Exploring Teachers' and Students' Beliefs about Written Feedback in Writing

Evelyn Ngiam
Shanwaz Iqbal

Innova Primary School
Singapore

Abstract

Teachers put much effort and time into giving written feedback on students' writing. It is important to know whether this effort is effective in helping students improve their writing competence. This study investigated the beliefs of a teacher and a group of twenty students about written feedback, and the effectiveness of such feedback for improving students' writing competence. The findings revealed similar as well as differing beliefs between the teacher and the students regarding written feedback. Both agreed on the value of indirect feedback. However, while the teacher preferred to do 'selective marking', the students reported that they would rather be given feedback on every error. The authors conclude that teachers could more explicitly communicate their intentions and expectations regarding written feedback with students.

Introduction

Giving written feedback on student writing is viewed as an essential part of teaching English Language (EL). The assumption is that written feedback will help students learn to write better. Written feedback is a widely researched area in the language-teaching field. It is a topic of high interest among language educators due to the fact that to give written feedback on students' writings requires a tremendous amount of time and effort. It is important to know how this amount of effort has translated to effectiveness in helping students to improve their writing competence, both from the teachers' and the students' perspectives. While there have been studies on teachers' and students' beliefs in written feedback, little was known, at the point of embarking on this study, about how Singapore teachers and students perceived written feedback in writing.

The study was prompted by an interest in the beliefs of Singapore teachers and students regarding written feedback and its effectiveness, and sought answers to the following general questions:

1. What are teachers' and students' beliefs about giving and receiving written feedback?

2. What are teachers' and students' views on the effectiveness of written feedback-giving and-receiving?

Investigating Teachers' and Students' Beliefs on Written Feedback

From the interactionist perspective (Probst,1989), to give written feedback to students on their writing would mean that the teacher asserts her role in the writing of her students, acting as the reader of the text and giving her response to help shape the meaning of the text. It is assumed that, with this reader response, the students will then make improvements on their writing. However, as English Language teachers, we would like to question such an assumption. We wonder how students and teachers actually view such feedback, and whether the feedback is effective in helping our students improve their writing.

Studies on teachers' perceptions of written feedback reported that language teachers in the United States devoted much time to writing feedback for their students' writing (Leki, 1990; Hairston, 1986) because they believed that their students would improve in their writing competence. This was despite the fact that there was research pointing to the possible futility of this painstaking effort (Lee, 2008).

According to Lee (2008), teachers' beliefs constituted an important factor in determining the type of written feedback they gave to their students; for instance, if a teacher believed in corrective feedback, she would focus on local errors in her marking and this would take precedence over other forms of errors. Ferris (1995) found that teachers believed that correcting students' errors in writing was an important part of their job. Leki (1990) and Hairston (1986) both mentioned that teachers adopted a 'conventional wisdom' in giving feedback. Teachers viewed their role as one of giving written feedback and believed that this effort of theirs would translate to desired outcomes. Hence, no matter how tedious and laborious the feedback process was, teachers tried their very best to give their written comments to students.

Research on students' views on written feedback has shown that students generally perceive written feedback to be important and helpful in improving their writing competence, both in content and language (Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998). Leki (1991) and Radecki and Swales (1998) found that students not only believed that they benefitted from their teachers' feedback, they also looked forward to receiving feedback from their teachers on their writing. In fact, as found by Leki (1991), some students even wished that their teachers would correct the errors for them. Olajedo (1993) found that students generally perceived the area of correction to be solely the responsibility of the teachers. As shown in previous research (Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995) on the types of feedback preferred by students, students largely preferred teachers to give them feedback on local errors rather than global ones.

In summary, students and teachers have their own beliefs when it comes to the area of written feedback. Examining teacher and student beliefs on written feedback could help teachers navigate their decisions about written feedback in order to ensure effectiveness. With this objective in mind and taking into account constraints such as limits to time, resources and funding, we designed a study to examine closely how a teacher and a group of students viewed written feedback about the students' writing.

Methodology

This section describes how we conducted the study to examine the specific research questions:

- What are the teacher's and the students' beliefs about written feedback?
- What are the teacher's and the students' views on the effectiveness of written feedback?

Participants

An EL teacher and a class of 20 Primary 5 students participated in the study.

Data Collection

We conducted a semi-structured interview with the teacher which was audio recorded. In the interview, the teacher was asked to provide verbal responses to the following questions:

- What are your beliefs about giving written feedback to your students on their writing?
- How effective do you think your feedback has been in improving your students' writing competence?

