The Effectiveness of Teacher Feedback in ESL Composition
—How to Improve It and How to Fully Internalize It—

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This paper reviews teacher feedback to student writing in ESL composition. I will start by introducing Vivian Zamel's article (1985), which triggered the active movement of feedback research (section 1), then focus on the nature of teacher feedback and how students receive it (section 2), later I will address some studies which investigated the effectiveness of teacher feedback (section 3), and finally suggest how the teachers can improve their feedback and how students can make the most of it (section 4).

1. Turning point of feedback research

Zamel (1985) examined the comments and markings of teachers on 105 ESL writing class student texts and responding behaviors of 15 teachers. What she found out was truly shocking:

> ESL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text (Zamel, 1985, p.86).

She also found responding behaviors of ESL teachers as the following:

> ...the teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers; they attend primarily to surface-level features of writing and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse. They are in fact so distracted by language-related problems that they often correct these without realizing that a much larger meaning-related problem has totally escaped their notice (Zamel, 1985, p.86).

This analysis drove a lot of ESL composition teachers to look the nature of teacher feedback on their students' papers over again and find some ways to turn this laborious work which simply makes the English teacher "a tired dog" (Zamel, 1985, p.79) into a goal-oriented, productive procedure for both teachers and students.

2. How do the students regard the feedback they received from their teachers?
2.1. In single-draft setting

Zamel's aticle (1985) anatomized teacher's comments and pointed out the problems in them by looking through students texts, but Cohen (1987) investigated the tendencies of teacher feedback and how the students process it by means of student questionnaires. He asked 217 university students from a variety of language classes and levels to recall the last paper they had received back from their teachers supposedly a day or two before. From the questionnaire, he found out that: 1) while most students read over all or most of the paper returned and attended to all or most of the corrections in their corrected paper, about 20% of the students did so only sparingly or not at all; 2) The comments that the students indicated as not understandable tended to be in the form of single words or short phrases—such as "confusing" or "not clear"—, not providing particular guidance as to how students should revise the part pointed out as being such; 3) students reported that they not only paid attention to mechanics (spelling, punctuation, etc.) , but also to vocabulary, organization and content-areas in which teachers comments were not frequently seen;

4) the most popular strategy for handling feedback was simply making a mental note, and the number of students who rewrote the paper was limited to 8%.

From these results, Cohen acclaimed the necessity of learner training (informing the students of various strategies for feedback processing) and teacher training (providing students more effective feedback) to solve the mismatch between the type of information sought by the learners and that provided by the teachers.

In addition to further delving this mismatch, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) tried to investigate how students process the feedback they receive. They examined teacher feedback on both L1 and foreign language writing in three settings (the EFL institute, the university EFL course, and the university L1 course).

It was found out in the EFL institution study that while the teacher had not made comments on content intentionally because it was not a factor that would be assessed in this course, the students clearly desired to have such feedback. Cohen and Cavalanti suggested that since comments on content could motivate the students to write more and to improve their writing, it would be one idea to indicate such comments separately in such cases as that is not included in assessment.

As to student's repertoire of processing feedback, the students in all settings usually simply made a mental note of the teacher's feedback. However, there was one exception: the L1 students were more likely than EFL students to resist (to disagree with or reject) the comments they received from their teachers. Cohen and Cavalanti attributed this to their native control of the language.

They concluded that "missing ingredients" (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990, p.175) in approaches to feedback are a clear teacher-student agreement on: 1) what will be commented on and how such comments might be categorized, and 2) feedback procedures. If the student are equipped with strategies for handling feedback, they say that would lead to "more productive and enjoyable composition writing in the classroom"(Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990, p.176).

A series of investigations administered by Cohen and his colleague were valuable in that they shed a new light on students' perceptions—how they receive the feedback and how they process it. Since learning is an interaction between teachers and students, it is crucial to check if the accordance of supply and demand is well-balanced. However, there are some flaws in both studies. In Cohen (1987), the linguistic situations of the participants were too diverse; of 217 participants, 60 were English as L1 students, 34 as ESL, and the rest as French/German/Hebrew as a foreign language students, the number varying from 6 to 109. As language complexity could be another variable in the results, his implications would have been more convincing if he had limited the scope of the study to either ESL students only or L1 and ESL students. In Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990), the sample number was only nine—three each for each setting (the EFL institute, the university EFL course, and the university L1 course). Their insights are in fact interesting, but there is no doubt that they need more verification before generalization.

2.2　In multiple-draft setting

Under a consecutive pedagogical context, Ferris (1995) administered a survey to 155 ESL students in writing classes asking about feedback from their instructors on their writing. In this writing course, all instructors used a multiple-draft syllabus, limited their feedback on content and organization on first drafts, prolonged making grammatical and mechanical comments until the final drafts, and placed a greater deal of weight on content and rhetorical issues than sentence-level concerns when determining the final grade of the writing.

