Student-Teachers' Comments' Type on Children's Writing: Practices and Perceptions of their Role as Writing Facilitators

Esther Sayag- Cohen
Kaye Academic College of Education, coheesther@gmail.com

Merav Asaf
Kaye Academic College of Education, merav@macam.ac.il

Nurit Nathan
Kaye Academic College of education, nurnatan@bgu.ac.il

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About the Authors

Jennifer Good currently serves as the Associate Provost at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. Prior to that position, she also served as a faculty member in the School of Education and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum and Institutional Effectiveness at Auburn University at Montgomery. She has also held administrative positions at Auburn University, where she received a Ph.D.in Educational Psychology with a cognate in literacy studies, and the Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. Before working in higher education, she taught high school English for eight years in schools in Chandler, Arizona and Virginia Beach, Virgina. *Kevin Osborne* currently serves as the Director of Institutional Research and Planning at Rockingham Community College in North Carolina. Kevin received his B.S. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and his M.B.A. at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM). After completing his degree at AUM, Kevin served in various positions for the university, including Director of Institutional Research and Senior Database Analyst in Institutional Effectiveness. Kevin continues to hone his interests and skills in accreditation and assessment, and he is beginning the pursuit of his doctoral degree.

Student-Teachers' Comments' Type on Children's Writing: Practices and Perceptions of their Role as Writing Facilitators

Esther Sayag- Cohen, Merav Asaf, and Nurit Nathan
Kaye Academic College of Education (Israel)

Introduction

Literacy programs in teacher education play a dual role: improving students' academic literacy level, and preparing them for their role as writing facilitators. Several courses and activities aim at improving the level of academic writing (language courses, academic writing courses and reading and writing assignments). However, little is done to prepare the student-teachers in non-language programs for their role as future writing facilitators (Dempsey, PytlikZillig & Bruning, 2009; Hill, Bronwen, Gilmore & Smith, 2010). Although, students continuously engage in writing activities, most do not engage in comprehensive processes of teaching writing with children (Moore, 2000). Consequently, Bainbridge & Macy (2008) find that many student-teachers are deeply concerned about their ability to assess literacy learning, even though they were exposed to several assessment tools throughout their studies. In addition, many teacher educators do not provide a positive role model for writing teachers since they are busy struggling balancing time and content limitations with the demands of providing effective and ongoing feedback to multiple students (Dempsey, PytlikZillig & Bruning, 2009). We are therefore interested in examining how student-teachers write and perceive the provision of feedback on school-students compositions in the final stages of their learning.

Writing Feedback

Writing Feedback on school-students compositions is the main activity use by non- language teachers to improve writing. This activity is based on student-teachers' experiences as writers and their perceptions about their role and about writing processes (Lee, 2009). Writing feedback relates to different aspects of the composition: syntax, lexical variety, register, text structure and ideas. It is commonly provided in the form of comments differed in their rhetorical style: pose questions, request clarifications, correct or suggest corrections (Auten, 1991; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener, & Knoch, 2009). Comments can be local (relating to the specific words, sentences, and suggesting specific corrections), or conclusive, serving as summative or global comments. The purpose of feedback is to improve writing but even more so, its aim is to motivate writers to express their ideas through extended writing processes (Lam & Law 2007). Teachers' feedback on their students' written products reflect their perception regarding the writing process (Auten, 1991; Connors & Lunsford, 1993) and their choice of feedback type tunes their students' writing process and their motivation towards writing (Biggs, 1988; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Hounsell, 1997).

Three major types of teachers' feedback practices are reported in the literature: editing (direct–corrective), formative (indirect-corrective) and dialogical which characterized by different comment types but moreover are a manifestation of the teachers' perspectives of the writing processes:

Editing Direct-Corrective Feedback. This feedback is characterized by taking control of the text and revising various aspects, correcting spelling mistakes, rephrasing sentences, adding informational details or ideas, etc. Teachers frequently adopt this technique by using imperative sentences (Sugita, 2006), presenting critical attitudes towards lexical decisions, syntax, structure and ideas (Kasanga, 2004). Direct comments imply that teachers perceive writing as a short-term activity, which seeks to correct a specific text rather than develop writing strategies (Lee, 2003). Nevertheless, studies find that college students prefer this directive, explicit

feedback approach which clearly guide them how to rewrite the text (Bitchener 2008; Straub, 1997; Sugita, 2006). Moreover, Sugita (2006) found that direct imperative comments were more influential on writers' revision than comments in a question form. Yet research which examined the effect of feedback pointed to a gap between students' positive statements on feedback and the minor corrections they actually performed on their compositions (Ferris, 1995; Straub, 2000; Wiltse, 2002; Sugita, 2006). Researchers conclude that findings on the efficiency of direct-corrective feedback are contradictory, and although it seems that students prefer this kind of feedback, which "takes control" of their composition, this feedback is not correlated with an improvement of writing skills (e.g. Gue´nette, 2007; Kasanga, 2004).

