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Exploring Effective Feedback Techniques in the ESL Classroom

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It is the final week of classes at the college, and my English 092 (ESL Composition) students have just turned in their final essays. When I sit down to begin the long process of commenting and grading, I have high hopes; I have spent many hours providing detailed feedback on my students' previous writing assignments on everything from subject-verb agreement to topic sentence effectiveness with the intention of helping them develop more advanced writing skills. In addition to my written comments, I have also conducted a variety of grammar and sentence structure lessons on topics such as verb tense usage, subject verb-agreement, and punctuation that I hoped would aid in my students' writing progress. Alas, as I page through their work, I notice students committing the same errors in their final essays as they have in previous ones. Mo, Ali, and Saad (names have been changed for privacy protection) continue to exhibit persistent subject-verb agreement errors despite my instruction and feedback on this topic, while Rana's and Diana's* essays still contain multiple sentence fragments. As my high hopes begin to fade, I begin to wonder: is my written feedback simply a waste of time?

Study Rationale

As an English Composition Instructor at a community college, I spend countless hours providing written feedback to my students on their writing assignments. I offer particularly numerous comments to my English as a Second Language students, since I consider not only their content and organization, but also grammar usage and sentence structure/punctuation. Despite research that posits the ineffectiveness of surface error correction, I continue the practice of providing written feedback on correct usage of grammatical structures to my ESL students. I provide some direct grammar and sentence structure/punctuation instruction in my ESL classes, which is one reason I believe I feel the need to comment on student usage of these structures. Most assignments are expository in nature, so I also spend a great deal of time discussing more content-based topics, including thesis statement formation, topic sentence formation and placement, and organizational techniques. However, in light of the aforementioned research, I recently find myself questioning the usefulness of

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both surface error correction and content-based feedback in my ESL classes. Since I began teaching, I have subscribed to the "more is better" idea when it comes to providing feedback on ESL student writing; I feel it is my job to guide them through the writing process, and more feedback means more guidance. But due to time constraints, I do not always see multiple drafts of all student essays. Therefore, I am often unaware of actual student uptake of my written feedback. I began to wonder if the information I glean from looking more closely at the value of my written feedback will lead me to more critically examine my teaching practices as well, and perhaps make some changes that would have a more noticeable impact on the progress of my students' writing.

What Type of Written Feedback Works?

Given the many hours I spend reading and responding to student writing, I suppose what I would really like to know is if I am wasting my time. But coming to a more informed conclusion about my feedback practices is not a purely selfish pursuit; discovering the most efficient way to provide feedback would benefit both my students as learners and me as their time-challenged instructor. How much uptake of grammar-based surface error corrections is happening with my ESL students? Is direct grammar/sentence structure instruction helping to reduce the occurrence of various errors in their written work? What other types of feedback (content/organization/coherence/unity)—would guide ESL students as writers? I believe gathering data from a case study about student use of all forms of feedback might begin to help clarify these questions, and in turn offer me and other ESL writing instructors insight into more appropriate pedagogical techniques. But first, I turn to existing literature in the field of written feedback to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding ESL writing.

Contextual Factors to Consider

My analysis of the literature revealed several factors that are essential to a more thorough understanding of what constitutes effective written feedback. These factors are discussed below.

Factor #1:

The nature of the feedback provided (direct vs. indirect). According to Ferris (2010), there is a distinction between explicit surface error correction and errors that are simply called to the student's attention. At the beginning of every semester, I provide my ESL students with a "Guide to Correction Abbreviations" in an effort to help them interpret my corrective feedback. For example, "s-v" stands for subject-verb agreement. We discuss the list of codes and correct some examples together as a class. Because I do not typically offer the exact correction, and instead merely "hint" at it with my abbrevia-

tions, I at first considered my feedback to mainly be indirect. However, it appears from Ferris's definitions of the two types of feedback that my "coding" would constitute a more direct form of feedback, since I am providing explicit guidance on the type of correction needed (as opposed to simply underlining/not using codes). Before reading Ferris's explanation of the two distinct methods of providing feedback, I would have assumed 'direct' to mean correcting the error for the learner, as opposed to offering a coded suggestion for correction. Clearly in favor of the indirect form, Ferris (2004) states that, "teachers should provide indirect feedback that engages students in cognitive problem-solving as they attempt to self-edit based upon the feedback that they have received" (p. 60). I do understand that a less explicit (underline or circle only) form of feedback might engage the student more deeply in the revision process, as he/she is challenged to define the error and correct it appropriately. To add further legitimacy to her claim of indirect feedback superiority, Ferris (2010) notes that in student interviews, L2 learners have, "expressed a clear preference for indirect feedback" (p. 190). I am intrigued by Ferris's findings; my coding method of feedback is time-consuming and now I question its effectiveness.

