

Feedback's Efficiency: To what extent does the teacher-student relationship affect ESL student's writing using conference feedback?

Jeremy Ivan Thambirajah* Dr Noreen Noordin
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Abstract

Teachers' understandings of feedback probably influence the type and quality of feedback that they provide and also enhances teacher-student relationship in the classroom setting. A qualitative study design was adopted, whereby six undergraduates participated in focus group interviews. Participants were first asked to write an argumentative essay. They then submitted the draft for the teacher's feedback. After two days of correcting the papers, conference feedback was provided by the teacher. The focus group interview was audio-taped and transcribed, as well as written performance scores from students' writing samples, and audio-taped teacher-student writing conferences.

Teachers' understandings of feedback were strongly focused on enhancing relationship with the student instead of improving learning. Similar factors are expected in other contexts, though agreement rates should reflect local policy priorities and cultural values. Emerging themes provided insights into value of conference feedback in academic writing.

1. Introduction

It is worth mentioning that many researchers believe feedback to be a critical factor in Assessment for Learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Clarke, 2003; Hattie, 2009; Sadler, 1989, 1998), and among them Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 102) pointed it out as "among the most critical influences on student learning". Therefore, feedback encourages student contentment and determination (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), and provides students to adopt more productive learning strategies (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005). Nevertheless, the meaning of 'good feedback' is always a question mark (Shute, 2008), with feedback considered the element of formative assessment "most laden with a legacy of bad practice and misguided views" (Clarke, 2003, p. 3). Feedback, when provided inappropriately, can lead to negative effects. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that feedback actually reduces student performance in a third of the studies analysed.

Despite the power that teachers commonly exercise over the delivery of feedback, there has been little research to date investigating teacher-student relationship that affect the quality of the feedback, with most work examining their enacted practices (e.g., Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Conceptions consist of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions that people have (Brown, 2008; Thompson, 1992) and are important contributors to behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). The certainty teachers have about educational processes is significant since they have been demonstrated to contribute meaningfully to the actions that teachers take (Pajares, 1992; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2011; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006).

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, teachers have been accountable for providing students feedback. Conversely, throughout the last two decades, with the international rise of student-centered pedagogy and Assessment for Learning policies, there is a growing agreement that students are acceptable sources of feedback (Andrade, 2010; Black et al., 2003; Strijbos & Sluismans, 2010). Peer and self-assessment practices help students to recognize learning objectives and understand the criteria used to judge their work, with the goal of increasing self-regulation (Andrade, 2010). Using students as a source of feedback can potentially reduce teacher feedback problems related to timeliness and frequency (Andrade, 2010) and perceived psychological risks for students (van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010). Although teacher feedback is traditionally regarded as more accurate, Topping (2010) on the other hand has suggested that peer and student feedback is no less reliable and valid than teacher feedback. However, students still require training in these practices (Andrade, 2010; Brown & Harris, in press; Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010) and the nature of this training will be influenced, in part, by the classroom teacher's understandings of feedback.

The validity and effectiveness of feedback from peers and the self is dependent on interpersonal relationships and psychological issues related to self-disclosure and trust (Cowie, 2009; Peterson & Irving, 2008; van Gennip et al., 2010), requiring students to take on the complex role of assessor (Topping, 2010). Research has indicated that some students and teachers question the validity and reliability of the feedback received through these practices (e.g., Harris & Brown, 2010; Harris, Harnett, & Brown, 2009; Peterson & Irving, 2008; Ross, 2006), with studies showing that, especially among younger students, peer feedback cannot be expected to be frequently provided to students in classrooms (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Harnett, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

3. Methods

To contribute to knowledge about teacher-student relationship when feedback is provided, this paper reports the results of a questionnaire survey of teachers' perceptions of feedback. A small number of participants were chosen for this study because of the expected difficulty of obtaining the data from the students and also the time constraint of this study. Therefore only six participants and a lecturer were chosen to participate in this study.

3.1 Research question

The research question guided the development and use of the Teacher-Student Conference Feedback survey instrument and subsequent measurement models of teacher definitions and conceptions of feedback:

To what extent does the teacher-student relationship affect ESL student's writing using the conference feedback?

3.2 Research Design

This study used the phenomenological approach to collect the data. The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the participants in a situation. This normally translates into gathering 'deep' information and perception through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, and representing it from the perspective of the research participants (Lester, 1999).

The most important section in this study, in terms of qualitative research was the nature of teacher-student interaction during conference feedback. Qualitative research "investigates the quality of relationships, activities, situations or materials" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p.422) and it focuses on "description, analysis and interpretation" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p.11).

