It is indispensable in the students' whole writing process. Usually we can easily find the interpretation gap between the teacher and the students, especially in written feedback. That is, a misfit between teacher written feedback on compositions and the learner interest—between what a teacher gives and what students would like to get (Lee, 2008). And this mismatch between the concerns of the students and those of the teacher is sure to affect the practical effectiveness of the written feedback. As a result, the students always feel at a loss how to handle the feedback in their revising work. Such unsatisfactory occurrence is rooted in lack of interaction between reader and writer either in spoken or in written language. As we know, a common feedback situation is one in which the teacher takes students drafts away and provides a written comment on them. After that, there is no opportunity for both to contribute to the discussion. On the one hand, the writer's ideas are represented only by the draft and they are not always so skillful in expressing their intentions. Thus, the teacher relying on the writer's inadequate performance is likely to give misguided comments. On the other hand, the writers, faced with the puzzled remarks, will not obtain the full evidence for revision. Misunderstanding is expanding. Under these circumstances, it may be necessary for several cycles of students' drafting and teacher comment to take place before an acceptable version can be produced. Therefore, teachers and students need

to work more at establishing agreement on their interpretation of feedback and at improving the students' writing strategies by gaining maximal benefit from the feedback they receive.

Teachers can provide their effective written feedback appropriately by adhering to four principles.

A. Focusing on the Process rather than the Product

1. The Product Approach

The product-focused approach to EFL writing mainly refers to controlled or guided composition as mentioned. It focuses the students' attention on specific features of the written language. It focuses primarily on formal accuracy and correctness, prefers mastery of previously learned linguistic form of language to the production of original ideas, organization and style. The methodology involves the imitation and manipulation (substitution, transformation, expansion, completion, etc.) of model passages carefully constructed and graded for vocabulary and sentence pattern. "The writer is simply a manipulator of previously learned language structures; the reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor or proofreader, not especially interested in the quality of ideas or expressions but primarily concerned with formal linguistic features" (Silva, 1990). To conclude, the product-focused approach views writing as a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences into the prescribed pattern. Students learn to write by imitation of the given pattern, but they will not add anything of their own to it. What they have organized together is considered the end-product.

2. The Process Approach

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s, concentration in the teaching of writing was shifted from the written product to the process of writing. The process approach infuses "greater respect for individual writers and for the writing itself" (Hyland, 2003). Teachers begin to put increasing emphasis on how the learners write well rather than what they have written (Su & Yang, 2001). Current theory and practice in writing pedagogy acknowledges that the nature of the writing process is fundamentally social. "Writing is seen not as a de-contextualized solo-performance but as an interactive, social process of construction of meaning between writer and reader" (Arndt, 1993).

The process approach (the Tapestry approach, called by Scarcella, 1992, p.122-5) is defined as a multiple-draft process which consists of prewriting input (to generate ideas), drafting (to emphasize content, author's ideas), revising more than once (to polish the communication of those ideas). As far as the rhetoric composition is concerned, successful writing technique learning still requires the process approach. The main concern of rhetoric in writing is the rhetorical, structural, logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms. It stresses the elements of the paragraph (topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences, and transitions), and various ways to the development of the paragraph (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, classification, definition, and so on). Attention is also given to the essay development: elements of an essay (introduction, body, and conclusion), and organizational patterns (narrative, descriptive, explanation, and argumentation). It is likely that students will not be so skillful in performing such complicated writing techniques until after they have practiced several drafts.

The process approach is writer-centered, and it takes student writing as the central course material and requires no strict, predetermined syllabus; rather, problems are treated as they emerge. In the students' whole writing process, the teacher only shows what should be corrected instead of correcting the compositions completely. With the relative freedom in students writing, teacher's immediate feedback through the whole writing process appears more and more important for students to revise their drafts.

In the particular teaching context—college English teaching to non-English majors, because of large class size and very limited classroom instruction, the process approach has been viewed as impractical as too time-consuming. So, a teacher who uses a process approach need to draw some techniques from other approaches as the students need them, such as the paragraph-pattern approach (rhetoric). We seldom find a writing classroom where a teacher only adopts one approach which excluding all others. It may be practical and beneficial to be eclectic in teaching writing, that is to say, to combine the merits of the approaches rather than stick to a single approach. Some elements of different approaches can be successfully combined. Therefore, the process approach connected with rhetoric, in the long run, will be effective to develop learners writing ability for its agreement with the nature of writing and its practicing of the specific writing techniques.

