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# THE REALM OF THE RED PEN: THE IMPACT OF WRITTEN TEACHER FEEDBACK ON L2 WRITING

Review by Doug J. Brazil

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps since students first put pen to paper, teachers have written comments and corrections on their students' assignments' — in the margins, at the end of compositions, or within the body of writing itself. In recent decades a heated debate has raged around this practice: the way teachers of English respond to the writing of their students. In particular, teachers and researchers involved in second-language instruction have sought to evaluate its impact on subsequent student writing and attitudes. Such feedback comes in many shapes and forms; Saito (1994), for example, has identified such varied methods as correcting mistakes, indicating (but not correcting) mistakes, providing written commentary, and using prompts or symbols (pp. 51-52).

This article presents a historical review of the research into these methods, together with the most recent findings and their implications for classroom teaching. The historical perspective reveals a gradual process of earnest soul-searching marked at times by contradictions and extreme views, and how the debate has, like a pendulum, swung back and forth between these extremes. The article concludes with the

latest views on how and when to offer written feedback in the L2 classroom.

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

### *Early Research, Early Views: The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s*

Not surprisingly, relatively few studies dealt with the impact of teacher feedback on ESL/EFL writing in the 1950s and 1960s. Attention at that time was focused largely on the avoidance of errors. The audiolingual approach to teaching was then the dominant force in foreign language instruction; under this rigid system, as Hendrickson (1975) notes, an "obsessive" approach developed around "error correction", "avoiding error", and "overcoming errors" (p.387). Interestingly, he observes that some early researchers had adopted a "puritanical perspective" toward errors, likening them to "sins" which had to be avoided and overcome. Teacher feedback on student writing focused on immediate identification and correction of errors, presumably in order to eliminate them.

With the waning influence of audiolingualism in the 1960s, educators began to explore new approaches to errors and teacher response, and the rigid

“seek-and-destroy” attitudes toward error correction in the 50s and 60s began to give way to alternative views of feedback in the 70s. As Hendrickson observes, teachers began to experiment with a variety of feedback methods, including the use of symbols and arrows, direct corrections, (“Use the subjunctive!”), indirect corrections (question marks, underlinings), and the use of different coloured inks (pp.394-395). Nevertheless, Hendrickson adds, research at this time was overly concerned with the “Hows” of feedback without offering insights or empirical evidence into its actual effectiveness.

### ***The 1980s: doubts and soul-searching***

The rise of more communicative and humanistic styles of teaching and the new focus on meaning brought an even closer and more critical examination of teacher feedback and error correction. During this decade, researchers and educators began to question the traditional approach of providing feedback on student drafts, and second language writing research, though still closely entwined with first language writing research, began to emerge as a more separate, specialized field with a voice of its own. At this time several studies emerged to indicate that traditional teacher feedback is at best vague and unhelpful and at worst a counter-productive waste of time. In “Effects of the Red Pen”, for example, Semke (1984) demonstrates that teacher feedback and error correction can negatively affect student attitudes and writing fluency. In addition, her interesting study suggested that overt written corrections had harmful negative

effects on student motivation and attitude. For these reasons, she claimed, “the time which teachers use in correcting students’ original compositions is not well-spent” (p.201). Although critics would counter that her study focused solely on free-writing activities, Semke’s article at least succeeded in drawing attention to the “dark side” of teacher feedback. Similarly, Zamel (1985) examined the responding behaviors of 15 ESL teachers in another important study of the decade. In this article, “Responding to Student Writing”, she concluded that teacher comments are abstract, vague, and difficult to understand; furthermore, she found teacher corrections in general “confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible” (p. 79)—a rather damning appraisal of the traditional correction model. Although critics later rebuked Zamel for considering such comments out of context and failing to review how such comments were incorporated in later student drafts (see Reid, 1994), this article succeeded in sparking a lively discussion on the general effectiveness of teacher feedback.

Also during the 1980s, L2 writing research focused more and more on writing in terms of dichotomies—in other words, teacher feedback was viewed on a continuum between two alternatives, with one extreme more or less desirable. One such debate centered on *process versus product*—namely, whether to focus feedback on the process of drafting and re-drafting or on the finished product. Some researchers like Zamel (1985), for example, insisted that teachers should try to facilitate revision by responding more to work in progress and less to the finished product.

Going a step further, Fathman and Whalley (1990), concluded that that “teacher intervention is not always necessary” and that re-writing alone would lead to improved texts.

Other research at this time involved *global errors versus local errors*—that is, the distinction between errors that interfered with general meaning, and less critical errors at the sentence level. In contrast to the 1970s, research trends in the 1980s appear to downplay the importance of error correction of the latter type, encouraging teachers to focus more on errors that affect global meaning. A similar and related dichotomy contrasted *form versus content*—that is, focus on grammar and mechanics versus focus on organization, rhetorical features, and supporting details. As with the debate on global and local errors, research trends led educators to focus on content through drafts and re-writing, while leaving scrutiny of form and error correction to the final draft (Zamel, 1985; Robb *et al.*, 1986). Thus, in keeping with the rising popularity of ‘whole language’ teaching in the US in the 1980s, many researchers believed that the essential meaning—the message that students wished to convey in their writing—deserved more attention than the surface form used to convey it, at least in the initial stages of writing.

