

TEACHING WRITING: STUDENT RESPONSE TO TEACHERS' WRITTEN COMMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effects of teacher comments on students' revisions when students revise their compositions. The study involved three writing teachers and three students. The students differed in their language ability, ranging from advanced to low level of proficiency. Teacher comments on form enabled the advanced and intermediate students to correct their language errors successfully. However, for comments on content, short teacher comments written in-between sentences were of little help to all three students. Comments in the form of long and complete sentences written in-between paragraphs were found to be useful by all three students when revising. The findings suggest that a teacher's responding style could influence a student's revision style.

Introduction

When teaching writing, the most important thing that we do for our students is responding to their written work. In the absence of a face-to-face verbal writing conference between teacher and student, written response is the only way in which the teacher can respond to the individual writing needs of the student. Teacher comments are therefore, essential, if not indispensable to a student revising and rewriting his or her composition. Given that teacher response is such an important aspect in the teaching of writing, I find it somewhat surprising when most writing teachers I speak to on the matter report that when they were trainees, they hardly received any instruction on how to respond effectively to student writing.

While most teacher trainers may not consider teacher response as an essential component in the training module of teachers, researchers have long recognised its role as being an important one in the teaching of writing. There have been numerous studies conducted in this area. Two early notable articles written by Sommers (1982) Zamel (1985), were based on research that studied and attempted to describe teacher comments. Sommers found that teachers of writing were preoccupied with surface level errors (errors of form) in students' written work when giving written feedback. Sommers is of the opinion that the effect of such comments is that they encouraged the students to view their compositions as fixed pieces, which consequently gave them no inherent reason to revise the structure and meaning of texts. To make matters worse,

comments on content, already few in number, usually take the form of vague and abstract descriptions that students find difficult to interpret. A similar observation was made by Zamel (1985).

This preoccupation with language accuracy in student essays has long been a trait of teachers who taught English as a second language (ESL or L2 teachers). Therefore, it is not surprising that writing achievement is often defined as mastery of the surface level skills required for accurately written papers. Lau (1990) reported that most ESL teachers responding to the written work of high school students, focused on form (grammar) and paid very little attention to content. Keh (1990) stated that one reason why teachers tend to focus on form more than content is that, endless hours of red pen correction is often equated to hard work and has great face-validity to teachers and headmasters. It remains to be seen of course, whether or not these corrections are of any help to the student writers when they revise their compositions. This tradition continues to persist in spite of various studies reporting that error correction has little effect on the overall writing quality of students. For example, Robb *et al.* (1986) investigated the hypothesis that more salient or more detailed feedback on errors would have a significant effect in improving the overall writing quality of student writers. The results of the study showed that detailed feedback on form is not really worth the teacher's time and effort. In fact, many earlier researchers like Searle & Dillon (1980); Lamberg (1980); and Knoblauch & Brannon (1982) had voiced similar concerns. Kepner, (1991), explains this trait among teachers by saying that teachers, especially L2 teachers, fear the fossilisation of errors, and thus feel morally obligated to correct all mistakes in students' written work. Kepner calls for feedback that would attend more to content.

Besides calling on teachers to focus more on content, another concern among researchers is that, teacher response should be more facilitative and less directive in nature. Dunn *et al.*, (1989) and Hyland (1990) contend that teachers should not just "tell" students what to do, but instead provide a platform from which students themselves can reassess and redraft their work. Hyland calls for detailed and informative feedback on content, which is deemed more helpful than short questioning remarks. Such long comments, almost conversational in nature, would respond more to the students themselves and not just to their writing. Mahili (1994) expressed her view that a teacher's primary role should be that of a guide, shares this opinion.