B. Engaging Students' Mind

As for the various ways of providing feedback on the form of the students writing, the indirect marking which engages students' minds in interpreting has proved to be effective. Many earlier studies (Ferris, 2003; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982) have found indirect error feedback can benefit students more than direct feedback in their writing in the long run. Research generally indicates that overt error correction by the teacher is ineffective and may actually hinder students' progress and fail to help students learn on their own (Wang & Wu, 2012). It is very tedious and time-consuming for the teacher, and disheartening for the students if they get back their compositions almost covered with too much ink. Simply writing out a correct response is unlikely to offer much of a stimulus to future improvement. Therefore, our approach must give the students clear awareness of their errors without reducing the benefit of conscientious marking. The widely-used means of accomplishing correction are to use a shorthand of correcting codes located above the errors or in the margins without showing where the errors are in the line; and to make crosses in the margins alongside the lines in which errors occur, either indicating how many errors there are or not. Whatever correcting symbols teachers use, they must make students understand what they mean before or during this correction.

The obvious advantage of marking the students' errors with symbols is that teachers can save much time by freeing themselves from such correcting burden. What's more important, however, is that the students have to engage their minds in resolving their own problems. It leaves them with enough room for having the opportunity to identify their errors and correct them before returning the paper for reassessment. Correcting codes may generate pair and group discussion as students collaborate in the activity. With clues hinted by such minimal marking technique (Haswell, 1983; Hyland, 1990; Zheng, 1999), students are motivated to consider correction actively, which is more effective than the mere passive reading of teacher corrections. As a result, they can learn from their mistakes and the process of self-correction as well. Some studies suggest that students can improve their writing by being made responsible for correcting their own grammatical errors, and suggest that students are able to reduce the number of errors in their subsequent writing when the teacher has marked all errors using the correcting codes (Shrum & Glisan, 2009, p.167-188). Regarding the specific techniques of marking, the proficiency level of the learners should be noted. When the students are unable to identify their own errors, the teacher assists them—by marking the major errors with correcting symbols that help the learners identify their errors and fix them. Later, when the students have gained more competence as editors, the teachers indicate where the major errors have occurred by placing x's in the margins of the students' written papers.

Apart from the minimal marking that involves in students minds to self-correct, a student self-monitoring technique (Charles, 1990) in responding to problems in written English is also indispensable of the students' cognitive performance. That is, students annotate their drafts with comments or present their problems before handing them in. The teacher then gives corresponding opinions on the points raised by the students. Writers and readers' minds participate in one writing process. Regardless of the students' actions before or after the teacher written feedback, the teacher should make great efforts to activate the students' thinking about their writing problems on their own initiative all the time.

C. Ensuring Students' Positive Feelings

Providing appropriate written feedback requires the teacher to think it over seriously not only in cognitive way (e.g. on form), but also in affective way.

Krashen's (1982, p.31) affective filter hypothesis "captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of L2 acquisition". As we know, human beings are emotional creatures. Their emotional states and affective factors filter what they take in. That is to say, affective filter controls the entry of input. A strong filter allows less input to be processed whereas a weak filter allows more input to be processed. Hence, the writers' personality, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, must be taken into consideration for the teacher to provide marking or comment feedback. Behavioral scientists have done countless experiments to prove that any human being tends to repeat an act which has been immediately followed by a pleasant result. If kids know they are working for a reward and can focus on relatively challenging task, they show the most creativity. As Graham (2012) put it, "Instead of drowning students' compositions in critical red ink, the teacher will get far more constructive results by finding one or two things which have been done better than last time, and commenting favorably on them. I believe that a student knows when he has handed in something above his usual standard, and that he waits hungrily for a belief comment in the margin to show him that the teacher is aware of it, too." Demonstrated improvement can be a useful tool for increasing self-confidence and providing some hope. Therefore, positive comments are to be offered as much as possible to arouse and strengthen the writers' positive feelings in the process of their writing improvement. In most cases, positive words result in positive effects.