In this qualitative research study, multiple case studies were used because they allowed the researcher "to study on multiple cases at the same time as part of one overall study" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 431). Conversely, Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as an inquiry approach useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon.

3.3 Site and Participants

The participants of this study included a lecturer and six students, (3 males and 3 females) from the American Degree Programme (ADP) Basic Composition 1 (ENL 101) classroom from a private college in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. A small number of participants were chosen for this study because of the expected difficulty of obtaining the data from the students and also the time constraint of this study. Therefore only six participants and a lecturer were chosen to participate in this study.

4.0 Results

Students' perceived the individual conference as very helpful to understanding the teacher's comments on their drafts and to revising their drafts. Most importantly, students in this study seemed more responsive and attentive to their teacher's instruction than other students who were not involved in this study, which might have contributed to the development of a caring relationship between them. For example, before the individual conference, the teacher announced in class that the students should prepare a list of questions for the conference. However, most students showed up without making a precise list of questions. Accordingly, the lecturer had to explain every comment on the students' papers without exactly knowing what parts the students did not understand, and the students just listened to their teacher's explanations.

In contrast, all the students' read their drafts and made a list of questions from each draft and proceeded to ask them at the conference. Their teacher was then able to explain the exact parts he did not understand in a more efficient way within a limited time.

As students' demonstrated their responsiveness to their teacher, she revealed her attentiveness to them. Rather than telling them the answers, the teacher, as a more knowledgeable person, guided them step-by-step until she felt they were able to revise their drafts, and the student for the most part appreciated and trusted her. Both the teacher and the students seemed to look at the better part of the other, which made it possible for them to remain in a caring relation.

Researcher: How do you feel about your teacher's comments on your drafts?

Student: I make the same mistakes over and over, such as parallelism or run-on sentences. She is very precise in making comments on these...In terms of grading, it is not my job but hers. I am very satisfied with her conferencing method, her feedback, and more importantly her teaching methods.

Researcher: How did you interpret these comments [not clear, unspecific]?

Student 2: I visited her and asked her about these.

Researcher: Do you think your teacher is a caring teacher?

Student 3: Yes, she is. She seems to know my writing well and makes precise comments on my drafts. I really appreciate her commitment.

In teaching and learning situations, both the teacher and students might encounter more or less frustrating moments depending on numerous conditions and constraints, for example when the teacher provides negative comments during the conference which might discourage the student and this could increase or decrease the students understanding of the conference feedback. However, the teacher and the students always tried to see the better part of the other, the degree of trust in each other did not seem to diminish in any teaching and learning situations of the semester.

Nonetheless, when the students received low grades on their drafts after they reviewed the comments and revised their draft with care, they could have felt frustrated. Rather, they gave importance to their teacher's authority and accepted the grades without questioning the teacher. Therefore, this is one of the benefits of teacher-student relationship in using conference feedback to develop writing skills.

5. Discussion

Students' confidence in their writing ability can improve when writing conferences are provided in a teacher-student approach where students are seen as active participants and were provided opportunities to share and highlight their ideas and suggestions during conference dialogue. Besides engaging in teacher-student centered writing conferences, a student is able to gain opportunity to pay attention to their previous learning and progress, observes the teacher to improve writing skills, and utilize verbal feedback to better recognize and determine skills and level of confidence towards writing. The information gained through these important aspects of writing conferences ultimately may help student writers to assess their level of effectiveness (Bandura, 1993).

It can be mentioned that to study the complex nature of interaction between teacher and student during writing conferences, researchers should not limit observations to only one aspect of conference interaction such as body language, number of words produced, number of turns taken, and/or the length of conferences. Additionally, while analyzing conference interaction attention needs to be paid to both parties' input rather than focusing solely on either the teacher or student. As Murphy (2000) highlighted, "we cannot make sense of an interaction if we only hear one half of the conversation" (p. 89). Therefore, a rubric with multiple and specific categories can be utilized to more fully observe details of conference interaction which ultimately can provide a clearer picture of overall writing conference dynamics.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the conference feedback approach provide students the opportunity to negotiate meaning with the teacher and also clarifying important matters with the teacher. As pointed out by students interviewed in this study, they found weaknesses in their writing after the lecturer provided one to one feedback regarding their writing. Therefore it is significant to have students draw focus on linguistic forms (Pica, 1994) from written feedback by circles or by marking their grammatical errors and teachers' can provide conference feedback because this can offer more possibility for students to reproduce a better written product based on what they have learnt from the feedback. Therefore, teachers of English writing should provide more opportunities for students to receive feedback from their teachers and revise them accordingly.

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