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# WHAT TO FOCUS ON WHEN GIVING FEEDBACK

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*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to identify four basic roles that English teachers may assume when giving feedback: audience, evaluator, examiner and assistant and to underline the role of feedback as a supportive teaching environment, being crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning. Teachers need to develop more systemized and consistent forms of feedback that take advantage of the process approach and make it clear to students what the feedback means and what they are to do with it. Moreover, teachers need to familiarize and train students in how to effectively use the feedback in order to make gains in their proficiency and competence as English writers.*

*Keywords: feedback, course requirements, objectives, purpose*

## I. Roles of the teacher when giving feedback.

The role of feedback provides opportunities for students to see how others respond to their work and learn from their responses. The quality of feedback matters. Feedback is recognised as crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning and it plays a pedagogical role by assisting students to work and to comprehend the writing context. Feedback should not be simply informational and didactic discourse but a key factor in learning to write. In my opinion, the role of feedback is to create a supportive teaching environment.

C. Tribble (1996) identifies four basic roles that teachers may assume when giving feedback: audience, evaluator, examiner and assistant. Our feedback is usually limited to granting, commenting and correcting errors. As audience we read the text and say how we find it. We respond to the students' ideas, feelings, and attitudes and indicate whether the author's point is clearly formulated. Feedback is most useful when students have previously been given the assessment criteria and have a clear understanding of the expectations. Indeed, students gain a deeper understanding of the expectations when they have an opportunity to participate in determining the assessment criteria (Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & William, D. 2003).

Our purpose as evaluators is to give feedback on the present text, with a view to help our students to improve their future performance. Teachers can determine the content of the feedback by considering the elements of the writing that are strong or that need more work. (Haswell, R. 2006).

The text is assessed on all dimensions: task fulfilment, content, organisation, vocabulary, language, and mechanics. Each of these is accompanied by the following descriptors that we take into consideration:

1. Main idea: which sentence expresses the main idea?
2. Supporting reasons and examples developing the main idea.
3. Verb tenses

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4. Verb forms.
5. Vocabulary

Evaluating means to point out strong and weak points, while examining is assigning a grade. By giving the grade we indicate the degree of excellence that a task has achieved. We assess the students 'skills on the basis of a product or a portfolio that is evaluated. The use of explicit criteria helps the pupils to understand what is expected from them and how a weak paper can be improved. Giving separate scores, one for each area, will also help our pupils to understand their strengths and weaknesses.

"We know that writing is very personal and the students 'motivation and self-confidence as writers may be damaged if they receive too much criticism" (Connors and Lunsford, 1993). It is very important to praise what a student does well in order to foster students' self - esteem because it is possible that negative feedback has a detrimental effect on writer confidence. (Gee, 1972; Taylor and Hoedt, 1996). I consider that it is necessary to show both positive and negative parts of the writing.

What we need is strategies to give constructive comments on drafts. It is very important for students to have understood the purpose of our feedback at each stage.

If we limit our feedback to pointing out or correcting errors, our students will concentrate on producing error-free writing, neglecting the interest of the content. We should know how to maintain a fair balance between form and content when assessing and giving feedback.

There are two main types of comments we can offer our students: error correction and content critique. Error correction focuses on "how you write". In this case the focus is on writing mechanics like spelling and grammar. Content critique relates to "what you write". Feedback comments should be limited to three or four major suggestions. Teachers tend to emphasize error correction more than they should. No student likes to receive back a paper filled with red marks. Students often complain feedback has too much focus on the negative, and that negative comments are usually more specific than positive ones Students should be encouraged to proof-read their own work or get help from their peers. For this reason, I consider that the feedback should be supportive and positive. Students will react better to feedback if you begin with positive comments. Then add some constructive criticism, but keep the balance between positive and negative.

## II. Using errors to help learners develop.

To help our students to concentrate on particular aspects of language, we can tell them that a piece of work will be corrected for only one thing , the use of tenses, for instances. By doing this, we ensure that their work will not be covered by red marks, and we encourage them to focus on particular aspects of written language. Students appreciate teachers getting involved with the subject of their writing, but do not like to have their ideas questioned or criticized. Reasonably, teachers should aim to provide feedback to each student in five to ten minute student teacher conferences, every two to three weeks. It is important to keep a record of the topics of these conferences, to create an ongoing picture of students' writing, development (Peterson, S.S. 2008).

We should ask our students to discuss where they think their mistakes come from and why they make them. This will help us to realise which mistakes the pupils can recognise and which ones cannot. Asking the students to discuss their mistakes may provide us with information about their transfers from English, the aplication of interlanguage rules, their interpretation of teaching, and their use or communication strategies because many students

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misunderstand the purpose of feedback and see it as judgment instead of enabling learning. Judgmental or critical comments can undermine a student's motivation and impede the learning process. We should point out both strenghts and weaknesses or to use  Thus, our students will have the chance to perceive a correct model in their own use of laguage and will likely to continue taking a correct model in their own use of language and will be likely to continue taking risks if they see that their good qualities are noted and encouraged.