A group interview format was adopted for the students participating in this study and audio recorded. Considering that the students were 10-11 years old, it was important to provide them with a platform where they could collectively respond to the interview. In groups of five, students were asked to provide verbal responses to the following questions:

- What are your views on the written feedback you have received from your teacher?
- How effective is the written feedback given by your teacher in helping you to improve in your writing competence?

Data Analysis

The interview recording of the teacher and the group interview recordings of the students were transcribed and content analysis was carried out to provide insights into the research questions.

Findings

What are teachers' and students' beliefs about written feedback?

From our study, it was found that the teacher and the students did not share the same beliefs about the way written feedback should be given. While the teacher used 'selective marking' rather than 'comprehensive marking', the students saw more value in 'comprehensive marking'.

When feedback was given on the students' written compositions, the teacher chose to perform 'selective marking' by focusing only on the content and plot aspects of students' writing. The teacher did not provide feedback on grammar and language errors. This was because the teacher believed that teaching the content and plot of a piece of writing was more important than having to divert the focus to teaching the language aspects at the same time.

> *Usually it's the story, the plot itself – I think it holds more importance. When you look at language – over time they will pick up language – but plot is something that has to be taught. It has to be explained to them. From an unrealistic plot, they are moving to a more realistic plot, and then things like your audience. Why are you writing it? Those kinds of things. So those are the things that I usually focus on.*

The teacher believed that the language aspect of a piece of writing can be dealt with at other times in the English Language class. This finding was surprising to us, considering that studies (Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 1999) had suggested that teachers mostly believe that correcting students' errors in writing was an important part of their job.

Interestingly, the students in our study did not share the same beliefs as their teacher. The students

believed that their teacher should do 'comprehensive marking' so that they would have a complete picture of their performance in their writing and could make revisions based on the teacher's feedback.

> Student 1:   *You don't know if you're correct or wrong if [the teacher] never marks.*
> Student 2:   *I want to know all my mistakes in the composition so I can change them.*

This belief reported by the students is aligned to research on students' views on written feedback (Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998). The students wanted to know their errors (all of them). They valued written feedback and viewed it as crucial in helping them revise their writing (Leki, 1991; Radecki and Swales, 1998).

As to the type of written feedback, both the teacher and the students valued 'indirect feedback' (where the teacher indicates the location of errors) to 'direct feedback' (where the teacher edits the errors and shows the correct form). The teacher believed that the students learned better with the 'indirect feedback', despite the fact that it took a longer time to give this feedback and for the students to address it. The teacher recognised that, while giving direct feedback to the students on their errors could save time because students could just copy the corrections, the teacher would rather have the students think about how they could address the indirect feedback given.

> *To me personally I prefer indirect feedback. I find direct feedback redundant. You're copying my work. What is there to learn?*

This preference was shared by the students. While students believed that direct feedback could be more efficiently addressed since they could just copy what the teacher wrote, they preferred to be given the time to think for themselves how to interpret and respond to the feedback. In the words of the students, they found that 'indirect feedback' would 'stimulate their minds to think'.

> Shanwaz: *So why is it you prefer indirect?*
> Student 4:   *'Cause you'll have to think for yourself, which helps you better instead of just copying out.*
> Student 2:   *Helps you think more.*
> Student 6:   *Because like, we can like, help yourself to like, think, like don't need the teacher to write out the answer.*
> Student 7:   *So that when we think more, we can write more words without any help.*
> Student 2:   *So we can figure out what is our mistake.*
> Student 1:   *Can stimulate our minds to think.*

The teacher's view about 'indirect feedback' was congruent with the findings of research (Lalande, 1982; Lee, 2008) which suggested that teachers tended to use 'indirect feedback' because they believed it would help students to think more carefully about their errors and grow their ability to edit their own work.

The students' views, though, were surprising. We had thought that the students would prefer 'direct' feedback, as Lee (2005) found with Hong Kong students. Those students generally preferred that their teachers gave them direct feedback because they could then easily transfer their teachers' comments to their correction piece. In contrast, the students in our study favoured the opportunity to think about how they could address the feedback given by their teachers and make improvements on their writing.

With an understanding of the beliefs of the teacher and the students about written feedback in writing, the next question for us to examine was how the teacher and the students participating in the study viewed the effectiveness of the feedback given and received.

What are the teachers' and students' views on the effectiveness of written feedback?