Indirect-Formative Feedback. Formative assessment seeks to help writers improve writing in the long term. It does not focus on improving a specific text but on writing processes assuming that raising awareness to problems rather than their correction can lead to long-term learning (Ellis, 2009). This feedback helps writers, especially novice writers, to cope with the ambiguity of the writing process (Shute, 2008). Error codes (as circles, lines, arrows, etc.), which draw attention to linguistic issues tends to increase meta-linguistic awareness to the writing process. Yet, data on formative feedback and its effect on writers are opaque (Yin, Shavelson, Ayala, Ruiz-Primo, Brandon, Furtak, Tomita, & Young, 2008). Formative feedback was not found to be more effective than the editing feedback (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Similarly, Vardi (2009) found that general feedback had less influence on student revisions than text-specific feedback and that both local and global feedback addressing organization in general were poorly related to change.

Dialogical Feedback. Theories referring to writing as a continuous and dialogical process between writers and their addressees (based on Bakhtin theory in Lillis, 2003) suggest that teachers will act as addressee and respond in a manner which directs the writer to perceive writing as a dialogue (Lillis, 2003). Hence, teachers are encouraged to engage in oral and written discourse with the writers. The objective of dialogue is to increase motivation, to develop a concept of writing as a prolonged process, and to promote self assessment. Straub's (2000) study shows that the success of the dialogue is influenced by the teacher and students' perception of what writing is and by teaching style.

It is noteworthy that these three types of feedback are not mutually exclusive and teachers may engage in different types of feedback simultaneously based on the learning situation, on students' writing capabilities, on the writing tasks, and on their expectations from students.

The Context of the Study. The population of this study consists of student-teachers attending various education programs in one Teacher College in Israel. This college certifies teachers in two main programs – a four year B.Ed program and a two year teacher accreditation program for students who have previously obtained an academic degree. Students study in six departments (kindergarten, special education, elementary school, junior high school, art education and physical education). Studies include three major domains: pedagogy, (psychology and education) disciplinary studies (literature, mathematics, sciences, etc.) and field practice with methodology courses. During their final year, students take part in the internship program of 8 hours a week of practicum and 8 hours a week of education courses. Throughout the program, students take 2-3 language courses (depending on the grade they achieved in a language admission examination) dealing with academic writing, grammar and oral proficiency.

The population of this college is unique and challenging. While half of the students are Jewish Hebrew speakers, the other half consists of Arabic-speaking Bedouins. These students studied in Arabic-speaking elementary and secondary schools in villages located in the college's vicinity. They need to acquire a high level of fluency in Hebrew in order to assimilate socially, professionally and academically. Their admission requirements are different from those of the Jewish candidates in order to increase their prospects for admission. Some of the students study in special programs for Bedouins and others in multicultural programs and courses of the

college, according to their interests and competencies. The majority of these Arabic-speaking student-teachers will teach Hebrew as a second language to Bedouin children, and therefore they are expected to achieve a satisfactory level in Hebrew writing and in teaching Hebrew writing.

Little is known on how prospective teachers perceive the writing process (Lee, 2009) their role as writing facilitators and how they respond to children's writing (Dempsey, PytlikZillig, & Bruning, 2009). The research questions of this study aimed to portray student-teachers perceptions and practices about writing feedback: (1) How do student-teachers, in the last year of teacher preparation program, perceive their role as writing facilitators? (2) What are the main characteristics of their writing feedback to different genre? (3) Do non-native speakers of Hebrew write feedback differently than native speakers of Hebrew?

Method: The aim of this study is to draw a picture of student-teachers' feedback practices, attitude and perceptions. In order to compare perceptions and practices, four research tools were- composition writing, feedback on children's writing, a questionnaire and an interview. The data distinguishes between native speakers of Hebrew and non-native speakers of Hebrew, (mainly Arabic speakers) in order to see if their level of Hebrew writing affects their feedback writing and perception regarding the teacher role and feedback writing.

