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Improving Student-Teacher Writing Conferences

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The research on student-teacher conferences in second language student writing indicates conferences are useful in helping students revise their work. However, their effectiveness can be improved by enhancing student negotiation and discussion during the conferences. In addition, teachers should schedule the conferences early in an assignment, balance criticism with positive feedback, assist students in conference negotiation, and track the progress of their revisions. Important additional assistance can come in the form of a tape recording of the student-teacher conference, and written comments on student error types to aid students in making their plans for revision.

Second language student writing における student-teacher conference を調査してみると、それは、生徒の writing の訂正に役立っていることがわかる。しかしながら、conference 中に行われる student negotiation や discussion の質を高めることにより、その効率は上がるのである。そのうえ、教師は、student-teacher conference を課題提示の早い段階に予定し、積極的なフィードバックで批評のバランスを取り、conference negotiation において生徒の援助をし、生徒の訂正の経過をたどるべきである。重要な補助的な援助として、student-teacher conference を録音したり、生徒が訂正案を立てる際の手助けのために誤りの種類を書き記すことがあげられる。

Introduction

The idea is widely held that through the act of conferencing alone, second language writers will be able to engage in useful and appropriate interaction with their teachers, and that this will lead to successful revisions of student compositions (Zamel, 1985; Sokmen, 1988; Ferris, 2001). But researchers have only examined the attitudes of students and teachers towards conferencing, rather than its effects on student revisions.

One of the few studies of these effects emphasizes the importance of student interaction with the teacher. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) analyzed the conference discourse of three ESL students of high, medium, and low abilities, and coded the subsequent changes that students made to their papers. They determined that after students “negotiated meaning,” they made “revisions in the following draft that improved the text” (p.443). In contrast, when the teacher introduced the questions, the students would apparently agree with the instructor, but make few successful revisions afterward.

This paper will outline several techniques for improving student-teacher writing conferences. These include better structuring of conferences, encouraging student participation, the teacher's use of comments on student papers, and adding audio recordings to the process.

Enhancing Student Participation

A student-teacher conference should be structured so as to encourage student participation. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) note the paucity of empirical research on student-teacher conferences but argue that data from student evaluations suggest several general conditions. The student conferences should (1) be limited to 5-10 minutes; (2) focus on a single assignment in an early draft; (3) balance criticism of student work with praise; (4) incorporate student negotiation in the conference (through helping students to formulate questions, and to confirm teacher remarks); (5) conclude with students verbalizing what they will do next; and (6) finally, that teachers track student progress over the year, presumably through anecdotal comments and by maintaining a record of students' revisions and grades (p.391).

Student negotiation in the conference is particularly important. One approach is that of developing a student conferencing form. Reid (1993) offers a series of open-ended questions to help students assess their work, discuss it effectively during the conference, follow the teacher's comments, and make the appropriate revisions afterward. The first two questions require a student to complete two evaluative statements: "I thought the best part of my essay was ..." and "I thought the weakest part of my essay was ..." (p.222). Judging the paper distances the student from his or her work, and fosters a critical perspective. A third question asks the student to paraphrase the teacher's remarks

about three strengths and three weaknesses in the paper. Taking notes on these remarks helps the student remember the teacher's advice. The final question requires the student to make notes for a plan of revision based on the teacher's feedback. In doing so, the student has to synthesize the teacher's response into a workable writing plan.

Using Written Comments

Teachers usually respond to student papers with written comments rather than by conferencing. But these written comments can also be discussed and clarified during a student-teacher conference. Among the most common written responses are teacher correction of student errors. However, this practice is very time-consuming and some researchers criticize error correction for its inconsistency (Robb, Ross, & Shortread, 1986). Others fault it on the grounds that it appropriates students' work and overlooks the content and ideas in their writing (Zamel, 1985).

Two other, more effective responses in promoting student revision are to identify error types and to frame questions or requests for information to encourage students to develop their writing (Cumming, 1985; Ferris, 2001). In the former approach, the teacher circles or underlines all of a student's errors, or at least representative ones, and requires the student to correct them. Even if a teacher misses grammatical errors, a student can still discern a pattern of error. Second, framing requests for information about and summaries of assigned readings often helps the student writers to rethink how they organized their writing or introduced content. In an analysis of more than 1,500 marginal and end comments on 110 first drafts of papers by 47 advanced university ESL students, Ferris (1997) found that summary comments on grammar and most requests for

information led to substantive revisions. Most of the changes the students made were rated positively, or at least did not detract from the teacher's rating of a paper. The findings also suggest that students pay close attention to teacher comments, and that they are a potentially powerful tool in student revision.

Conferencing in a Composition Program

In the Integrated English program for freshmen and sophomores in the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University, a program for about 450 students at the upper intermediate level of language ability, we employ conferencing in each of our four semester-length writing courses. The first course looks at paragraph writing. Courses two and three cover essay writing. The fourth course, which students undertake in the last semester of their sophomore year, is on writing a research essay. We respond to our students' work by identifying their errors, providing written comments, and conferencing with each student on a piece of writing once or twice each semester.

Each course begins with students analyzing a genre of academic writing, and examining models of student writing in that genre from previous years. We assist students in brainstorming ideas for their writing, then in talking out these ideas with a partner who records the ideas on paper, paying particular attention to detail. In subsequent classes, students bring in several partially-completed drafts, perhaps thesis statements and introductory paragraphs, or topic sentences and lists of examples. They discuss them in small groups of their peers using checklists provided by the teacher. Next, the students take their papers home, revise them, and hand them into their teachers for written comments and instruction.

