

Writing is more than just writing: A case study of effective feedback within an intercultural writing center

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine a 'popular' tutor's beliefs on feedback and her regular tutee's receptivity toward the feedback in order to investigate factors involved in giving 'good' feedback within intercultural settings. The data was gathered by interviewing a pair of L1 tutor and L2 tutee and observing their tutorial sessions. The results revealed the importance of three points: building a 'safe house' for both the tutor and the tutee, respecting the tutee's 'writer's identity,' and using praise in an appropriate way. This research was conducted at a writing center; however, the findings offer important insights into feedback that are applicable to language teachers in multicultural and multilingual settings as well.

Key words : interpersonal feedback, academic writing, writing center

1. Introduction

What is 'good' feedback for writing? Answers could be varied. For some learners, it is about corrective feedback, such as detailed grammatical correction. For others, it means evaluative feedback with praise, which makes learners motivated (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). I believe that good feedback is tailored for the writer, as Hyland (2003) points out. People may prefer different kinds of feedback; however, at the writing center it is obvious who gives good feedback. Tutees come back to the same tutors regularly if they like the feedback they provide. But, how do they do this? Of course, each tutee has a different personality, level of language proficiency, and level of understanding of the writing conventions in a language. Even if students bring similar written assignments, they have different questions and problems. Tutors are required to understand those aspects within a limited time and give feedback. Through working as a bilingual tutor for a writing center at a university in Tokyo for two years, I came to realize the importance of the interpersonal aspect of feedback. This study began with my strong interest in knowing what kind of feedback these 'popular' tutors gave their tutees.

2. Feedback and Receptivity

Several studies have been conducted to understand how to provide helpful feedback to students (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2008; Leki, 2003). However, as Lee (2008) argues, many feedback studies put teachers at the center of the

studies and fail to grasp the students' reactions to the feedback, although there is little disagreement about the importance of the role played by students in the feedback process. Moreover, there has been a tendency to only look at instructors or only at students in the studies of feedback. I strongly believe that feedback is negotiated and/or co-constructed by both tutors and tutees at tutorial sessions at the writing center. Therefore, I investigate both tutors' and tutees' perspectives toward feedback in this research.

3. The Writing Center

Since the 1930s, writing centers have been an important part of educational institutions in universities and colleges in the United States. In the 1970s and the 1980s, there were significant changes from 'remediation' of the writing products to support for students' compositions in general by focusing on the process of writing, authorship of the written products, and collaborative tutorial sessions (Williams & Severino, 2004, p. 165) . In the 1990s, there was a new trend at writing centers. In addition to tutees whose first language is English (hereafter L1) , they rapidly started to have more and more tutees who speak English as their second language (hereafter L2) . However, it soon became clear that tutors could not just adjust the same instruction to these L2 tutees as they did with the L1 tutees. This is because L2 tutees not only have a low proficiency level of English, but they are also unfamiliar with the conventions of academic writing in English.

4. The Current Study

4.1 The writing center

I conducted my research at a writing center at a university in North America. It is open for all students at the university. Graduate students are hired as tutors, and they can assist with any kind of writing at any stage of it. Therefore, students can go to the center without any written products and ask for tips on where to start or what to write for their assignments. Each session lasts for 30 minutes, and a tutee can sign up for a maximum of two sessions per week.

4.2 Participants – Nicole and Dao

In the current study, I focus on one pairing: an L1 tutor Nicole and her L2 tutee Dao. They have worked together for one hour every week for a couple of months. For Dao, this is the first time in her life that she has learned how to write academic English.

There are two reasons for choosing Nicole and Dao as participants for my study. Firstly, as I noted earlier, it was essential to choose a popular tutor to explore the research question. Through observation at the writing center, I noticed Nicole's popularity. Whenever I visit the center, she always has a tutee, although sometimes no tutee signs up for another tutor. For one year, I have been checking the tutors' schedules; Nicole's sessions were always booked quickly by both L1 and L2 tutees. In the interview with Dao, she referred to Nicole as a "popular" tutor. Secondly, it was necessary to have a tutor who has regular tutees. I assume that if a tutor has

regular tutees, it means that tutees like working with her, including how she gives feedback and what she provides.

4.3 Data Collection

I collected data for this study by interviewing both Nicole and Dao to explore Nicole's beliefs and opinions on feedback and Dao's receptivity toward feedback. Both interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about one hour. I also audio-recorded their sessions; however, I focus only on interview data in this study.

5. Findings

5.1 Building a 'safe house' – writing is not just writing

The writing center offers a unique setting for both tutors and tutees. Since it is a free service and open for both L1 and L2 writers, tutees are a heterogeneous population. As the participants in my study, some tutors and tutees have known each other for a certain period. However, quite often it happens that tutors and tutees just meet for the first time and work together sitting closely at a small desk. Wolff (2000) argues that it is the tutor's job to create a 'safe house' for writing instruction during the session. She applied Pratt's contact zone theory to describe a tutorial session. The contact zone is defined by Pratt as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 44) . Wolff insists that writing tutorials are done in this contact zone; therefore, it is necessary to make it into a safe house for tutees.