This paper, which is based on a study conducted in a centre for pre-university studies in Malaysia, seeks to address the concerns stated above. Three ESL teachers and three students (of different proficiency levels) were involved in the study. Specifically, I wanted to find out:

1. If these teachers paid more attention to form than to content,
2. If they responded differently to students of different levels of language ability, i.e. by giving more salient feedback to the weak student and less salient feedback to the good student,
3. What their respective responding styles were, with style referring to how clearly the teachers phrased their comments and where they placed their comments on the students' essays.
4. Which types of teacher response were effective, i.e. able to aid the students when they revised their essays and which types were not.

Design

Three ESL teachers, Paula, Farah, and Jenny (not their real names) agreed to participate in the study. All three were involved in teaching a writing course at the centre. Paula was the most experienced with ten years of teaching experience. Jenny had been teaching for almost four years while Farah had taught for only two years. Farah was also the only writing teacher who did not have any formal training in the teaching of English as a second language (TESL).

With the teachers' help, I was able to select three students whose language abilities ranged from the high intermediate level to the beginner level (based on scores from an English placement test, grades of ongoing assessments, and the ability of the students to verbalise their thoughts). For ease of reference, I shall refer to them as the Advanced Learner, the Intermediate Learner, and the Beginner.

I did not prescribe any topics for the students to write on. Instead, the three essays used in the study were part of a number of ongoing writing tasks. This suited my intentions of keeping the tasks in the study as real as possible. All three essays were in the expository mode. The length of the essays ranged from 300 to 350 words. Once the students had written the first drafts, they were then distributed to the three teachers for feedback.

Each teacher responded to three essays of the same title. This means that Paula responded to the first essay, written by all three students, while Farah responded to the second essay and Jenny to the third. I decided on such a distribution as I wanted to find out how the teachers would differ in their response to students of differing language ability. Besides, getting each teacher to respond to all three essay titles would have meant each teacher would have had to respond to all the essays written by the three students. Consequently, each of the three students would have had to revise each essay three times - once for each teacher! Needless to say, both the teachers and the students were not agreeable to this idea.

The teachers were required to verbalise their thoughts (verbal protocol) as they responded to the essays. The essays, with the teacher comments, were then returned to the students for revision. The students were also required to verbalise their thoughts as they revised and rewrote the essays. The student protocol transcripts proved valuable when determining which teacher's comments were helpful and which were not. Four sets of data were obtained from study. These were:

- 1 Essays written by the three students (each student wrote three essays),
- 2 Protocol (think aloud transcripts of teachers responding to the students' essays,
- 3 Rewrites of all the essays (each student revised and rewrote all three essays using teaching feedback, and
- 4 Protocol transcripts of the students revising and rewriting their essays.

I divided my analysis of the data into two parts. For the first part, I looked at the teachers' responses to form (grammar, vocabulary and spellings). I then studied how the teacher's comments on form affected the students' revision on form. In the second part, I studied the teachers' comments on content (development and organisation) and how their comments affected the student's revisions on content. Whenever the students' were able to make corrections of error and textual revisions by using teacher comments, I recorded them as instances when the teacher response had been successful or effective.

Going through the students' essays and transcripts, I could identify several types of students' responses. There were three types of response with regard to form and four for content. The three types of responses that I noted as the students attended to form were: '

1. Teacher comments are understood and the suggested changes to the text are acted upon by the student when writing the second draft
2. Suggestions are ignored and changes are not made to the text in the second draft though teacher comments are understood,
3. Teacher comments are not understood by student, therefore no change is made to the text in the subsequent draft, and
4. Teacher comment are not understood by student, but changes are made anyway to the text in the second draft.

Findings

Part 1 - Amount of Correction, Response style and Differences between Teachers

Judging from the number of comments made on form and content, I found that Paula and Farah did not make any conscious effort to get the students to focus on content. The total number of comments that they made on the essays of the Advanced and Intermediate learners were similar. But both did make more comments on content when responding to the Beginner's essays. It was only Jenny who made fewer remarks on form compared to content for all three learners. However, on a more similar note, all three teachers gave the same type of feedback on form to the three students.

A) Teacher comments on form

When responding to form in students' essays, teachers normally make one of three types of corrections.