As teacher comments on the student papers include editing symbols to identify grammatical errors, we either introduce them while students are reviewing one another's work, or in the same class in which the teacher will be returning the papers. The teacher distributes a handout with the editing symbols (see Appendix). Each symbol identifies a writing error common to student papers, and the handout includes a sentence with the error in it. To teach students to recognize error types such as sentence fragments or missing articles, and how they might correct them, the teacher goes over each error type and definition, and asks the students to try correcting the sentence with the error in it. Afterward, students compare their answers in pairs. Later, the teacher reviews the answers on the blackboard or an overhead projector.

The teacher also shows examples of more substantive comments on a paper, such as those relating to content or essay organization. For example, a flawed student essay comparing the Japanese and English languages might prompt the teacher to remark: "At this point, your thesis is not clear about which parts of the two languages you plan to compare." Again, this activity is done using the blackboard or an overhead projector.

After the papers are returned to the students, each student reviews the comments on his or her paper and begins to correct them. We don't employ a pre-conferencing form in our English classes, but use instructions on the board or on an overhead projector. We also require each student to find the best and weakest parts of their essay and to write down three questions s/he may have about the ideas or content of a paper. Students may also write down ideas they have about the teacher's comments. The students attend to this while waiting for a student-teacher conference. The students also use the class time to rewrite their papers. This activity of either revising or conferencing for a class of 25 students occupies most of the instructional time over two classes.

Assisting with Audio Recordings

We record our conferences in order to reduce the language and conceptual demands on our students and to maximize the potential of a conference to provide more explicit and comprehensive feedback than written comments alone. Otherwise, the teacher's information and suggestions in a short conference may seem overwhelming. This is particularly true in a second language where students may fail to undertake revisions they have discussed with the teacher because they may not fully understand the teacher's remarks. Simultaneously, the teacher may not realize the difficulty because the student, apparently agreeing, is merely back-channeling. With an audio recording, a student can listen to his conference as many times as he likes. Furthermore, the audio tape provides the student with a model for commenting on another student's paper.

Because grammatical errors have been identified before the student-teacher conference, we spend little time on them while conferencing. The exceptions occur when a student has trouble recognizing a certain kind of grammatical mistake. Otherwise, the conference time is taken up with more substantive problems such as responding to the student's ideas, essay organization, or the use of examples.

As each student-teacher conference begins, the teacher tests the tape. Once it is running, the teacher asks the student to initiate the conference with his or her three questions for the teacher, and then the teacher and student discuss this as well as the student's opinion of the best and weakest parts of the writing. This might turn the discussion to the content, organization, or use of examples in the paper. Some conferences with more skilled writers who have produced more polished and comprehensive drafts might be slightly less than 5 minutes;

others, will naturally take longer. However, we try to keep even the longest ones under 10 minutes, so that we can finish the conferences for a class of 25 within two class periods.

We have found that our students respond very favourably to these short conferences. In the course evaluations since we began introducing these structured conferences, students have often commented that they preferred conferencing and audio recordings to either peer responses or an exclusive use of teachers' written comments.

Finally, the teacher keeps a record of the conferences and of the points discussed. This is done through anecdotal notes in the teacher's lesson planning book. By tracking the items discussed over the term, the teacher can chart a student's progress and provide even more effective diagnosis of the student's writing problems.

Conclusion

Student revision remains one of the most difficult skills to teach in composition courses. Generally, students are also weak at criticizing one another's writing. By improving student-teacher writing conferences, the student writing process will be better supported. Student negotiations during conferencing can enhance their grasp of the challenges of writing. Afterward, students also will have an audio record of their teacher's comments and, incidentally, a potentially meaningful opportunity for authentic listening in a second language. Finally, the teacher can plan for remedial lessons that are pitched to typical writing problems in the class. Altogether, these measures to upgrade student-teacher writing conferences will assist teachers in developing their students' revisions.

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Appendix 1

Editing symbols

A?	Article missing	<i>He is ___?___ tallest boy in the class.</i>
WA	Wrong article	<i>He gave me <u>a</u> advice.</i>
C	Capitalization	<i>She was a politician in <u>japan</u>.</i>
FRAG	Fragment	<i>Because there are many problems.</i>
P	Punctuation	<i>Some plants can move <u>_</u>Most cannot move.</i>
PI	Plural	<i>These <u>story</u> are translated.</i>
PREP	Preposition	<i>She is very kind ____ children.</i>
WPREP	Wrong preposition	<i>He is excellent <u>to</u> sports.</i>
PRON	Missing pronoun	<i>She bought the book, so it is book.</i>
WPRO	Wrong pronoun	<i>She bought the book, so it is <u>his</u> book.</i>
REP	Repetition	<i>Scientists do <u>scientists'</u> work scientifically.</i>
SP	Spelling	<i>He lives in <u>Canda</u>.</i>
SVA	Subject/verb	<i>The men in the factory <u>works</u> hard.</i>
T	Wrong tense	<i>I <u>watch</u> the film last night.</i>
V	Verb missing	<i>He a fat man.</i>
WV	Wrong verb form	<i>Tea is <u>grow</u> in India and Japan.</i>
WO	Word order	<i>Can you tell me <u>the station is</u> where?</i>