Through observation, I noticed that Nicole always stood up and welcomed tutees with a big smile. I observed that not all tutors welcome tutees in such a way. When I pointed this out during the interview, she explained that she tried to welcome them as much as possible (l.185). Nicole said that she tried to be in a good mood, even if she was tired or grumpy (l.181) . She told me that she found that if she was not ready for the tutorial session, it often did not go well. This is because she thought that "people need to be relaxed as much as possible" to "be able to ask questions, and back and forth". Coincidentally, she also used the word "safe" to explain how she views the tutorial session. She said that a tutorial session is "a sort of a safe place" for tutees to ask her questions. From this talk, it became clear that she believes that creating a relaxed atmosphere is necessary to encourage tutees to ask her questions.

Dao also referred to the atmosphere at her session with Nicole. In the first and the second semester, it was "so hard" (l.34, l.36) for her to write papers in English. She said that she felt like "I wanna cry" (l. 248) whenever she had to write. Even though she is not satisfied with her writing ability, she feels "more comfortable to write" (l. 254) now. She still goes to the writing center with these struggles and worries. When I asked Dao about the difference between Nicole and other tutors she had worked with before, she explained as in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

Dao: Sometimes, my writing is not that clear and I can *** with tutor and I can

understand another point which is not the point I wanted to say, but maybe **with Nicole, I feel very comfortable to ask, so I mean I get whatever, I want**, I mean. Because it's sometimes it's my fault, because **if I feel uncomfortable with tutors, I feel like, oh I am shy to ask them**. And at that point, I might have a lot, something information or somehow I want to put into my (writing) . (1.210-215)

It is because she felt “uncomfortable” with those tutors that she was too shy to ask questions, although she had a lot of thoughts and simply did not know how to write. Dao also said that this was her “fault” and not the tutor’s “mistake” (1.208) . However, this points out the importance of building a safe house where Dao feels comfortable to ask questions to tutors. It also prevented those tutors from knowing Dao’s questions and giving appropriate feedback to her.

Regarding the contact zone, Nicole also described tutorial sessions as “often more than just writing” repeatedly during the interview (1.142, 1.287) .

Excerpt 2

Nicole: I think, even people aren't, being not personal, but **still very personal. I think it's particularly in written and in oral literacy experience is a personal**. People often will talk about somewhat, personal things, problems they have had with writing or things they were surprised about, writing in one country and writing in the US, things like that. But **sometimes it's a fragile situation, when does get personal like that, you have to be a little more careful**, 'cause people are there for writing, but **often more than writing**, like anything, **when you spend time one-on-one with someone**, try to work on something. (1.136-143)

Excerpt 3

Nicole: And it's not all about writing, well sometimes it's just writing, but **sometimes it's more than just writing during the session. People are talking about their experiences or trying to explain how their experiences come out to their writing**. (1.287-290)

This shows that Nicole was aware of what would happen in the contact zone between tutors and tutees. Nicole understood that tutors not only had to support tutees' grammatical corrections or their composition, but also engage in talk with them about their personal writing problems, such as difficulties in different academic writing conventions.

It should be noted that tutors themselves also need a safe house to ask questions to be able

to provide appropriate feedback to tutees. Nicole said;

Excerpt 4

Nicole: I may ask (questions) for two minutes during a session, because I **need to know where the people are, in order to figure out, what to do with them, where they are going and what they need.**
(1.292-294)

Nicole's motivation to ask tutees questions is similar to what Goldstein (2004) points out as the basis of a desirable and helpful response. Goldstein argues that it is vital to begin with "where the writer is, what the writer intends, and what the writer says he or she needs from the reader" (p. 73) in order to give helpful feedback. This shows that Nicole understands the benefits of knowing where the tutee is, what the tutee wants to write, and what the tutee needs from her.

Overall, excerpts 2, 3, and 4 show that Nicole is aware of the importance of interpersonal aspects of her responses. She focuses on giving a response to Dao as a writer, not her written texts. They also make it clear why Nicole is able to give helpful feedback to her tutees.

5.2 Writer's identity – tutee as an author

As I mentioned briefly, Dao has experiences of working with other tutors; however, she was not satisfied with their feedback.

Excerpt 5

Dao: When I am back and I read my paper again and I think, **it's not my point** ...Yeah, so I feel that way, **I try not to go back to the person again.** I mean, the way they help is good, but sometimes, **I lost my point,** because of the editing. (1.169)

It is very interesting that Dao described what the tutors did as "editing". Through her talk, Dao used editing several times, for her former tutors, her friend who checks her writing, and her professor who gives a lot of feedback on her papers. She showed a negative feeling toward her former tutors, however, she said that she liked the feedback from the professor, yet called it "editing". Thus, I thought that the word "editing" was used to refer to feedback in general. However, she never described feedback from Nicole as "editing" at all, although she talked about Nicole's feedback more than anyone else's. Dao described Nicole's feedback as she "respects our thoughts, whatever write, she doesn't try to change my topic or idea. She tries to make a sense, what we write" (l. 159-161). As Dao said that Nicole did not change her topic or idea and respected her thoughts, this might be why Dao did not use the word "editing" when referring to feedback from Nicole.