Participants. A cluster which consisted of all students in their final year at the college was sampled: students attending the college's B.Ed program (N=111) and the teacher accreditation program (N=62). This cluster was chosen since the students in these groups were in the final stages of their studies, took several writing and didactic courses, and were about to start teaching their internship year. Background Data were collected on the students' first language and writing level. This was done in order to control for the level of language mastery (FL or SL Hebrew speakers), due to our college demographics.

Instruments. Four instruments were used in this study: (1) **Composition writing.** In order to assess the writing level, student-teachers were asked to write an argumentative composition relating to television commercials. The students were given a short written opening which describes two opposed standpoints towards television commercials and were asked to continue this introduction and relate to the different standpoints. The time allocated for the task was 30 minutes, yet students, especially non-native speakers of Hebrew, who needed more time for the completion of the task received up to 10 minutes more. The purpose of this phase was to assess the student-teachers' writing level and see if it correlates with their feedback practices.
(2) **Writing feedback on children compositions**. Two compositions, written by two 6th grade-students, were used in this phase. The first composition was an argumentative essay supporting and opposing TV content restriction as a means for reducing violence among youngsters. The second one was a narrative about a relationship with a pet. The student-teachers were asked to refer to the text as a first draft and write feedback to the writers who wrote the compositions as if they were their teachers and wanted to improve their writing.
(3) **A questionnaire**. The questionnaire included two questions about the teachers' role as writing facilitators, and three questions about writing feedback. The first two questions were as follows: Do you think your role as a teacher is to facilitate students' writing? Do you think you are qualified to facilitate student' writing? The other three questions related to the role and types of comments were: Do you think children benefit from comments on their writing? The fourth question introduced 18 types of comments on writing from which the students were asked to choose six most preferred (appendix A). The fifth question presented 11 descriptions of teachers' roles from which they were asked to choose the three most important ones (appendix B).
(4) **Interviews**. The purpose of the interview was to better understand the students' position when writing comments and their attitude towards their feedback. The interviews started with writing feedback on children's composition, followed by five questions: What needs improving in the composition? How can your feedback help the students in improving their writing? What do you know about the teaching of writing? What can teachers do

to promote the writing processes of their students? How can comments promote / demote writing abilities?

Procedure. Data gathering was conducted in the following order: composition writing, feedback writing on compositions and answering the questionnaires. This order was chosen because the questionnaire included a list of types of comments on compositions and teachers' roles in writing which could have affected the feedback on the composition. After giving their consent, 77 students wrote compositions, 66 answered a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of teaching of writing and teachers' role and 49 students wrote feedback on children's compositions as well. Ten additional students, who were not included in the former sample, agreed to be interviewed about their perceptions and feedback on writing. The interview included all the research tools and was accompanied by open-ended questions.

Data Analysis. The compositions of student-teachers were assessed by the researchers as having one of the three levels (low, medium or high) in four aspects: ideas, structure, vocabulary and grammar/usage. The compositions assessment was initially conducted by the three researchers together with the help of detailed rubrics describing each level. Thereafter, ten compositions were assessed separately to ensure reliability achieving high level of reliability (r=0.92) and afterwards the compositions were divided among the researchers for individual assessment. Data analysis addressed for each group separately in order to see if there are differences due to language level. Crosstabs of 77 compositions were analyzed on a three-level scale. Mean scores ranged from 1.87 to 2.22 with Hebrew-speaking students achieving significantly higher scores than students of HSL, on three factors:
(1) structure (χ^2 =9.86, df=4, P< 0.05);
(2) vocabulary (χ^2 =29.17, df=4, P< 0.01);
(3) grammar and syntax (χ^2 =17.38, df = 4, P< 0.01);
(4) and for the Holistic assessment (χ^2 =11.17, df=4, P< 0.05).

Analysis of Feedback Writing. Comments were divided into local and summative or global remarks: summative remarks are usually written at the end of the composition and are related to the text as a whole. Local remarks are written throughout the text relating to specific problems of the composition. Student-teachers' comments on the compositions were classified into 18 types according to the ones in the questionnaire (appendix A). The classification of comments was initially done by the three researchers together, thereafter, ten feedbacks on ten compositions were assessed by each researcher to ensure reliability of the classification, achieving a relatively high level of reliability (89% agreement), and only then were the student-teachers' feedback divided between the researchers.

Limitations of the Study. We are aware of two major limitations: (a) the use of only one text from two genres (an argumentative essay and a narrative) is a weakness of this study since it is possible that the characteristics of the particular text yielded specific comments and therefore does not enable making any inferences relating to genre. (b) In the feedback task, the student-teachers were not acquainted with the children who wrote the compositions. This may have reduced empathy to the writers' and affect their feedback. This limitation was reported in other studies examining preservice teachers' writing comments of anonymous school students (e.g. Furneaux, Paran, & Fairfax, 2007).