However, only praise or criticism feedback is not working as expected all the time to all the students. The students need the loving force-praising comment, from which all creation flows; and yet the approval alone is incomplete, even misleading, finally, destructive. It needs the balance of the force of these cautions, such as "Wrong. Correct. Review. Improve." The two conflicting evaluations are often working complementarily. Between the two poles of affirmation and doubt, both in the name of love and help, the students try to follow their true course with the guidance of the teacher to arrive at their destination. The results of behaviorists' experiments have demonstrated the importance of praise and criticism, and the necessity of feedback. Those who were praised improved dramatically. Those who were criticized improved also, but not so much. And the scores of the children who were ignored hardly improved at all. Interestingly, the brightest children were helped just as much by criticisms by praise, but the less able children reacted badly to criticism, needed praise the most. As can be seen, the majority of the students are so eager to accept the teacher's approving feedback on their previous performance that we should be ready to ensure their positive feeling by providing effective feedback appropriately.

D. Expanding Students' Language and Ideas

Even though engaging the students' minds and ensuring the students' positive feelings need to be taken into account in providing the effective teacher written feedback, the teachers will never leave expanding the students' language and ideas out of account. Expanding the students' language and deepening their ideas are not only the signals of their improvement in writing but also the ultimate goal of their learning in writing.

Writing is a way of discovering meaning since it refines thought and empowers students by enabling them to affect their readers. Writing is a complex, creative and thinking process. Meaning of a composition is central and form

develops from meaning (Scarcella, 1992, p. 176-7). Form serves content. They are united as one. While the language in writing is expanded, the idea is opened up and thinking is deepened. Such expansion of language is far beyond the correction of form alone, which cannot solve all the language problems. It includes both correcting form and enlarging the meaning of one specific word. Not surprisingly, we often find that many students' compositions are lacking in content in spite of the correct usage of words in grammar. So, to increase the quality of a composition, is dependent on helping the students to widen the meaning of their words or sentences without straying away from the main idea. For instance, as we have noticed, the details which make a paper interesting and effective are specific details. To increase students' awareness of what "specific" really means, the teacher ought to transform vague, general words and phrases into sharp and vivid ones, for example:

- (1) doing a hard job—digging for coal in a mine a mile below the surface;
- (2) walking in the street—strolling down the avenue;
- (3) an ugly nose—a small flat nose;
- (4) an untidy room—my brother's room, with sweaters, underwear, books, and toys scattered everywhere;
- (5) a moving car—the speeding Ford shooting along the highway.

Apart from the operation of the writing techniques, teacher written comments on content have been criticized for being too general, or for being too specific. Comments such as "Good" or "Good point" "Why?" are problematic, confusing students about what it compliments and leaving them no way of providing an appropriate answer. On the other extreme, if the advice is too detailed, it will hinder the students' creativity and they cannot use it on subsequent writing. Keh (1990) recommends the ways of writing effective and efficient comments: the teacher should

- (1) respond as a concerned reader to a writer rather than a grammarian or grade-giver;
- (2) note improvements: "good", plus reasons why;
- (3) refer to a specific problem, plus strategy for revision;
- (4) write questions with enough information for students to answer;
- (5) write summative comment of strengths and weaknesses;
- (6) ask "honest" questions as a reader to a writer rather than statements which assume too much about the writer's intentional meaning.

Teacher written feedback aims at providing a tool for students to reassess and redraft their work. To ensure that all the teacher's hints are absorbed and carried out by the students, we must persuade students to reflect on and to act on the feedback we provide, even press them to do so if necessary because researches show that most of the students do not really act on the feedback except for making a mental note of the grade, the correction and the comment. Therefore, it is urgent to reinforce the students' consciousness of revising work. The students' redrafting functions as a key to converting the teacher's instruction into the students' own achievement in writing. So, as soon as the teacher has offered the thoughtful feedback on both the form and content of the students' compositions before the next lesson, he ought to be responsible for the monitoring and checking the students' subsequent revising assignments. If the students are reluctant to edit their work, an added incentive is that no grade is recorded for the assignment until self-correction has been attempted. In consequence, with the co-operative engagement of both the teacher and the student, the student's following article tends to be better either in the accuracy and vividness of language or in the profundity and substantiality of content.

III. CONCLUSION

So far we have discussed how to provide written feedback on students' compositions in an appropriate way. Before giving our responses, we need to be aware that any comments are shaped by the students' individual needs and strengths. Meanwhile, we also have to admit that each teacher has his own preference to evaluation. No matter what methods the teacher adopts in written responding, we ought to bear in mind that the teacher written feedback should aim at enabling the students to monitor their own performance and to correct themselves. The ultimate pedagogic goal is simply to lead the students to become independent of the teacher's instructions.

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