1. Firstly, they might indicate only the location of an error in the students' essays.
2. Secondly, they may choose to indicate both the location of the error and the type of error that the student has made (for example, by writing "tense" to indicate that the wrong tense had been used, or "SVA" to indicate a subject verb agreement error).
3. The teacher response gets even more salient in the third type of response, where they opt to indicate not only the location and type of an error, but also provide a model of the correct version.

All three teachers in this study used the second method, that is, they indicated the location of an error and what type of error it was. The following is a sample of a teacher's response to form (teacher comments in italics):

Example:

SVA

'.....every intention have both effects.....' *write in full*

'.....because it's too many.....' *sp.*

'..... Perfomance.....'

Paula and Farah marked a higher percentage of errors than Jenny did. Surprisingly, it was the Intermediate Learner and not the Beginner who received the highest number of corrections from Paula and Farah. Since the teachers' protocol transcripts did not reveal the reasons for this, I could only make a calculated guess. That is, since both teachers had also made numerous comments on the content of the Beginner's essays,

the fewer comments on form could be seen as reluctance by the teachers to inundate the student's essay with their remarks. When interviewed later, the teachers agreed that their many comments on the content of the Beginner's essays could have influenced them to reduce the number of corrections of errors in the student's essays.

Jenny, however, showed a marked difference from Paula and Farah in terms of the amount of error correction. Though she did correct a higher number of errors for the Beginner, proportionately, the number was similar to the amount of corrections done for the other two students (she corrected approximately 28% of the total number of errors in each essay she responded to for all three students). This indicates that Jenny had a predetermined idea of how much feedback she was going to give on form. This is a necessary decision if we are trying to focus the student's attention on content.

Of the three teachers, Farah corrected the most number of errors. She was also the only teacher who did not have formal training in TESL, as she was a Management degree holder. Though this training variable warrants further investigation, it is an indication that training could be a factor that influences teacher attitudes with regard to responding to students' essays. In this case, Farah's preoccupation with error correction seems to suggest that she was less aware of the overall objectives of the writing course in the pre-university programme, which emphasises the developmental aspects of essay writing.

B) On content

There was no significant difference in the number of comments made on content among the three teachers. All three teachers wrote more comments on content in the Beginner's essays than they did in the other two students' essays.

Paula and Farah again shared similarities in their responses to content. They had an identical style of responding. As they read the student essays, the teachers progressed from sentence to sentence and stopped to write comments whenever they felt it was necessary (this is indicated in the protocol transcripts). Most of their comments were in the form of short and vague phrases. This trait has been the predominant method of responding to students' essays, even in L1 classrooms – an observation made in several studies (including in Sommer 1982; and Zamel, 1985). An example of such a method of commenting is as follows (Paula's comments in italics as found in the Advanced Learner's essay, which was titled "The Causes of Schizophrenia"):

be specific *stress?* *only facts?*
“When the brain is always suffering overloading of facts then it is justified that the situation will worsen and stress will catch up.”- *weak concluding sent. – not sensitive*

As you can see in the example, Paula has pointed out that the student’s concluding sentence is weak and she explains that it is so because the sentence is not sensitive, but she fails to explain what it is not sensitive to.

Though writing in-between sentences focuses the student’s attention on the exact part of the essay that needs revision, teacher comments that require the student to make changes to a particular sentence are sometimes at odds with error corrections which have also to be done in-between sentences. There is little point in correcting errors in a sentence that the teacher wants the student to rephrase as the structures containing the errors will probably disappear in the rephrased sentence.

On the other hand, Jenny’s protocol transcripts revealed that she progressed from paragraph to paragraph as she responded to the students’ essays and only occasionally stopped at the sentence level to correct errors. She read whole paragraphs before writing her comments. Her comments were mostly in the form of near complete sentences, written in the margins or in-between paragraphs, not in-between sentences.