Factor #2:

The type of feedback provided (focus on form vs. content). As previously indicated, I provide feedback on both surface structure errors and content-based errors on my ESL student essays, and I am certain many ESL writing instructors do the same. I am interested in discovering the effectiveness of both types of feedback in order to focus my efforts on giving the most useful comments. Hillocks (2005) reports findings in favor of content-based instruction and feedback, despite the fact that

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historically, "form has been so overwhelmingly an instructional focus" (p. 243). He claims that focus on content rather than form "gives students the power to work with ideas" (p. 243). I hypothesize that the surface error feedback that I provide, given its more concrete/right or wrong nature, lends itself more readily for ESL student uptake, as opposed to the less concrete inquiry-type feedback I offer for content issues in student essays. Though it may be more complex for students to comprehend, Hillocks promotes the strength of inquiry by claiming that "it challenges students to do more than they can on their own but provides the scaffolding to allow them to push beyond what they can already do" (p. 242). This is a promising statement, and I am interested through my case study to examine ESL student uptake of my content-based feedback, in addition to (and perhaps compared to) the feedback on surface (grammatical) errors that I also provide.

Factor #3:

The effects of time on student uptake of feedback (short-term vs. long-term effects). One of the most debated issues in the discussion of written corrective feedback provision involves student retention of feedback, and what constitutes actual "learning" based on immediate and long-range student essay revisions. While Ferris (2004) posits that student editing of texts immediately following instructor feedback on grammar forms is at least helpful in longer term improvement of student writing accuracy, Truscott and Hsu (2008) find that "successful error reduction during revision is not a predictor of learning" (p. 292). Truscott and Hsu define student learning as "improvements in learners' ability to write accurately" (p. 293), and tend to dismiss studies that do not take into account learner ability to apply feedback received on one text to a new writing task.

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Their research demonstrates no correlation between immediate student revision of an existing text based on instructor feedback and student retention of such feedback on subsequent writing assignments. Ferris (2004), however, recognizes the value in short-term editing, saying that it helps "to assess student uptake of corrections received" (p. 54). Though I am interested in discovering both short-term and long-term effects of my written corrective feedback, I would ideally like to know if my immediate feedback lends itself to longer-term uptake by my students, and if their error revisions following my feedback become part of their linguistic repertoire and help them make fewer errors on future essays.

Factor #4:

The underlying socio-cultural factors involved in "correction" of student work. Aside from the technical aspects of written corrective feedback, there are also socio-cultural factors to consider when providing feedback to diverse student populations. I often struggle with the notion that only a specific form of English is acceptable in academic writing. My students come to the classroom with a myriad of educational and cultural experiences, and I hesitate to approach my teaching from a prescriptivist perspective.

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However, I understand that my students are confused by ambiguity in language usage (as they have expressed to me), and because of this I feel obligated to teach grammar forms and rules. For example, punctuation is always an area of unease with my ESL students, and they frequently want to know the "rules" for correct comma placement. I teach them about comma splices, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and coordinating conjunctions, but sometimes I am not sure if teach-

ing the Standard English rules (and subsequently highlighting errors on their essays) doesn't just confuse them more, given multiple exceptions and the complexity of the language surrounding these structural topics (subordinate clauses and conjunctions, for instance). As I question this practice, Shafer (2004) offers his viewpoint that "with notions of correctness expanded to fit the language of myriad races and ethnicities, we learn more about the realities of authentic speech and become more inclusive as educators" (p. 67). I fear the possibility that by including grammar instruction as part of my ESL classes, I perpetuate "false and anachronistic notions about language" (Shafer, 2004, p. 68). Is my feedback causing my students to feel less confident in their language usage, in turn raising their affective filters, leading them to become less motivated and more fearful of writing? This would obviously be an undesirable outcome of my feedback provision. Horner (1992) addresses the complex matter of instructor error correction on student texts by explaining the necessity of engaging "issues of power, authority, and conflict" and that errors are the "product of social relationships" (p. 176). I continue to examine how my own social status might affect my provision of feedback on my ESL students' work, as it is my goal to value and promote their unique personal uses of the English language. Both Horner and Shafer agree that students must be part of the error correction process, and I am already thinking about ways to more deeply engage my students in the feedback discussion.