The teacher and the students participating in the study were interviewed to elicit their views of the effectiveness of the written feedback provided on the students' writing. The teacher was asked whether the students were able to make revisions on their writing based on the written feedback and if the revisions met expectations. Similarly, the students were asked whether they could address their teacher's written feedback and if they thought that their subsequent revisions met their teacher's expectations.

Asked about the effectiveness of the written feedback on the students' writing, the teacher did not expect the students to be able to act on the feedback fully. The teacher thought that the students would still need support beyond the written feedback (for example, being shown a model composition) in order to complete their corrections according to expectations, as shown in the excerpt from the interview:

> *Evelyn:*   *So, when you're marking, you write this feedback, you already know that even if a child is going to make a correction, it's not going—*
> *Teacher:*   *It won't change. Don't think it will change much. He didn't change right?*
> *Evelyn:*   *He actually changed it to 'encourage'.*
> *Teacher:*   *Yeah, so I know the thing about the theme, once the theme is wrong, they don't know how to carry on already. It's just out of point, so to me, I don't expect anything out of it. Unless I show them a model composition or something like that.*

The teacher was satisfied as long as there was an attempt by the students to make a revision based on the given feedback, even if the revision did not fully address the problem.

> *Evelyn:*   *Did this meet your expectations?*
> *Teacher:*   *I mean at least you (the student) have attempted to do something about it.*
> *Evelyn:*   *But did they address the problem?*
> *Teacher:*   *I mean I'm happy that it moved from here to there. [pointing to the revisions, which did not fully address the problem]*

Leki (1990) and Hairston (1986) both observed that teachers tend to adopt 'conventional wisdom' when giving feedback. Teachers view it as their role to give written feedback and that their effort will translate to fruitful outcomes. Hence, no matter how laborious the feedback process is, teachers try their very best to give written comments to students.

We saw this happening in the teacher-participant's practice. The teacher wrote comments for the students despite knowing that they might not fully achieve expectations. It seemed that the teacher subscribed to a realistic and practical view about the effectiveness of the written feedback on the students' writing. The teacher seemed to view the written feedback as a preliminary point of communication with the students about where and how they could improve on their writing and took a hopeful stance about the students doing 'something about it'.

The teacher highlighted several times in the interview that after the students had received written feedback, a whole-class correction exercise would still be conducted on a writing piece, based on the common areas of concerns for the class. This was to provide further support to help the students improve their writing. When asked if they could address their teacher's written feedback and whether they thought the corrections had met their teacher's expectations, however, the students expressed doubts.

> Evelyn: So, generally, do you all understand the teacher's feedback for you all?
> Student 7:   Hmmm. A bit.
> Shanwaz: How did you know this is what you needed to do then? So, when the teacher wrote the word 'how' (referring to the student's work), how do you know what the teacher wants you to do?
> Student 7:   Like, try figuring out what the teacher was talking about.
> Shanwaz: Yeah, so how will you go about figuring out what the teacher wrote? Because the teacher just put the word 'how' over there. The teacher underlined this, the teacher underlined 'John bullying' and then wrote the word 'how'. So, did you understand that?
> Student 3:   Must think, lah. Just guess.

The students confessed that they had to 'figure out' or 'guess' what their teacher meant by the comments when addressing the feedback given to them. This is congruent with what researchers such as Cumming (1985), Semke (1984) and Zamel (1985) have observed. Their studies found that students tended to find their teachers' comments vague. Most of the time, students were not able to make corrections based on the feedback and were left to guess what their teachers meant to communicate by the written feedback.

When asked if they thought their revisions met their teacher's expectations, the students expressed uncertainty, hope and disappointment. They also expressed a desire to meet the teacher's expectations and hoped they had done so with their corrections. However, they recalled how the teacher had told them their corrections were not up to the teacher's standards. That made them feel that the teacher did not appreciate their effort. When the teacher identified certain students in order to provide them with more guidance, the students did not perceive the action as supportive of their learning. Rather, they thought that it was a negative consequence of their inability to meet expectations.

> Evelyn: So, generally, do you all think the teacher is satisfied with the way you all are doing corrections for your composition?
> Student 3:   Hopefully.
> Student 4:   But sometimes [the teacher] will get like angry. Then the teacher will -
> Student 5:   Call our names individually.
> Student 1:   I feel that my corrections are not appreciated.
> Evelyn: Why? Why is that so?
> Student 1:   Er, because er, even though I do corrections, [the teacher] will say 'Do you know that this is wrong? It's still wrong.'