It was found that: 1) students were more likely to reread their essays and pay closer attention to their teachers' comments on the earlier (1st or 2nd) draft than on the final draft; 2) although students reported paying the most attention to comments on grammar (67% said paying "a lot" of attention on earlier drafts) than any other aspects of their papers, they also indicated paying attention to the content and organization (63% and 51%, respectively); 3) students utilized a variety of outside resources (instructor, tutor, other students, grammar book, or dictionary) to respond to their teachers' commentary; 4) although nearly half of the students reported never having trouble understanding the teachers' comments, some complained about having difficulty with teacher's handwriting, with grammatical terms and symbols indicated, and with confusing questions about content; 5) many of the students reported having received positive comments from their teachers and had vivid recollection of their teachers' encouraging and affirming remarks; and 6) an astonishing number of the students (93.5%) appreciated their teachers' feedback as being helpful in improving their writing.

It seems that the dynamics of multi-draft syllabus was exhibited in this study.   Students necessarily paid attention to teacher's feedback for they were required to revise their drafts at least once in this setting. It is interesting to note that even on final drafts, which the students did not have to rewrite, more than 86% of the students reported they paid attention to teacher's comments.   This shows that the students customarily checked how their efforts had been accepted by their teachers.   Also, although Cohen (1987) wrote that L2 students writers in his study reported a limited range of strategies to their teachers' feedback, it was found that students in this study consulted a variety of outside resources.   This can also be attributed to the multiple-draft setting because it was necessary for the students to respond to the teacher's indications and show what adjustments they made in the revised version.

2.3.   In the writing conference setting

Although being away from classroom activity, Freedman and Sperling (1985) addressed the writing conference "to examine its potential role in the teaching and learning of written language"(p.106).   They investigated teacher-student interactions in four writing conferences, containing two high-achieving students and two low-achieving students.   The conference covered discussion about class schedule, the student's writing habits, diagnostic instruments such as writing samples or verbal skills tests done by the entire class, or whatever issues the student wanted to discuss with the teacher.

It was found out that each student wanted to focus on different types of topics (e.g., discourse-level or surface-level), and naturally, the teacher focused on different types of topics for different students. Moreover, higher-achieving students received more expository explanations both in quantity and in quality; and the higher achieving the student, the more likely he/she was to receive a more detailed invitation for future conferences.   This could be explained partly by the immature communication style of low-achieving students such as initiating topics that are likely to alienate a teacher, or breaking down the communication by inserting interjections at the inappropriate time.   Also, the higher-achieving students seemed to get more praise out of the teacher by expressing their insecurity about their writing, but apparently this strategy was not seen among the lower-achieving students.

From the result that the lower-achieving students' immature communication style, it is conceivable that each individual learner has the same pattern of strategies for communication, whether it be speaking or writing.   In cases where the writer is not skilled enough to have a successful communication with the reader and to respond properly to the comments he or she receives, great amount of efforts in "learner training" (suggested in Cohen, 1987) would be crucial.

3.   Is teacher feedback effective in improving student writing?

The significance of feedback from an instructive aspect can be integrated into a single question: Is it effective in improving student writing?   Cohen and Robbins (1976) examined the written work of three university ESL students, focusing on verb form errors.   Comparing the number of times a certain verb form appeared erroneously with the number of times the form appeared altogether in the papers ordered chronologically,   they concluded that "the correction did not seem to have any significant effect on student errors" (p.50).   However, this result was not at all persuasive due to the inconsistency of procedures teachers had taken in correcting the students' written works: although graders were given a checklist for correction, it was not always reflected in the actual corrections; moreover, corrections were not made at all oftentimes.   They concluded their study by suggesting that correction should be more specific and should be checked by multiple graders (so as to make sure the corrections are complete) if the purpose of correction is to measure its effects over time.

Based on the data that 93.5% of the students participated in the survey felt that their teachers' feedback was helpful in improving their writing (Ferris, 1995), Ferris (1997) tried to support it by numerical evidence and further scrutinize types of feedback that are more or less influential in students' revision process.   She examined teacher feedback, in the margins or at the end of students' papers, on the first drafts and subsequent revisions of forty-seven advanced university students in ESL composition course.

Comment types were categorized into eight types: 1) ask for information in the form of question [indicated as *ask for information/question* after this]; 2) make a request in the form of question [*request/question*]; 3) make a request in the form of statement [*request/statement*]; 4) make a request in the form of imperative [*request/imperative*];   5) give information in the form of question [*give information/question*]; 6) give information in the form of statement [*give information/statement*]; 7) make a positive comment in the forms of statement or exclamation [*positive comment*]; 8) make a grammar or mechanics comment in the forms of question, statement, or imperative [*grammar comment*].[1]

Among this categorization, marginal *grammar comment* elicited positive change the most (77%), followed by marginal *request/imperative* (72%), end *grammar comment* (66%), marginal *request/statement* (62%), end *request/question* (60%).   Ask for *information/question* (both marginal and end),   marginal *request/question*, and end *request/statement* were all over 50% (56%, 53%, 55%, and 50%, respectively).   Revision had a tendency to improve gradually as the comments got longer and moreover, text-specific comments generally influenced more positive changes than did general comments.   Also, making comments of encouragement, even general ones resulted in the students writing more or better.

