

“You have some good ideas, but ...”:

Research on effective feedback to L2 writing

There’s an old story you may already have heard about an advertising executive who received written reports regularly from her staff. Because she sometimes felt the reports were not well written, she developed a feedback strategy to improve her employees’ writing. The next time she received a report, she took the written report home and the next day returned the report to the author in her private office saying, “Is this the best you can do?” The author sheepishly took the report back, worked on it, and resubmitted it. The boss once again took it home and the next day again asked, “Is this the best you can do?” This continued until the increasingly annoyed author finally said, “Yes, it’s the best I can do!” and the boss answered, “Good then I’ll read it.”

If only it were this easy!

Giving good feedback is important to teachers because we sense, I think, how important it is to a writer’s growth to have someone read and respond to what they’ve written. It is a powerful form of instruction because it trains student writers to focus on and value what gets addressed in the feedback and so as teachers I think we try hard to determine that magic constellation of things to say about a student’s text that will help the student 1) create a better one and 2) become a more sophisticated and confident writer. But it is a complex and difficult job.

One important reason for the difficulty is that most of us have never had good models of feedback to our own writing to draw on in responding to our students. Another reason is that individual students respond differently. We know from nearly unanimous research findings that L2 students crave and appreciate feedback on their written work. And yet it is sobering to realize that in Ferris’ 1997 research on students’ uptake of teacher feedback at the ideational or rhetorical

level, although students used 3/4 of the teacher's feedback comments in their revisions, only 1/2 of that led to a better draft and 1/3 of the drafts actually became worse (F. Hyland & K. Hyland, 2006). Furthermore, students aren't always able and don't necessarily always want to act even on feedback they ask for.

And there is the question of feedback on error or grammar or at the sentence level. Many teachers believe that this kind of feedback is very important to provide students. On the other side are those who agree with John Truscott (1996) that correcting grammar in L2 students' writing is a waste of time, doomed to failure, and detrimental to L2 students in a variety of ways. This is not a debate that is inconsequential. Often the most salient feature of L2 writing for some readers unaccustomed to reading it, and that includes some academic audiences, is error. It is often on the basis of errors present in a text that L2 students are sent to remedial courses, remanded to ESL courses instead of mainstream programs, or failed in entrance or exit exams or proficiency tests where the evaluator does not know the writer. Yet on the other hand, there is also evidence at the university level that professors across the curriculum are able to ignore sentence level errors and make a distinction between these errors and the quality of the ideas being expressed (Santos, 1989; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). It also appears that if a context demands grammatical accuracy, L2 writers are more likely to focus their attention on language issues, and given limits on time, attention, and cognitive energy and, if they focus on the sentence level, they are likely to neglect ideational and rhetorical levels. Thus, the literature on error correction shows conflicting and contradictory patterns.

It is important to acknowledge as well that responding behaviors do not exist in a vacuum and are influenced by considerations such as what the writing task was, what the goal of the writing course is, what has just been taught in the course, and what the student's last paper looked like, in addition to institutional, historical, and situational factors that may be beyond the control

of both writer and responder. Nevertheless useful response to writing probably include the following and begin with communication between teacher and students.

PRE-FEEDBACK COMMUNICATION: THE LANGUAGE OF WRITING

Helping student develop a metalanguage about writing gives them a vocabulary to communicate with you and their disciplinary instructors about their writing and may allow a student to understand and profit more fully from teacher/reader response to that text.

DETERMINING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Appropriate writing assignments do not set students up for failure by asking them to discuss topics they know little or nothing about. If their knowledge of a topic essentially consists of the contents of one or two articles, the texts produced on the topic can be predicted to lack developed ideas. And when the writing teacher then responds by noting that some paragraph needs more supporting evidence, the response of many students will justifiably be to just delete the paragraph because they have no more supporting evidence. In such a case, they do not and cannot benefit from the teacher/reader response.

SELF-ANALYSIS

Writing teachers can improve feedback behaviors by first analyzing them to determine exactly what their practices are. (See Ferris, 2003 for an example of a good approach to use.) A fair amount of research suggests that teachers think they do one thing but actually do something else. Find out what it is you actually do and compare that to what you think you do or, more to the point, what you would like to be doing. Also, if you can, try to continue the analysis to see which of your suggestions were taken up and which simply died there in the margins. Is there a pattern?

COMMUNICATION: YOUR GOALS

Thinking through just what your philosophy of feedback is and the communicating that to your students helps them understand what to expect and allows them to express their own desires and preferences for written feedback.

APPROPRIATION

It is important to meet the student's text where it is and to work toward helping writers say what they want to say rather than pushing them to write the one we would have written. After all these are not just students learning to write in an L2; they are intelligent humans attempting to communicate and we owe it to them to regard their texts as communication and not to appropriate their meanings to ourselves.

