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Providing Feedback on Students' Writing to Stimulate Thinking

KWAH POH FOONG

Introduction

When teaching a methodology course on process writing, I asked a class of pre-service teachers to provide some constructive comments on an essay, but I found that most of the students responded by correcting linguistic errors in the essay. This seems to indicate that the students' notion of feedback is that editing is the correction of errors, which is probably due to their writing experience during their school days. The following is an example of how a student described his experience:

Naturally, I found the going tough and writing English compositions turned out to be particularly difficult for me. The grades I got were very low and there were red markings all over my exercise books. Spelling mistakes here, grammar mistakes there. It was really demoralizing. The phobia of writing grew in me and this greatly affected my love for the English language. Fortunately my condition improved a little towards the end of my secondary school days.

When writing is taught as a means to reinforce language skills, very often students are asked to write a composition in class, with or without preparation, which will then be handed to the teacher for grading. Students will get back the composition with red markings showing the errors that they have made. In such an approach to teaching composition, we find that the focus is on form rather than on the thinking process and the construction of meaning. The feedback that students obtain from the teacher is usually a response to their errors. Here, the teacher does not play the role of a facilitator or a reader, but that of a proofreader.

In the interactive and process approach to writing, writing is seen as a thinking process as well as a communicative and social act.

Besides refining their thoughts on paper, writers also write to convey meaning to an audience, so it is necessary for them to establish a reciprocal relationship with the readers (Nystrand, 1986). In such an approach, the teacher assumes the roles of a facilitator and a general reader in giving responses that stimulate rethinking and the development of a sense of audience.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the rationale for providing feedback and to share some helpful pedagogical suggestions with writing teachers on how to give feedback that encourages students to rethink what they have written and create reader-based compositions.

When should feedback be given?

A common practice in the traditional approach to writing is that comments are given on students' writing by the teacher only when they hand in their essays for evaluation. According to Healy (1980), feedback given at the end product is rather ineffective. It is more effective that drafts of student writers be read by an audience during the process of writing as this allows writers to try out their drafts on readers in the class and to develop an awareness of readers' needs. As Sommers (1982) wrote:

As writers we need and want thoughtful commentary to show us when we have communicated our ideas and when not, raising questions from a reader's point that may not have occurred to us as writers. We want to know if our writing has communicated our intended meaning, if not, what questions or discrepancies our reader sees that we, as writers, are blind to (p.148).

Other research studies (Ziv, 1984; Freedman, 1987) have also indicated that comments on intermediate drafts have resulted in improvement on the final drafts of students. Furthermore, if teachers want to encourage students to rethink what they have written, it is necessary that comments on students' compositions be given in earlier drafts for them to have any effective impact on the revision process.

What kind of feedback is effective?

The kind of responses given by teachers on students' drafts can have an impact on students' perceptions and attitudes toward writing such as the case of the pre-service teacher mentioned at the beginning of the paper. Therefore, responses given in earlier drafts should not only focus on errors; instead they should encourage rethinking and the development of ideas. This will help students to perceive writing as a means of constructing meaning for an audience and as a thinking process rather than as merely writing correct sentences.

In comparing the effects of different methods of teacher response on students' writing, Semke (1984) found that marking all errors did not improve students' writing skills as errors still persisted even though teachers meticulously corrected them, and that corrections "may have a negative effect on student attitudes" (p. 195) toward writing. The group which received comments and questions rather than corrections showed more progress and had more positive attitudes toward writing. Similarly, Sheppard (1992) discovered that holistic response on content is more effective than on form as students who received comments on content showed improvement in the quality of their writing. In studying the effects of feedback on errors of second language writers, Robb et al. (1986) concluded that the amount of time teachers spent on correcting errors "might be more profitably spent in responding to more important aspects of student writing" (p. 91). Other studies have also shown that comments on content were more helpful and effective, especially those that were focused and not wordy (Beach, 1979, Hillocks, 1986). Studies on student writers further revealed that good or skilled writers revised content more than form (Perl, 1979; Sommers, 1980; Zamel, 1983).