For reference, while 92% of the marginal comments of the teacher who participated in this study were rated "short" (1-5 words) or "average" (6-15 words), 87% of the end comments were rated "average" or "long" (16-25 words).   Marginal and end comments were quite different in type—31% of her marginal notes were *ask for information*, whereas the same percent of end comments were *positive comment*.   Her strategy of making short comments on the way and making longer comments, including positive ones, may have contributed to student's improvement in their revision process.

4. Implications and perspectives

4.1.   What should be taught in ESL composition course?

Raimes (1983) asserts that even though teaching and learning ESL composition is a compound of composing and second-language acquisition, most of the ESL composition teachers have stressed the ESL part (structures) at the sacrifice of the composing part; that is, "stress editing skills rather than the creative

act of communicating meaning" (p.262).   She insists that ESL composition teachers are dealing with "TSL: Thinking in Second Language" (p.272) and that the composing part should be emphasized as well as the ESL part.   However, nobody claims that grammatical correction should be neglected in ESL composition.   Ferris (1997) maintains that simultaneous attention to content and form does not impede students' ability to revise their ideas but may improve their end products after all, since they receive more accuracy-oriented feedback throughout the writing process.   From student questionnaires as well, a large proportion of students reported attending to their teachers' feedback on grammatical aspects (Cohen, 1987; Cohen and Cavalanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 1997).   It is important to respond to students' need to wanting the grammatical/mechanical correctness in their writing to be checked, but the ESL teachers ought to remember their role as a reader, not an editor.

4.2.   How can teachers communicate their feedback policy to students?

Ferris (1995) asserts the importance of teachers' intentional explanation of their responding behaviors to their students.   It would be beneficial for the students to have the feedback policy (e.g., content on first drafts, grammar on later drafts) explained early in the term, perhaps during the class time, giving the students freedom to ask question about it, if they have any.

As to abbreviations and symbols that are going to be used in teacher's comments,   equivalent chart (i.e., a chart that shows what each abbreviation or symbol stands for) could be shared between teachers and students to keep their meaning clear.

4.3.   How to maximize the effect of feedback

Even with a consistent feedback policy from teachers, students will not always internalize the comments by simply making a mental note of them.   The multiple-draft syllabus makes the students thoroughly review feedback they receive and to find some ways to revise the drafts.   In addition, Ferris (1997) suggests "a revise-and-submit letter" (p.331), in which students will explain how they have responded to the feedback they have received.   She claims that besides encouraging reflection upon both feedback and revision, this procedure gives the students discretion to disregard or disagree with some comments they have received.

Teachers, in contrast, can also improve their feedback by making sure if the students realize the intention of the comments.   Some students complained about ambiguous comments like "confusing," "not clear," "give information," or "too general/specific" insisting they did not clearly show what the students have to do to revise their drafts (Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 1997).   Also, the teachers should bear in mind the significance of positive comments.   Students are very anxious to know if they receive any affirmative comments, and this is especially true of the weak ones (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990).   How students appreciate positive comments can be easily assumed from the amazingly vivid memory of the students in the study of Ferris (1995).   Positive comments will motivate the students to revise the drafts for the better ones, and to take pleasure in writing.   Moreover, it will also demonstrate the teacher's stance as a reader, not simply a checker.

4.4. Conclusion

With the growing interest in feedback research, the teacher-students relationship in ESL composition courses seems to have been transformed as well.   Formerly, the teachers behaved like a judge to evaluate the linguistic correctness of the student papers, but lately teachers have become aware of their role as

readers as much as language teachers.

However, some students may be puzzled at the American standard of "good writing." In Ferris (1995), some students wrote that although they understood what the teachers intended to say, they did not always agree with them. There was one student who even wrote: "My writing style is not American and the teacher seems to like American style. It's hard to change my style" (p.44). As the sense of value and communication (or even writing) style is closely connected to individual's cultural background, students with this kind of difficulty may well emerge. This student evidently needs some extra support in dealing with this problem. I will leave the cultural aspect in ESL composition as a topic to be explored in the future.

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NOTES

1. Typical examples for each of the eight comment type are as the following (Ferris, 1997, p.321).
   1) ask for information in the form of question

   Did you work out this problem with your roommates?

   2) make a request in the form of question

   Can you provide a thesis statement here —What did you learn from this?

   3) make a request in the form of statement

   This paragraph might be better earlier in the essay.

   4) make a request in the form of imperative

   Mention what Zinsser says about parental pressure.

   5) give information in the form of question

Most statements do allow a waiting period before an adoption is final —Do you feel that all such laws are wrong?

6) give information in the form of statement

Iowa law favors parental rights.   Michigan and California consider the best interests of the child.

7) make a positive comment in the forms of statement or exclamation

A very nice start to your essay! You've done an impressive job of finding facts and quotes to support your arguments.

8) make a grammar or mechanics comment in the forms of question, statement, or imperative

Past or present tense?

Your verb tenses are confusing me in this paragraph.

Don't forget to spell-check!