Yet another important trend in the professional literature of the 1980s focused more specifically on the negative consequences of well-intentioned, but misguided teacher feedback. Recalling beliefs of the late 1960s, some researchers continued to posit that written remarks and corrections were not only ineffective but also actually

harmful in some instances. Furthermore, research in this decade began to discuss another “evil” of teacher feedback, termed *appropriation*—the process by which a teacher “steals” control of student writing by superimposing her own values onto the assignment and distracting from the original meaning with unhelpful direction and guidance. In this instance, researchers argued that teacher feedback disempowered student writers by “appropriating” their writing and forcing it to conform to “The Ideal Text” in the mind of the teacher. Looking back on academic discussions in the 1980s, Reid (1994) noted that “appropriation became a buzzword for everything that was wrong with the old approaches to teaching writing” (p. 275), and that the charges of ‘cultural imperialism’, ‘teacher tyranny’, and ‘appropriation’ led many writing instructors at that time to retreat into a “hands-off” approach to student writing, preferring to give little or no corrective feedback on student drafts (p. 273). However, given the rigid practices of error correction up through the 1960s such extreme views were perhaps a logical reaction.

### ***The 1990s and beyond: emphasis on intervention and multiple drafts***

For L2 writing, the 1990s saw a flowering of research devoted to the topic of the impact of teacher feedback. Although the new decade opened with little agreement at all between researchers and educators (Fathman and Whalley, 1990), research of the late 1990s appeared to point toward compromise, balance, and a re-consideration of some traditional practices. For example, while acknowledging that teacher feedback was far from perfect, researchers and

educators began to repudiate the concept of appropriation. Leki (1990), for instance, noted that, due to the context of the classroom and the student-teacher relationship, "appropriation at least to some extent becomes almost inevitable" because teachers want students to do well and thereby offer comments constructively, not destructively. Other researchers noted even stronger discrepancies. For example, while earlier researchers had encouraged teachers to offer feedback in the form of questions in order to avoid appropriation (Zamel, 1985), studies in the 1990s suggested that ESL students felt confused by teacher questions on their drafts and incorporated such feedback less successfully into later drafts (Ferris 1997b, Conrad and Goldstein 1990). Moreover, Ferris' research demonstrated that longer comments and text-specific feedback in the margins and ends of compositions—a bane to certain researchers in earlier decades—actually had positive results on later drafts and revisions.

Similarly, the term "teacher intervention" appears to replace "teacher appropriation" more and more in the research of this decade. Reid (1995), for example, claims that the term "appropriation" was ill-defined and offered the term "intervention" as the process by which the teacher provides feedback and corrections in the capacity of "coach, judge, facilitator, and gatekeeper" (p. 291). In Reid's view, the teacher is responsible for establishing a classroom discourse community, setting up constraints and parameters within that community, and intervening on student drafts with feedback in order to better prepare students to enter the

wider academic writing community. In the L2 classroom, according to Reid, the teacher must foster change and growth: "if a sense of community has been established and maintained in the ESL classroom, mutual respect and goodwill can overcome such [misunderstandings, inadequacies, and contradictions in teacher feedback]" (p. 281). Ferris (1997b) echoed these sentiments, claiming that, given the teacher's role of "coach, reader, and evaluator" in the classroom context, a teacher could "betray" her students by not intervening more heavily on imperfect student writing (p. 60). In other words, intervention on student writing was worth the danger of teacher appropriation in the minds of many educators in the 1990s.

Along these lines, 1990s L2 research began to consider the impact of teacher feedback in the context of successive revisions of student writing—multiple drafts. Whereas previous researchers had typically scrutinized feedback on single drafts only, this new research viewed feedback on a wider scale and found much more promising results. By re-writing and revising the same composition, as Krapels (1990) suggested, students have greater opportunity to practice their skills, gain confidence in writing, and produce writing with fewer errors. Thus, in her study "Coaching from the margins: issues in written response", Leki (1990) urged teachers to invest more time, attention, and feedback on earlier drafts of student writing and less on final draft. Later, Ferris (1995) would support this argument with a study of student feedback preferences; in her study "Student Reactions to Teacher Response in

Multiple Draft Composition Classrooms”, students indicated that they paid more attention to corrections and feedback on earlier drafts, especially in revising such drafts. As Ferris reasoned, “because students must rethink and revise previously written essay drafts, they are more likely to pay attention to their teachers advice than in a situation where they are merely receiving a graded paper with comments and corrections to apply to a completely new assignment” (p. 36). Thus, researchers in the 1990s began to repudiate the more negative views of teacher feedback from earlier decades, at least in the context of multiple drafts and revision.

## DISCUSSION

Although contradictions and inconsistencies are apparent in earlier research, the increased attention given to L2 writing in the 1990s brought such matters more into the spotlight. As previously noted, for example, researchers in the 1980s decried the practice of providing grammar feedback, noting hostile student reactions and ineffectiveness; in 1990, however, Fathman and Whalley demonstrated that “focus on grammar does not negatively affect the content of writing”, especially on later drafts (p. 186). In their study, students who received feedback on form made more improvements in writing than those who did not. Later, Leki (1990) and Saito (1994) would also conclude that grammar feedback was helpful.