Factor #5:

Instructors' views on feedback provision. Since I began teaching, I have always felt obligated to provide as much written feedback to students as possible. This personal "more is better" belief is something I have recently begun to examine as I try to discover the effectiveness of my feedback. Evans, Hartshorn, and Tuioti (2010) discuss differences in instructor approaches to feedback provision in their study highlighting teacher beliefs about providing written corrective feedback to second language learners. Their findings indicate that nearly all teachers of second language learners use written corrective feedback in one form or another, and while some expressed some reservations about the helpfulness of such feedback, the majority of teachers think that students need it, and that "WCF is an effective pedagogical practice"(p. 54). It is interesting to discover that many ESL instructors hold beliefs similar to mine regarding the use of feedback in student essays, but I also wonder about the difficulty of reconciling one's personally-held beliefs about the practice of feedback provision with the findings of research demonstrating its limitations. This is a key consideration for me as I attempt to discover if my feedback really is working.

While I plan to consider all five of these factors when analyzing the results of my case study, my primary concern is discovering student use of my written feedback, and perhaps why certain types of feedback might lend themselves more readily to student uptake than others (Factors #1 and #2).

Methodology

To help illuminate the effectiveness of comments on student essays, I chose one student for a case study in my English 092 (ESL Composition) course. I first collected an essay plan, or outline, from the student, and provided feedback on content only: thesis statement, topic sentences, and details/examples. The student received the outline with my feedback and proceeded to hand in a "rough draft" of his final essay two days later. Upon providing various written remarks on the "rough draft", including grammar (subject-verb agreement/verb tense), punctuation (sentence fragments, comma splices, run-on sentences), and content (organizational techniques, topic sentences, relevant supporting details), I returned the paper to the student, who proceeded to compose a "final draft" of the essay. I collected both the rough and final versions of the essay to help establish a better understanding of the student's uptake of my feedback. I also gave him a questionnaire that addresses his use of and feelings about the comments in order to gain a better understanding of the affective dimension of revision, and to gain a more personal perspective on my student's revision process.

Feedback Questionnaire

1. What feedback did you feel was most useful on the essay plan? What feedback was least useful? Was there feedback you did not understand? If so, please specify.
2. When revising your rough draft, did you focus more on grammar and sentence structure, on organization and content of the essay, or did you spend equal time on both tasks? What area (grammar or content) did you feel the feedback indicated was more important? Why?
3. Describe your feelings when reading the feedback on your rough draft.
4. Did you receive any outside help (from a tutor, friend, relative, etc.) when revising any of your work? If so, how did this person/people help you interpret the feedback?
5. Describe how you feel about your final draft, and why you feel this way.

Findings

On the student's first draft of his essay, I provided the following feedback:

1. Seven content-based comments, including thesis statement and topic sentence clarification, paragraph coherence, wording clarification, and suggestions for avoiding repetition.
2. Thirty direct coded surface error comments, including indication of comma splices, sentence fragments, and run-on sentences, spelling errors, subject-verb agreement errors, verb tense errors, and word choice errors.
3. Eight indirect uncoded (underlined and circled) surface error corrections, including capitalization and apostrophe deletion/addition.