Some examples of her comments (as given in her response to the third essay written by all three students, titled “The Causes and Effects of Smoking” are given below (in italics):

- In a response given to a particular paragraph, Jenny writes, ‘You seem to have missed the link to the title -- smoking’
- Comment given by Jenny to a transitional paragraph (leading on from causes of smoking to the effects of smoking), ‘Transition should list the effects as well as not be too general’
- Comment given by Jenny to a new paragraph, ‘Avoid Q at the beginning of paragraphs’

Jenny, after reading the essays, also deliberated on each of them at length and wrote some general comments below the concluding paragraphs. Jenny’s style of responding generated more holistic and meaningful comments on content. (This style of

commenting approximates the type called for by researchers like Dunn, *et.al.*, 1989; Hyland, 1990; Mahili, 1994).

Part 2 – Effectiveness of Teacher Response

A) On form

The correction of error by indicating the location of the error only, or by indicating location and type of error, as practised by the teachers, seems to be adequate for the Advanced Learner and the Intermediate Learner, but not for the Beginner. The Advanced Learner and the Intermediate Learner were able to correct most of the errors picked out by the teachers. The Beginner was only able to correct 47.8% of the errors marked by the teacher although many of these corrections were for spelling errors. Though the Beginner appears to require more salient feedback on form, it may not be a good idea for the teacher to provide a model of the correct structure for each corrected error as this will place the responsibility of correction solely on the teacher.

B) On content

As for feedback on content, short phrases were generally found to be not helpful. At the most, they helped students to rephrase sentences, which means revisions were mostly done at the sentence level and not at the text level. Of the three students, the Advanced Learner was able to make the most number of revisions. She was able to utilise 16 out of the total number of 18 comments (88.8%) she received for all three essays. In contrast, the Intermediate Learner only utilised 16 out of the 29 comments (55.2%) that she received for all three essays in her revisions. Interestingly, she chose to ignore 8 comments. The following is an extract from the Intermediate Learner's think aloud protocol transcript (transcription of the recording made when she verbalised her thoughts as she revised and rewrote her first essay, "The Causes of Schizophrenia"),

"...Tremendous stress could also lead to schizophrenia. Paragraph is too short? (*referring to a teacher comment*) ... No, can ... it doesn't matter ... it doesn't matter if my paragraph is short or not ... I don't care ... no, I mean ... there's nothing wrong if my paragraph is short ... as long as it is more than one sentence ... I have few supporting details ... but I think this short paragraph is packed with ...things ... that the reader can understand ... I don't care ...I want it to remain a paragraph ... whether it is short or long."

The above example demonstrates a point made by Sommers (1982) that too many comments might result in the student ignoring them. This student also indicated that

she could not understand five (17.2%) of the teacher's comments. The following extract shows the Intermediate Learner struggling with Paula's comments on the same essay:

"Person who takes drugs such as heroin, speed and marijuana can inherently be predisposed to the disease ... meaning ... what is this? (*referring to a teacher comment*) ... the handwriting is terrible ... I cannot see properly ... I know there is something wrong with the sentence ... the lecturer doesn't like ... okay, I'll change it ...but for sure, the way she writes ... it's not clear ... I cannot detect my ... the correction she wants me to make.

While the problem here appears to be the teacher's illegible handwriting, The Intermediate Learner would have found more detailed feedback helpful.

The Beginner, who received a total of 41 comments on content, responded to 27 of them. However, his revisions were only meaningful and the essay content only showed improvement when the feedback he was responding to was clear and detailed. He did not understand 8 of the comments and chose to ignore the rest.

From the analysis of student revisions, I found that Jenny's long and clear comments were most helpful for all three students. In fact, it was only her comments that prompted the Beginner to make some meaningful revisions when rewriting. This supports Hyland's (1990) claim that detailed and informative feedback on content can help students to reassess and redraft their work.