Results. The data analysis sought to examine student-teachers' perceptions of their role in writing and feedback writing and their comment type in two frequently-used genres;

Perceptions regarding the teaching of writing. In the questionnaire, with regards to the teacher's role- 3% responded that writing improvement is the role of language teachers only, and 97% responded that they perceive writing improvement as their role in all lessons where texts are written. When asked about the knowledge about writing- 55% responded they have some knowledge about the topic, 11% responded that they do not know how to do it, and 34% responded that they feel prepared for this role. A similar picture arouse in the interviews - seven out of ten interviewees reported that no course they studied dealt with feedback writing and that they do not know much about it, emphasizing their obligation as teachers: *"We are all educators; we need to teach students how to write an answer". "We need to know the difference between oral and written language and how to promote these capabilities in our school students ";* OR *"I am not a language teacher, but I need to know how to relate to the structure of written answers on every subject matter".* These explanations illustrate that they perceive their roles as writing facilitators although they are not language teachers.

Declared teachers' roles. Two teachers' roles were identified in the questionnaire as being most important: developing the students' confidence in their writing ability (62%;), and encouraging further rereading and rewriting of drafts (53%), both aimed at raising motivation for writing. Secondary roles included promoting the love of writing (35%), raising awareness to genre (33%) and improving language awareness (30%). The least-cited role was developing self-assessment by introducing criteria for good writing (26%).

Preferred feedback types. The most preferred feedback types were suggestions on text structure (65%), praising (55%), rephrasing wording problems (47%), posing questions about the purpose of writing (46%) and adding connecting sentences (44%). All other types of comments were chosen by less than 39% of student-teachers including spelling, suggestion of new ideas, request for clarifications and corrections of grammar.

Perceptions about the benefit of feedback. 13% think that students develop a negative attitude toward writing due to teachers feedback, 23% think that students ignore the feedback, 47% think that students use feedback to improve the specific text and 17% think that feedback can improve writing in general. Five (of 10) students said in the interviews that feedback may upset some students, especially weaker writers who gain less from the feedback and who might be discouraged to continue writing because of negative comments, saying*: "Now that I am looking at my comments again I think they do not encourage writing".* When criticizing their comments, the student-teachers said that they mainly lack specific examples, like: *"I wrote some praises but I am not sure that the comments are good; I should have demonstrated them";* OR *"I see that my comments will not help him. I should accompany my feedback with an example of a good composition".* When asked to reevaluate their feedback in the interview, students were critical on their feedback, questioning their impact on the writer. Five other students presented a positive attitude to their feedback, they described their feedback as useful since it was specific and included examples: *"I highlighted the place where the writer should begin a new paragraph, so she will have a mark to follow ";* OR *"I advised him to use a different word and gave him the correct one;* OR *"From my comments he would know how to rearrange his arguments".*
No significant difference was found between first and second language Hebrew speakers in their perceptions on feedback and on their role as prospective teachers.

Comment types frequently used by students. When writing feedback on children's writing, the student-teachers wrote more local comments than global, concluding comments. In this task, 577 comments were written by all students – 70% were local comments mostly on spelling and 30% were global-concluding comments mainly on text structure;

Table one shows that most used comments were on spelling and suggestions for improving text structure. Relatively, few comments were praising the writers (13%) and fewer related to content- general

requests to clarify information (4%) and questions about content (11%).

Table 1: Comment Types Used by the Student-Teachers

Local Remarks (402)		Global Remarks (175)	
(%)	Type of remarks used	(%)	Type of remarks used
37	Correcting spelling mistakes	37	Suggestions for improving text structure
12	Marking places in need of correction	15	Commenting on style
12	Rephrasing wording problems		
11	Questions about content	13	Praising the writing
8	Correcting grammar and syntax errors	10	Commenting on spelling mistakes
7	Commenting on style	6	Questions about content
4	Suggestions for improving text structure	4	Marking places (and commenting on them)
4	Requesting clarifications regarding information		
5	Other types of remarks	15	Other types of remarks

Hebrew-speaking students wrote significantly more comments (N=19, an average of 16.21 comments per student) than students for whom Hebrew is second language (Arabic-speaking students - N=20, $\overline{X}$ =8.75; others - N=7, $\overline{X}$ =11.57) (F=4.39, df =2, P< 0.05). Yet, regarding comment type, the use of comments was characteristic of both first and second language Hebrew speakers, with no correlation found to the students' level of writing.