The revised final draft of the essay indicated that the student made use of the majority of my feedback. He appropriately revised 24 of the 30 direct coded surface errors, eliminating all but one punctuation-based error. Indirect feedback may be the preferred method according to Ferris, but it also appears through this case study that a direct approach may also be an effective feedback technique, at least in the short term revision process. He also revised all eight of the indirect uncoded surface errors (supporting Ferris's (2004) idea), and addressed five of the seven content-based comments, either through re-word-

ing, deletion of awkward phrases, or adding explanatory detail. His ability to accurately revise many of his errors is encouraging to me as his instructor and feedback provider. Even though the results were mainly positive, the student also unnecessarily separated paragraphs (created two paragraphs instead of one) in two instances, which could indicate a misunderstanding of my inquiry-based feedback on his content. I asked him if he intended to write about two seemingly unrelated topics in the same paragraph (my goals was to suggest he focus only on one topic), and the student still discussed both topics, but in separate paragraphs. I am reminded of Hillocks' (2005) emphasis on the strength of inquiry in response to student writing. I am not discouraged by the possible confusion that my feedback caused the student, since he did adjust his writing in response to most of my content inquiries; instead, I am interested in discovering ways in which my question formation might more accurately convey my intended message to my ESL students. Perhaps wording the inquiry in a different, possibly more direct way, may help clarify my intentions for the student's revision. The student's answers to the Feedback Questionnaire offered some additional insight into his thought process while revising his essay, and described in general his feelings about my feedback. He indicated that my feedback drew his attention to his continued issues with fragments and punctuation, and that he recognized many of his mistakes after they were indicated through my comments. The fact that my surface errors comments about grammar and sentence structure outnumbered those about the content of the student's essay, in addition to the fact that I had recently conducted class lessons on punctuation and sentence fragments, may have made the student more aware of these

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particular errors. He noted that he did not expect many comments on his essay since he thought he put a great deal of effort into the first draft, but found the comments quite helpful as they helped him recognize his areas of weakness, particularly with regard to sentence structure and punctuation. Reading this student's responses to the Feedback Questionnaire gave me some insight into his revision process and reactions to my feedback. Even though it appeared that my grammar and punctuation lessons did not have an immediate effect on this student's first draft, his answers to the questionnaire help to indicate his increased awareness to these areas, which gives me some hope that perhaps all of my efforts are not going to waste.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Because this case study was conducted with only one student and in a restricted time frame, the results are obviously inconclusive, but the study did help me come to some preliminary conclusions about feedback techniques as well as implications for further research surrounding feedback provision. First, it

appears that while I provided more form-based (grammar and surface structure) feedback than comments on content, and the student indicated the importance of addressing surface errors, student uptake of both kinds of feedback (grammar-based or content-based) seemed comparable. Therefore, teacher feedback in all areas of writing, including grammar, appears to be valuable. Secondly, my direct coded feedback seemed to lend itself to immediate student uptake quite well during the revision process, despite my skepticism about this feedback following a review of Ferris's research. For this reason, I feel it may be a worthwhile endeavor for writing instructors to engage in a more direct grammar feedback approach for their ESL students. Surveying the students about their feedback preferences, perhaps in the form offered by the Feedback Questionnaire, may also aid teachers in determining the best feedback method (direct or indirect) for each student. In addition, the results of this case study imply a possible correlation between instruction about particular surface structures and student recognition and uptake of corrections involving those structures. Even though the student in my study made multiple punctuation and sentence structure errors on the first draft of his essay even after I had provided mini-lessons on these topics, after receiving my feedback he indicated that his attention was immediately drawn to these areas that we had discussed in class. So, in the revision process, the class instruction, particularly that which addressed punctuation and sentence fragments, appeared to prove somewhat useful. Based on the answers to the Feedback Questionnaire, I was able to gain insight into what at first seemed to be a lack of feedback uptake, but instead was perhaps a delay in error recognition that could be helped along with continued teacher and student attention. Again, a personal survey of students' reactions to feedback looks as if to be a useful tool for teachers to determine the effectiveness of their grammar and sentence structure lessons.

Next Steps

While it offers some potentially useful insight into my current feedback practices, further exploration of my feedback provision is necessary if I want to come to a deeper understanding of its effectiveness. I propose extending my definition of "effective" to mean not only immediate student uptake of feedback on same-essay revisions, but also student retention and employment of the feedback on future unrelated writing assignments. In this regard, my definition of "effective" coincides with Truscott and Hsu's (2008) definition of student "learning." I believe further, more longitudinal studies conducted with this extended definition in mind would help me come to a more informed conclusion about the longer-term effectiveness of my grammar-based written feedback.

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