Related to Dao's talk, Nicole also talked about her opinions on working with tutees' ideas and their writings. When I said, "I try to see what they see" to describe my experience of giving feedback to tutees, Nicole agreed with my idea by saying, "Me, too. I try to work on their ideas, tutee as a writer, not my writing, but not how I write, but what they say" (1.205-206) . This matches how Dao described Nicole's feedback.

Dao was displeased when she realized that "I lost my point" in Excerpt 5, and this shows the importance of writer's identities. Cazden (2009) argues for aspects of writer's identity based on Ivani's (1998) theory of writer's identity. Writer identity consists of three selves; the autographical self, the discursal self, and the self as author. These three are connected to each other and overlap. All three selves are essentially equal. However, in the case of Dao's talk in Excerpt 5, the self as author is the most essential self. According to Cazden, the self as author is "the writer's sense of authority, and authorial presence in the text." Dao was not satisfied with the revised paper, since the author was not herself in that paper. The author became the tutor who was "editing" her writing. On one hand, there is a tutor who becomes an author of the tutee's written text. On the other hand, there is a tutor, like Nicole, who recognizes that the author is the tutee herself. Dao has worked with both types of tutors and did not want to work with the former type again. This shows that the tutee's receptivity will be limited if the tutor is not aware of the importance of the tutee's self as author.

5.3 The secret of encouraging students

During the interview with Dao, I asked what kind of feedback she preferred to have. She answered that she preferred feedback including praise and criticisms (1.190-195) . She did not mention critical feedback from Nicole, but it may be considered that Dao did not perceive any feedback from Nicole as critical. She said that she was "willing to have suggestions, comments, whatever to improve my papers" from Nicole (1. 589-590) . This shows Dao's strong receptivity toward feedback from Nicole. It could also indicate that Nicole gives feedback with praise.

Regarding praise from Nicole, Dao said that "she always have a good word to tell us. I think she may have a secret how to encourage students" (1.594-594) . She also mentioned that not only herself, but also her friends who had tutorial sessions with Nicole thought she was a good tutor (1.598-1.603) . She told me that because of the good reputation, she signed up for a session with Nicole. This story points out how essential it is for tutors to use positive words when giving feedback to tutees. Although Nicole did not mention praise or criticism in the interview, Dao's story indicates that Nicole always used "good" words in her feedback. Goldstein (2004) states the significant role of praise; "praise is important in and of itself for its acknowledgement of the writer and the writer's strengths as well as the strengths of the writer's text, and for its strong motivating force" (p. 73) . Nicole's way of using good words in her feedback encourages Dao and her friends by acknowledging their strengths as a writer and their writings.

However, it should be noted that Dao was not satisfied with praise feedback when it was not

helpful. She referred to one of her professors who used to give her “excellent” or “good” (1.280–281) on her written assignments. She appreciated those words, but she said that she “learnt nothing”. This clarifies that praise does not work if it is given solely, in line with Goldstein’s arguments.

6. Conclusion

Through interviewing Nicole and Dao, three interesting points became clear. Firstly, Nicole makes effort to create a comfortable place for both the tutor and tutee, so that they can ask each other questions. Tutorial sessions are held in the contact zone where the tutor’s and tutee’s cultures meet. This implies a risk of misunderstanding or miscommunication due to cultural differences. Therefore, it is essential to make the contact zone a safe house, so that both the tutor and tutee can be more personal without hesitation and ask each other questions in order to understand each other and avoid misunderstanding. Secondly, Dao’s talk on feedback from other tutors indicates the importance of the self as author. The tutor who edited Dao’s writing failed to give her helpful feedback. Moreover, the tutor became the author of Dao’s writing without noticing. Nicole’s talk shows that she is fully aware of the tutee as a writer. This opinion becomes apparent as she works with tutees whilst respecting their ideas. It makes Dao willingly take Nicole’s feedback. Thirdly, the way Nicole uses praise also makes Dao accept her feedback. From Dao’s talk, not only her, but also her friends considered Nicole’s use of positive words as preferable. However, it should be noted that Dao was not satisfied by just getting praise. Thus, it is obvious that praise does not work well if tutees do not receive appropriate feedback.

Within the three findings, some of them may be limited to only Nicole and Dao’s situation, and may not be able to explain how other popular tutors give feedback that is accepted by their tutees. Also, I did not look at their tutorial sessions in this study, although it is essential to look at how they actually negotiate feedback. Despite these limitations in this study, it should be noted that helpful and desirable feedback cannot be given without considering the interpersonal aspects of feedback. Nicole’s efforts to understand the tutee as a person, respect the tutee’s ideas, and recognize the tutee as a writer allow her to give tailored feedback to her tutees.

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