Comments as related to Genre. Four phenomena regarding the genre of the feedbacks on compositions were found: (a) feedback on the argumentative essay related mainly to the text structure (37%) e.g.: "*You have to rearrange your ideas into a structure*" or "*You have to add some examples to your statements*"; (b) comments on the prominence of the writer's opinion were written mainly on the argumentative essay (40%): "*Do not state your opinion at the beginning of the essay*" or "*You were not asked to express your opinion*"; (c) feedback on the narrative focused extensively on style (12%) e.g.: "*try using formal language, not colloquial language*" or "*Do not use slang in your writing*"; (d) 15% of the student-teachers criticized the writer's expression of emotions in their feedback on the narrative: "*you are focusing too much on your feelings*" or "*try to focus on the plot and leave your emotions aside*".

Summary of results. Most of the student-teachers believe that promoting student writing is their role, they are prepared for the job, and that feedback is beneficial for development of writing. The majority of students claimed that their roles as writing teachers is to promote rewriting and self-confidence and chose praising as a preferred type of feedback, but in practice, corrections of the text itself (correcting spelling, wording or syntax and grammar errors) were the most common types of comments on the drafts with only a few praises used. On the other hand, while students chose suggestions regarding structure as a preferred comment type, they did write mostly comments on text structure. Also suggestions of new ideas, and request for clarifications which was less preferred type of comments matched their few comments on the content in their feedback.

Recurring comments tended to emotionally detach the writers from their text. In the argumentative essays students asked the writer to minimize the place of opinion or to avoid stating it altogether; in the narrative, the students asked the writer to "play down" the emotional expression. Finally, the interviews led us to believe that students are aware of how feedback may discourage writers, but that they do not have a solid understanding or comprehensive knowledge about how to write feedback so as to keep the writer motivated. These findings were found in both native and non-native speakers of Hebrew, and were not associated with the level of writing except for the number of comments which was related to language competency, a result which should be reexamined in further research.

Discussion

The most prominent finding of this study is a discrepancy between several stances involved in the act of writing feedback: There is a clear mismatch between how the student-teachers state their role as writing facilitators and rank the types of feedback by importance and the way they write comments on the compositions. We think our students see writing as a functional technical process rather than an expressive practice. Our students claim that teachers should develop students' self-confidence in their writing ability. Yet in practice, they mainly assume an editor's stance: they correct text structure and linguistic errors, do not tend to relate to the content of the essays, and are critical of expressive features in the texts, which can achieve the opposite of self-confidence in writing ability. These results matched Furneaux, Paran, & Fairfax, 2007 of EFL teachers from five different countries. The authors explain that "most teachers reacted as language teachers, rather than as readers of communication." Although the participants in this study were not language teachers, they were focused on direct-corrective feedback.

The inconsistency between perceptions and practices was reported in Lee (2009) pointing at ten recurring mismatches between expressed perceptions and feedback practices, three of which are prominent in our study: (1) "Teachers pay most attention to language form but they believe there's more to good writing than accuracy"(pg. 15); (2) "Teachers tend to correct and locate errors for students but believe that through teacher feedback students should learn to correct and locate their own errors" (pg. 16); (3)"Teachers respond mainly to weaknesses in student writing although they know that feedback should cover both strengths and weaknesses" (pg.17). Similarly, our student-teachers in this study perceive their role as to promote rewriting, but their feedbacks were mostly a corrective feedback, focusing on structure and linguistic weaknesses. These mismatches may have surfaced due to a perception of "the ideal text" which Ferris, (2007) pointed at one of the sources for the inconsistency between teachers' perceptions and practices. The notion that writers need to achieve an "ideal text" causes teachers to point at all the corrections they think they should work on and thus leave behind teachers' intentions to let writers find their own corrections, to motivate writers and to develop love of writing. This notion of "ideal text" can contradict the perception of writing as a prolonged developmental process and cause teachers to act as if every text of his/her students is an ending point of writing. In this case, it seemed that the task of writing comments was an ending point to the student-teachers and so adopting the "ideal text" stance was stronger.