## III. Verbal or written feedback

Verbal or written feedback can be a powerful teaching tool if it is given while students are in the process of writing drafts. Comments on drafts of writing provide students with information about the clarity and impact of their writing. When students receive feedback while they are writing, they are more inclined to use it to revise and edit their drafts than they would be if they received the suggestions on a graded, polished copy (Nicol, D.J., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. 2006).

Written feedback has also been found to be effective when it is coupled with student-teacher conferencing (Brender, 1998; Fregeau, 1999).  Students appreciate teachers getting involved with the subject of their writing, but do not like to have their ideas questioned or criticized. Teachers should aim to provide feedback to each student in five to ten minute student teacher conferences, every two to three weeks. It is important to keep a record of the topics of these conferences, to create an ongoing picture of students' writing development (Peterson, S.S. 2008)

Conferences are an excellent time for teachers and students to ask direct questions to each other and uncover any misunderstandings by either party. Questions for considering when giving feedback.

1. Is the feedback consistent with the goals of the course?
2. Is the feedback consistent with the goals of the assignment?
3. Is the feedback clear and easy for the students to understand?
4. Did I use the system and symbols that I made the students aware of?
5. Have I consistently marked the same error or types of errors?
6. Have I only marked errors that I told the students I would or that I covered in class?
7. Have I marked anything not gone over in class? Why?
8. Will the student know what to do with the feedback?
9. Did I correct the errors or mark it for the students to correct? Why?
10. Have I made only negative comments or did I also add some praise?
11. Did I rewrite student words? Why?
12. Did I make any specific comments or ask direct questions? Why?
13. Are the comments I wrote specific to content and problems that we are covering or have covered in class?
14. - Is there appropriate progression and variety of task?
15. - Are there conversations of different sorts of writing taught? Which ones are taught and how are they presented?
16. - Is paragraphing taught (adequately, depending on level)?
17. - Is there emphasis on the style of written English?
18. - Is there attention to different styles according to text type?
19. -Is attention given to the language resources specific to the written form, such as punctuation, spelling, layout, etc.?

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20. - How much emphasis is there on accuracy?
21. - Are students encouraged to review and edit their written work?
22. - Is a readership identified for written activities?
23. - Do the students find the activities motivating, stimulating and interesting?
24. - are the activities of an appropriate level for the pupils? Or do they find them too easy/difficult?
25. - Are the writing activities relevant to the students 'needs?

Writing promotes learning and is one of the most effective learning activities. In order to be effective, writing needs to receive an effective feedback and the opportunity for revision. The purpose of writing feedback should give students a clear idea of how to improve a feedback needs to be specific and clear. Teachers can use the notes to praise students for the improvements they see from one conference to the next. Students can use the notes to reflect on the challenges they have had in trying to achieve goals set in previous conferences.
Students feel a greater commitment to improving their writing when they have the autonomy to decide whether or not to incorporate the feedback in subsequent drafts (Graves, D. 2004). Students should always feel that they may use the feedback in their own way – that the feedback is suggestive, rather than prescriptive. To support students' sense of ownership of their writing, feedback should:
• be given in the spirit of showing student writers the positive effects their writing has on readers
• identify potential areas where students may revise their writing to clarify meaning or more fully engage readers
• take the form of suggestions, observations and open-ended questions, rather than instructions and criticisms.
Student writers will not be able to benefit from feedback that they do not fully understand. It is very important for students to explain their interpretations of the feedback and speculate what they might do to use the feedback, explain how the feedback has been addressed, or provide a rationale for disregarding it (Ferris, D. R. 1997)
Fathman and Walley (1990) discovered that when students receive grammar feedback that indicated the place but not type of errors, the students significantly improved their grammar scores on subsequent rewrites of the papers. The same idea is related by Frodesen (2001), who notes that indirect feedback is more useful than direct correction. Indirect feedback means telling students they made an error, but not giving away the answer or doing their work for them. Feedback is about providing guidance.

## IV. Using proper indicators

We can indicate mistakes in written by putting a mark in the margin to show what kind of mistake it is. Whatever indicators we use, our students should understand clearly what they mean. When we bring back to class students' writing with comments on content, we should allow students time to identify their mistakes and correct them. While they are identifying their problem, we can help where they do not know what is wrong. The students have an immediate opportunity to try out the suggestions in their writing, allowing for meaningful application of what they have learned from the feedback. Focusing on individual students' immediate writing needs, this ongoing feedback is a form of differentiated instruction that

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complements the teaching of mini-lessons to small groups or to the whole class**. (**Peterson, S.S. 2008).