All these studies suggest that comments on earlier drafts should focus on content more than form in order to help students improve their writing and thinking abilities. That is not to say that we should neglect the linguistic aspects of a composition. The emphasis on errors can be done during editing, after students have rethought what they have written and revised their ideas and organization. In responding to students' drafts, it is important for us to make a distinction between revising and editing or proofreading. Revising is rethinking of ideas and content in the essay; editing or proofreading is more of a mechanical process of looking for errors.

Pedagogical Suggestions

Feedback from teachers can be given through written responses and conferences.

(a) Written Responses

In providing written responses on students' drafts, the teacher plays the roles of a general reader and a facilitator, responding to what students have written and offering suggestions on how to improve their essays. Teachers' responses should be a means of facilitating learning through questioning, providing suggestions, and allowing students to take charge of their own revisions, that is, to return control of the essay to students by allowing them to make their own decisions in the revision process.

Some pedagogical suggestions, which I found helpful in giving responses to students' compositions, are given by Larson (1986), Murray (1987), and Fowler et al. (1992).

- Refrain from imposing the views of the teacher onto students' essays and avoid doing the thinking for students if writing is perceived as a discovery and learning process.
- Provide a mix of praises, suggestions, and criticisms, for example, noting points of interest and confusion, requesting for more information or stronger support, and sharing feelings of pleasure and agreement.
- Avoid giving too many comments which can be counterproductive. Be selective and focused because problems can vary in importance depending on the particular essay. For example, for narrative or descriptive essays, the comments might focus on the lack of specific details or illogical sequencing of events (see Appendix A). For expository and argumentative essays, attention might be given to the thesis and inadequate support.
- Use summary comments at the end of the paper to identify the more serious problems (and strengths, too) and to suggest possible steps for solving the problems through revision.

Developing a set of priorities allows the teacher to point out the different problem areas in the essay and to direct the student's attention to the more important kinds of problems (see Appendix A).

- Try not to deal with mechanical errors if the essay has major problems with ideas and organization. Comments on persistent linguistics errors could be made if the ideas in the draft are satisfactory.
- Avoid using red pen, for the color is always associated with errors which may have a negative effect on students' perceptions of writing. Using a pencil is less disturbing and more practical as it allows the teacher to revise remarks which may not be appropriate or which may sound rather judgemental after second thought.

In sum, written responses on students' essays should be more facilitative, that is, giving comments that stimulate students to think about what they have written, rather than directive or judgemental. In my experience, comments given in the form of questions and suggestions tend to encourage and stimulate thinking (see Appendix A) as students are not told what to do, but are forced to rethink the intended meaning they want to convey to the readers. On the other hand, directive comments tend to dictate to students what and how they should revise their compositions.

(b) Conferences

Another way in which teachers can provide feedback on students' writing is through conferencing with students. Conferences can be conducted at any time during the process of writing and held at the students' desks as the teacher walks around the classroom, at the teacher's desk, or at a special writing conference table. Tompkins (1990) has given some helpful suggestions on when and how conferences can be held.

- *On the spot Conferences.* The teacher confers briefly with the students at their desks to see how they are progressing.

- *Prewriting Conferences:* The teacher and students could discuss possible ideas for writing, how to narrow a broad topic, or how to gather and organize information before writing.
- *Drafting Conferences:* Students talk to the teacher about a specific problem they have in writing their essays, and they can brainstorm how to solve it.
- *Revising Conferences:* The teacher could meet with students to discuss how to revise their compositions. These conferences allow students to have a sense of an audience and obtain feedback on how well they have communicated.
- *Editing Conferences:* These conferences are to review the compositions that students have proofread and to help them correct errors.
- *Instructional "Mini-lesson" Conferences:* The teacher meets with students to provide special instruction on one or two specific grammatical problems.
- *Assessment Conferences:* In these sessions, the teacher talks to students about their growth as writers, and students reflect on their writing abilities and set learning goals to improve their writing.