This study taught us that writing feedback can act as self-assessment in two aspects:

a. The process of examining others' writing can reflect on one's own writing. Student-teachers did reflect on their own writing when they were asked to perform the tasks of this study. For example, repeated responses in the interview were: *"I too make similar mistakes"," I am not a good writer, how can I write feedback?"* We think that writing feedback on compositions written by children can strengthen a self-assessment process and may contribute to writing competency. Since feedback writing requires a level of awareness, cognitive and reflective thinking that enable examination and corrections while writing (Torrance & Galbraith, 2006), we expect writing feedback to strengthen the process of self-reflection on one's own writing and thus improve writing products. Nevertheless, this should be examined in a longitudinal intervention in teacher education.

b. Writing feedback can shape student-teachers perceptions of the writing process. If writing process is influenced from perceptions on the writing process as reported in the introduction, it might has the potential of starting a profound self-assessment process, which is highly recommended for higher education programs (Hill, Bronwen, Gilmore & Smith, 2010; Pounder, 2000; Straub, 2000;). In this study, half of the student-teachers confronted with their comments in the interviews, examined their assessment from a critical point of view. However, others avoided a critical stance, adopted a defensive stance in order to support their assessment. Our results showed an equal distribution of the two reactions, but this needs validation and regulation. But if one interview can cause student-teachers to reflect and criticize their feedbacks then this talk about feedback has a potential of a real dialogue which can reach and change their perceptions on writing feedback and writing process.

Since our student-teachers engage mainly in editing, we think that reflection on feedback can help teacher trainers to widen student-teachers' feedback to a formative and dialogic orientation. This reflection will expose the students to practices and perceptions they are unaware of and which they rarely experienced in school as children. The personal example set by their trainers, along with reflection on feedback, could help students develop a more expressive and process-oriented approach towards writing. The focus of writing in teacher education is usually on expository writing, while writing narratives is rarely done in teacher education, and introduction to children's expressive writing is also very limited. Since teachers' main role is to motivate writing in all types of genres, it is crucial they experience writing and writing assessment of various genres and writing levels. We therefore suggest, writing feedback to authentic stories and argumentative texts written by children in different ages as part of their field experience program. Analysis of these feedbacks can be used as a didactic and diagnostic tool in various stages of the teaching process and as a basis for dialogue with the student-teachers. Dialogue on their feedback on compositions with their educators, may help student-teachers develop a more expressive and process-oriented approach towards writing. This dialogue accompanied by real opportunities to interact with school-students' writing and to see the impact of their own feedbacks on writers, is probably the way to prepare student-teachers to their role as writing facilitators.

By the time we write this article a long-term intervention in the college's writing courses focused on writing feedback is conducted in order to learn more on student-teachers writing feedback practices and perceptions and to find ways to widen their feedback writing.

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Appendix A: Eighteen Types of comments (the fourth question in the questionnaire)
Choose six most important comments.
1. Questions about the objectives of writing;
2. Suggestion of new ideas;
3. Correction spelling mistakes;
4. Suggestions regarding text structure;
5. Request for clarifications on information (e.g. relevance of ideas or accuracy of definitions);
6. Marking places in need of correction
7. Rephrasing wording problems
8. Underlining or writing question marks next to spelling, syntax, or wording errors;
9. Commenting on style
10. Criticizing the writers' ideas or standpoints;
11. Grading or giving an evaluative comment;
12. Asking questions on content;
13. General global comments (on ideas, structure, language and style, etc.);
14. Correction of grammar and syntax errors;
15. Asking questions regarding the connection between ideas;
16. Adding connecting sentences between sentences and paragraphs;
17. Praising the writing;
18. Asking questions regarding text structure.

Appendix B: Roles of writing teachers (the fifth question in the questionnaire)
Choose three most important roles.
1. Encourage further rereading and rewriting of drafts;
2. Develop students' confidence in their writing ability;
3. Correct and improve the students' texts;
4. Increase attention to genre;
5. Raise awareness to the addressee of the text;
6. Encourage students to evaluate their writing from different points of view;
7. Promote the love of writing;
8. Develop self-assessment by introducing criteria for good writing;
9. Develop understanding of the expected level of writing;
10. Develop language awareness;
11. Serve as a model of writing to their students.

About the Authors

Esther Cohen (Sayag) is a Senior Lecturer in Kaye Academic College of Education and the head of the Special Education Department. Her main research interests focus on reading and writing, instructional discourse and writing feedback. *Merav Asaf* is a lecturer at Kaye Academic College of Education and the head of the Center for Educational Technology Initiatives. Her research interests include writing in computerized environments, academic literacy and teacher education. *Nurit Nathan* is an Emeritus Lecturer of Kaye Academic College of Education. Her main research interests focus on reading and writing with graphic organizers.