As another example of inconsistencies in research, Ferris (1997b) noted “two conflicting but co-existing truths” in making generalizations in student attitudes. On one hand, students in her

study sometimes paid a great deal of attention to feedback and made substantial, effective revisions; at other times, they completely ignored and avoided suggestions in teacher commentary (p. 330).

By and large, however, one of the greatest contradictions around the debate on student feedback concerns student expectations. Although study after study had suggested previously that teacher feedback is ineffective in improving general writing skills, a flurry of research in the 1990s indicated that students actually want and expect such feedback. In the late 1980s, Radecki and Swales (1988) got a head start on this new debate by acknowledging the odd inconsistency that ESL/EFL students want feedback that has been shown to be of questionable value. In their study of ESL classes, they found that most students had a “neutral or positive reactions to heavily marked papers” (p. 357). Other research followed, challenging Semke’s (1984) warnings of student hostility and underscoring the differences between L1 and L2 students; in these studies, ESL/EFL writers were found to be receptive to teacher corrections and comments, invariably finding such feedback helpful (see Leki 1990, Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990, Leki 1991, Fathman and Whalley 1990, Ferris 1995).

In light of such findings, researchers began to discuss the “fit” between teacher feedback practices and student needs and expectations (Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990, Saito 1994). At any rate, teachers were faced with a new dilemma: simply choosing a “hands-off” approach and providing no feedback at all was not necessarily in the best interests of the

student. Leki (1991) summed up this dilemma in her results, noting that

...we must either accept the students' perceived needs to have every error corrected and accommodate that need, or we must address their preferences directly by discussing research evidence about the effectiveness of error correction. Those of us who feel that an excessive focus on error can be debilitating for students and pointlessly time-consuming for teachers must at least consider the need to explain and defend our versions of how to teach language and writing. (p. 210)

Radecki and Swales (1988) expressed similar thoughts, noting that "if [teachers] do not surface-correct, their credulity among their students can be impaired" (p. 364). A new attitude—the need to address student needs directly by sharing research results and personal views on feedback—would echo throughout other research in this area as well (Radecki and Swales 1988, Saito 1994).

## CONCLUSION

Viewing the most recent research, it becomes clear that there is no "final answer" or optimal feedback model for L2 writing. Instead, teachers and researchers have many alternatives to choose from. In general, however, the newest trends seem to point toward balance, compromise, and increased care in responding behaviors.

First of all, thanks to concerns raised in earlier decades about the possible shortcomings of feedback, teachers

should be more aware and careful in their feedback practices. Instead of pouncing, cat-like, on each and every error that they find, teachers can take more care in providing clear, text-specific, and comprehensible feedback and trust that re-writing and revision will help students to improve their writing. Along these lines, Ferris (1997b) urges teachers to take more care responding to writing, explain their feedback strategies to students, and hold students accountable for all corrections in their revision process (p. 331). In addition, teachers can achieve balance and save time in their responding behaviors—for example, in the same study, Ferris noted a "quite successful" strategy of limiting grammar feedback to summary comments at the end of a paper, coupled with underlined examples of such error problems in the body of writing (p. 327). Lee (1997) offers still another compromise, suggesting that teachers offer less feedback and corrections for advanced students and more for less advanced students. In short, teachers and researchers appear to have left behind the wilder extremes of past decades in favor of a more balanced view of feedback.

Secondly, research around L2 feedback appears to be moving more and more toward a trend in "dialogue" between students and teachers—in other words, collaboration and communication during the writing and revision process. As previously mentioned, feedback in response to successive multiple drafts better empowers students to improve their writing. In addition, recent research discusses portfolio assessment and student-teacher conferences; other researchers (Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990, Leki 1990, Ferris 1995) even advocate classroom journals where students can

respond to—and disagree with—teacher feedback on their earlier drafts. Furthermore, as noted before, many researchers recommend sharing research results with students and discussing questionable practices; moreover, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) suggest “clear student-teacher agreements on feedback procedures and student training in handling feedback” (p. 176). In this way, such practices can better promote a positive environment and more open communication between student and teacher.

In conclusion, despite decades of lively debate, the jury still seems to be out on the topic of the overall effectiveness of teacher feedback on ESL/EFL writing. With further research and continued cooperation between the academic community, we may one day develop clear guidelines around teacher feedback practices, thus benefiting future generations of students and teachers alike.

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## IMPLICATIONS

***First and foremost, realize that ESL/EFL students expect (and often respond favourably to) feedback and be prepared to address these expectations.***

- Be clear about your own personal approach to error correction and feedback.
- Be prepared to use compromise and balance in error correction and feedback.
- Bear in mind that students will incorporate error correction and feedback most successfully in the context of revision and multiple drafts.
- Foster and encourage a student-teacher “dialogue” around student writing and revision.
- Hold students accountable for acting upon the feedback and corrections they receive, either in the context of revision/redrafting or in the student/teacher dialogue.



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