As for the placement (location) of teacher comments in the students' essays, comments in-between sentences (as evident in the feedback given by Paula and Farah) helped the students to identify the parts that needed improvement. However, the sentential revisions did little to improve the overall quality of the essays. Jenny's detailed comments in-between paragraphs enabled the students to rethink paragraphs, though the comments did not really prompt them to make major changes. Similarly, Jenny's long comments at the end of each essay did prompt all three students to think about the overall effectiveness of their respective essays (as evident in the students' protocol transcripts), but again, the comments did not seem to prompt actual revisions, except in the case of the Advanced Learner, who made some textual changes. This finding suggests that there are other concerns that the teacher of writing should be aware of when responding to students' essays, namely, whether or not the student's linguistic ability would permit him/her to make the necessary changes, and his/her attitude towards teacher response.

Conclusion

It was difficult to determine if the teachers were paying more attention to form than content by just counting the numbers of comments made for the respective categories,

except in the case of Jenny. Jenny clearly showed more concern for content when responding to the students' essays. In the case of Paula and Farah, it would be fair to say that they paid as much attention to form as they did to content (clarity of comments notwithstanding). Considering that these are ESL teachers, the findings appear promising as these teachers of writing seemed to consider textual development to be just as important as accuracy in second language writing.

The teachers did not make any clear attempts to vary their responses when responding to students of different language ability. While the difference was not significant between the total number of comments made on the Advanced Learner's essays and those of the Intermediate Learner's essays, all three teachers did give a significantly higher number of comments on content when responding to the Beginner's essays. The obvious reason for this is that the Beginner composed a poorly developed essay and needed more revisions. But it could also mean that the three teachers were aware that he required more help than his peers did.

As for the effectiveness of the teachers' responses, when giving feedback on form, or what we generally call error correction, indicating just the location of the error, or the location and the type of error, appears to be effective for students of high and average levels of proficiency, but not for weaker students. The findings suggest that students of low proficiency levels require more detailed feedback, like having the model of the correct version or perhaps even a grammar rule to explain the error. This is effective only if we want to help the student to edit his or her errors. But doing this too often could render more important feedback ineffective. If the teacher appears to focus more of her attention on error correction, the student will be inclined to follow suit.

As far as feedback on form is concerned, I would recommend that teachers offer their feedback sparingly. Picking out certain repetitive major errors and giving detailed explanations (depending on the level of the student) would probably be more effective than making random corrections like what the teachers in the study did.

For the feedback on content, comments in the form of short phrases are definitely not very effective. Though the Advanced Learner was able to utilise most of the comments given on her essays when revising, the revisions were mostly the rephrasing of sentences and not revisions centred on the development of the content. Placing the comments in-between sentences is also not advisable as the students in the study did not consider such comments in relation to the whole paragraph. Comments written in-between paragraphs were found to be more helpful. These prompted the students to consider a point in relation to the whole paragraph. Too many comments, repeatedly asking the student to elaborate or clarify, also do not appear to be effective in prompting meaningful revisions. Students in the study responded by either paraphrasing

sentences or by completely ignoring the comments. Finally, retrospective comments written at the end of the essay can be useful in aiding students to review the overall effect of their essays. Teachers should also pay attention to the nature and content of the comments, that is, what the teachers actually say in their responses. Ideally, when responding to content, teacher comments should prompt the students to revise more at the textual level than at the sentential level (an aspect that was largely missing in the present study).

After looking at the various aspects of teacher feedback, on form and on content, effective or otherwise, I am of the opinion that students, when revising, view their essays in a manner that is similar to the way their teachers view them. If teachers read essays and write comments at the word and sentence levels, this “fragmented view” is transferred to the students through their comments. Consequently, the students revise in a corresponding manner. If teachers want students to adopt a more global perspective when revising, they have to start providing more holistic comments (or comments which enable students to rethink their essays in a larger context). A point to note is that a student’s ability to revise is also subject to factors like writing experience and command of the language. In the process approach writing class at least, I would recommend that teachers pay as much attention to students’ revisions as they do to the written products.

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