COMMUNICATION: STUDENTS' GOALS

A first step in this direction is communicate to students that texts are crafted to produce certain effects on the reader and certain impressions of the writer. Since it is not always easy for us as teachers to see what the writer hopes to accomplish, a potentially very useful practice is to ask students to include with their crafted text a cover sheet where they simply state what their goal is in the paper, what they are trying to do, how they are trying to sound. Knowing answers to these kind of questions will help us respond in a way that will allow us to intervene in the crafting but not appropriate the text.

READING THE WRITER'S TEXT (NOT YOURS)

The next step is to really read the text, with no pen in hand, just reading to try to follow what is being said in light of the student's purpose. Although it seems obvious, it bears saying that we should not correct or suggest anything without being sure we understand what the writer is trying to say and if we don't understand, we need to ask the student and not guess.

So after all this preparation, what kinds of feedback seem to work? Here's what the research is saying these days:

FEEDBACK: STUDENT AND TEXT

Good feedback is text specific. The most helpful feedback gives the student not just a comment, question, or suggestion but gives the writer fairly specific advice or suggestions on how to go about responding to the feedback, points the writer specifically toward the way to proceed. Specific directive feedback answers the writer's question: I understand what you think I should do but now how do I do that? Give me some ideas.

FEEDBACK: STUDENT AND TEACHER

Good feedback is also writer specific, personalized, a communication between two people. As Ken and Fiona Hyland (2006) point out "...learners are historically and sociologically situated active agents who respond to what they see as valuable and useful and to people they regard as engaging and credible" (p. 220). [my emphasis] Each text should be responded to as the effort of an individual, the whole student, and whatever you know about the student.

CHARACTERISTIC OF GOOD FEEDBACK #1

According to the research by Conrad and Goldstein (1999), the most difficult feedback for students asks how and why questions, that is, asks for explanations or analyses, most likely because they do not know how to revise in response. This may mean that they don't quite know what analysis or explanation means, something which can be addressed in the writing class or with individual students through scaffolding or modeling. Or students' lack of uptake of this feedback may mean they do not have enough information about the topic to provide the analysis or explanation, something that should be addressed in the writing class through selection of appropriate writing assignments.

CHARACTERISTIC OF GOOD FEEDBACK #2

Another piece of advice, one that is perhaps difficult for conscientious teachers to conform to is not to respond to everything in the paper. More efficient, however, is to select two or three changes that, if carried out, would be most likely to have the biggest positive effect on the text. Be sure to explain to students that you are doing this so that they are not under the impression that you have addressed everything in their paper.

CHARACTERISTIC OF GOOD FEEDBACK #3

One of the most effective and yet non-appropriative techniques I have seen for responding to writing is the If, then technique that Lynn Goldstein (2005) uses. Here the teacher gives the student one or more choices for revising by suggesting what the outcome of a given revision might be expected to do. For example, in a student's paper on overpopulation in China, the purpose of the text was unclear. Goldstein's written response questioned the student using the If/then technique: If you hope to convince Chinese people to ..., then you need to If this isn't your purpose in this paper, then you need to re-think what your purpose is and revise in light of your real intentions. (See Goldstein, 2005.)

AFTER FEEDBACK

It is important to provide time in class for students to ask about the comments you have written. Research has shown repeatedly that students sometimes can't read teachers' handwriting, can't understand what the written comment is getting at, or even if they do understand, don't know how to proceed. Leaving time in-class allows students to clarify these issues. One potentially powerful follow up is to ask students to annotate the feedback you gave them, in effect, writing a response back to it, piece by piece or including a cover letter with a revision which indicates

which feedback they have addressed and how, and which they have chosen not to address and why.

Finally, highly appropriate in a class devoted to writing would be a writing assignment that asks students to analyze their revisions in response to feedback, in much the way I suggested earlier that teachers analyze their feedback practices. Looking over several of their annotated texts, students might ask research questions like these:

What kinds of annotations did I address most frequently or carefully?

How often did I delete text rather than change it in response to an annotation?

What prompted deletion rather than revision? Is there a pattern in these responses?

In this way students become ethnographers of their own writing practices.

I believe that our writing assignments and the approach that many writing teachers have taken to writing courses have improved a great deal over the years. Nevertheless, it is important as well to realize that writing is not a generalized skill that once learned in a writing class is simply there to call upon at will. Instead, in a sense, writers re-learn to write in different writing contexts for different audiences. For example, in long-term research on L1 writers, Carroll (2002) found that students who never did particularly well in first year writing courses often became entirely competent, sometimes even accomplished, writers in their majors by their senior years. And yet these same good writers still could not write well in the kinds of genres and for the kinds of purposes typical of their first year writing classes. Our L2 writing students as well will move through new discourse landscapes and will have to adapt to them on their own. But our writing courses can help set on the right track, in terms both of some writing skills and of affect or emotions and feelings about their writing in English.

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