In his study *Do students value feedback? Students' perceptions of tutors 'written responses assements and evaluation in higher education* Weaver M. found that most students complained their writing feedback was too general and vague with no suggestions for improvement.

Students report that they are often left not knowing what they have done well, what they need to change. The goal of feedback is to leave students a clear message about what they must do to improve future submission. When it takes a long time to get feedback to students tend to lose interest in the assignment and feedback is not helpful unless the student responds to it. Correcting written work is very time consuming, particularly if we have large classes. One possible solution is to let the pupils correct and edit each other's writing. Even they cannot discern all the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing, they will detect at least some of them.

The sheer number of hours spent commenting on student paper is reduced dramatically when instructors can rely on automated electronic feedback system. "By using this system, instructors can free time to turn their attention to other aspects of teaching in the process writing approach". (Chen, 1997, Yao &Warden 1996).

## V. Self-correction.

V.Zamel (1991) suggests four self-correction/critical reading techniques that the students can use to correct their own work in class with a critical eye.

- The students read their papers aloud to other pupils. This will help them spot some of the mistakes. In most cases, they will naturally hesitate when a sentence does not work.
- A classmate reads the paper aloud. The new reader may pause when coming across a mistake or when a sentence is problematic.
- The students take their text, cover up everything on the page except the first sentence, put their pencil point to one word at a time, and say the sentence aloud, word by word.

The question of class climate, personal relationships, trust and willingness to accept criticism and help from one another remains. As critical reading does not come naturally for many pupils, the teacher can help them with checklists and/or questions answer.

Frequency of errors types marked:

1. Sentence structure
2. Word choice
3. Verb tense
4. Noun endings (singular/plural)
5. Verb form
6. Punctuation
7. Articles/determiners
8. Word form
9. Spelling
10. Run-ons
11. Pronouns
12. Subject-verb agreement

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13. Fragments
14. Idiom
15. Informal

The students read their papers aloud to other pupils. This will help them spot some of the mistakes. In most cases, they will naturally hesitate when a sentence does not work.

Students appreciate teachers getting involved with the subject of their writing, but do not like to have their ideas questioned or criticized. Reasonably, teachers should aim to provide feedback to each student in five to ten minute student teacher conferences, every two to three weeks. It is important to keep a record of the topics of these conferences, to create an ongoing picture of students' writing development (Peterson, S.S. 2008. *Writing across the curriculum: All teachers teach writing* (2nd Ed.). Winnipeg, MB: Portage & Main Press)

In his study *Teachers 'Practices and Students' Preferences for Feedback on Second Language Writing*: *A case of Study of Adults ESL Learners*, Hiroko Saito investigated the fit between teachers 'practices and students strategy for handling feedback on their written work. The following research questions were asked:

1. What kinds of feedback do the teachers give on students 'written compositions?
2. What are the students' preferences for various types of feedback?
3. How do students handle the feedback they receive?

He considers that questionnaire should be given to all the students at the end of the course. This instrument was constructed to inquire about the usefulness of different kinds of feedback which the students were familiar:

1. **Commentary** The teacher provides feedback by making written comments or questions or in between sentences. No error correction are made.
2. **Teacher correction** with comments. The teacher corrects all the surface (mainly grammatical) errors by crossing out perceived errors and providing correct answers.
3. **Error identification.** The teacher indicates the place where a perceived error occurs by underlying or circling it. But no corrections are made.
4. **Self-correction.** Students evaluate their own work by using a checklist.
5. **Teacher – student conferencing.** The teacher and student discuss a piece of student writing individually during the writing of a composition, and after it is finished.
6. **Preparation for lesson**: lesson plan should have appropriate structure and sequence and the outcomes be realistic and achievable. The lesson uses appropriate introduction procedures, outlines the lesson objectives and encourage student's participation.
7. **Classroom management.** Motivates and engage students in developing knowledge, made effective use of non-verbal communication. Encourage appropriate behaviour and student participation.

## VI. Conclusion.

To sum up, most of the frequently used and relied on methods of teacher feedback on written assignments are not always effective when it comes to developing and promoting students' English writing skills: effective organise and structure writing assignments, understand and consider multiple viewpoints on a particular issue or topic, appropriate reference content, synthesize information from multiple sources into a cohesive piece of work, give a strong argument.

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Teachers need to develop more systemized and consistent forms of feedback that take advantage of the process approach and make it clear to students what the feedback means and what they are to do with it. Moreover, teachers need to familiarize and train students in how to effectively use the feedback in order to make gains in their proficiency and competence as English writers.

In the study *Contrasting Conceptions of Essay-writing*, Hounsell, D (1997) showed that tutors and students had quite different conceptions about the goals criteria for essays. The goal of feedback is to teach skills that help students improve their writing proficiency.

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