Despite their struggles and apprehension surrounding written feedback, it was interesting to note that the students still looked forward to receiving their teacher's feedback. While this is a good sign that the process of giving and receiving feedback was valued by both the teacher and the students, researchers such as Truscott (1996), Kepner (1991) and Polio et al. (1998) have cautioned that receiving a corrected piece of work that is full of negative feedback might be demoralising for students and could be detrimental to their learning.

Discussion and Implications

The findings from our study have provided some insights into differing teacher and student beliefs about written feedback on students' writing. Some of these findings reinforce what the reviewed literature highlighted, while others offered new insights specific to a Singapore Primary 5 EL classroom. Like teachers in other studies (Leki, 1990; Hairston, 1986), the teacher in this study perceived the

feedback-giving process to be a laborious one. In order to balance the effectiveness of the feedback with the amount of time that could be afforded amidst teaching duties and demands, the teacher preferred to do 'selective marking', prioritising plot elements over language errors since the latter could be addressed in grammar lessons later on. The students, on the other hand, hoped that they would get feedback on every error ('comprehensive marking') so that they would know where they had gone wrong. This disparity in preference might be bridged if the teacher's intentions and expectations could be communicated more explicitly to the students.

The teacher and student participants in this study valued 'indirect feedback' and how it encouraged thinking. It is heartening to note that the Primary 5 students preferred 'indirect feedback' even though it required more effort on their part to make revisions. Researchers like Ferris (2003) have recommended the use of 'indirect feedback' by teachers because it encourages students to think critically about their errors.

In our view, teachers should continue with the practice of giving 'indirect feedback' but they could also consider ways to prevent or reduce the "guess work" students need to do in order to make sense of the feedback. We believe that much can still be done to ensure that teachers and students understand one another's expectations regarding written feedback. Besides clarifying expectations, teachers could give verbal feedback alongside written feedback so that students can seek further clarification.

Clearly, there are limitations to the generalisability of the findings given the small number of participants in this study. However, the findings do suggest that teachers and students in Singapore primary schools might have views about feedback that have not been fully accounted for in the research literature.

Conclusion

This was a small scale study, yet it serves to remind us that teachers and students can have different views about common practices in the EL classroom. Questioning long-held assumptions can reveal areas of need, so that we can make improvements to our practice or conduct studies to better inquire into our understanding of teaching and learning. Moving ahead, we would like to collect the views of more teachers and students so that we can find ways to ensure that the energy and time invested in giving feedback reaps due rewards.

References

Cumming, A. (1985). Responding to the writing of ESL students. *Highway One, 8,* 58–78.

Cohen, A. D. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. In A.L. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learning strategies in language learning* (pp. 57-69). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ferris, D. R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly, 29,* 33–53.

Ferris, D. R. (1999). The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes: A response to Truscott (1996). *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8,* 1–10.

Ferris, D. R. (2003). *Response to student writing: Research implications for second language students.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hairston, M. (1986). On not being a composition slave. In C.W. Bridges (Ed.), *Training the new teacher of college composition* (pp. 117–124). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher written feedback on individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 7*(3), 255–286.

Kepner, C. G. (1991). An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second language writing skills. *Modern Language Journal, 75,* 305-313.

Lalande, J. F. (1982). Reducing composition errors: An experiment. *Modern Language Journal, 66,* 140–149.

Lee, I. (2005). Error correction in the L2 writing classroom: What do students think? *TESL Canada Journal, 22*(2), 1–16.

Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 17,* 144–164.

Leki, I. (1990). Coaching from the margins: Issues in written response. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Insights for the classroom* (pp. 57–68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals, 24,* 203–218.

Olajedo, J.A. (1993). Error correction in ESL: Learners' preferences. *TESL Canada Journal, 10*(2), 71-89.

Polio, C., Fleck, C., & Leder, N. (1998). If I only had more time: ESL learners' changes in linguistic accuracy ones say revisions. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 7,* 43-68.

Probst, R.E. (1989). Transactional theory and response to student writing. In C. Anson (Ed.), *Writing and response* (pp. 68-79). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Radecki, P., & Swales, J. (1988). ESL student reaction to written comments on their written work. *System, 16,* 355-365.

Semke, H. (1984). The effects of the red pen. *Foreign Language Annals, 17,* 195-202.

Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning, 46,* 327–369.

Zamel, V. (1985). Responding to student writing. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*(1), 79–101.