For teachers teaching large classes, I would recommend that the first three modes of conferences be conducted at the students' desks when students seek for assistance while the teacher walks round the class to see how students are progressing. For revising, editing, and instructional conferences, meeting with small groups might be more practical considering the large number of students in the class. In most of these conferences, teachers can decide to confer with students individually, in pairs, or in groups. When teaching a big class, it would be practical to conduct pair or group conferences as they are less time-consuming. For students who have not been exposed to conferences, I would suggest conducting pair or group conferences as some students may feel more comfortable and less intimidated talking to the teacher in pairs or in a group, and at the same time they are able to share their writing experiences. Alternatively, individual conferences

can be conducted when students feel more comfortable in talking to the teacher in an informal manner or when they request for individual discussions.

When conducting conferences, it is important that students be given ample opportunity to talk about their essays. The teacher should not dominate the conference by telling students what they should do. Constructive conferences are those in which the teacher responds to students' comments and questions directly and personally and acts as a listener and a guide, offering suggestions and choices for students to consider when revising their drafts. Such interactive conferences will promote better understanding and rapport between the teacher and students. Through conferences, students are able to perceive writing as a communicative and learning process in which the students' views are taken into consideration. At the same time, the teacher is able to question students about various aspects of the ideas they have presented in order to stimulate them to think and suggest alternative ways which students could revise their compositions. In view of the advantages of conferences, students should be encouraged to confer with the teacher at any time during the process of writing.

Conclusion

In reacting to students' writing, teachers can decide which form of feedback they would like to use: written responses, conferences, or a combination of both. Conferences held just after students have received written comments from the teacher can involve more student participation as students will be able to contribute more by commenting on their own essays, asking for clarification on the teacher's comments, explaining why they have made certain choices, and discussing how they would want to revise their drafts.

Besides teachers' written comments and conferences, class discussion and peer-response can be other forms of feedback that students can obtain for their writing. In providing additional sources of feedback, students can receive multiple viewpoints on their work and at the same time develop their skills as critical readers. The teacher need not be the only person to respond to students' essays; both the teacher and peers can be readers in the classroom.

Responding to students' writing on earlier drafts has to be an integral part of the writing process. Whatever form of feedback a teacher wishes to use in the classroom will be a valuable learning process to students as long as the responses given encourage and stimulate students to think.

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Appendix A

A Sample of Teacher's Comments on a Student's Essay

Title?

One Saturday night, my parent brought me to a hawker central for supper. I was so hungry that I order a lot of foods. I ate so much that I was lazy to walk home. Planning to spent my time here.

Teacher's comments: *What food did you order? The last part is confusing to the reader. Explain logically what you did after you finished your supper at the hawkers' centre.*

When I reach home, I felt so sleepy and went to sleep. While I was sleeping half-way, I thought that my sister was calling me up for breakfast. When I open my eyes and saw lots of vampire. They are all saying "Let me such your blood. It won't be pain." I quickly get out of my bed ran to a corner and stood down. I was panting and gasping for breath and my heart was beating so fast that I thought I was going to die.

Teacher's comments: *Can we sleep half-way? How many vampires did you see? What did they look like? Besides saying those words "Let me suck your blood.....," what did they do to make you run away? How did you get away from them? How did you feel?*

Suddenly, all the vampire disappear. As I ran out of my room to my parents room. I wake my mother up and switch on the lights. I saw two vampire laying on the bed. They said "my Good daughter, give me your blood." I was so scared that I scream then I found myself laying on the floor. Then I realized that I was dreaming.

Teacher's comments: *How did the vampires disappear? The next part is a bit a confusing. What happened to your parents? Were the vampires the same ones as those you saw in your room? When you found yourself on the floor, were you awake?*

Summary comments at the end of the essay:

You seem to have a horrible dream to tell your readers, but your description of the dream is sketchy and not scary enough to frighten your readers. This is because you did not use enough details to create the feeling of fear. You can create this effect by adding more descriptive details about the vampires, describing how fearful they look and how you were afraid of them. All these will help your readers to picture and imagine the terrible dream that you had.

Secondly, due to missing information, some parts of your story are confusing or do not make sense to the readers. Adding the missing information and considering the logical sequencing of the events will greatly help your readers to follow your story better.

When revising your essay, you may want to consider the questions that I have posed as they will help you to develop your ideas and clarify what you want to say.