

Rescuing Student Writers from Their Deadlock

Yoshiko Kondo
Scott Gardner
Okayama University

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Students take pains to become better writers, but many reach an impasse while writing and simply do not know how to proceed further. Their lack of knowledge and insufficient skills hinder them from achieving better results. As a remedy, teachers often use different forms of feedback to help student writing. Many claims have been made about the beneficial role of student-teacher writing conferences. Another common format for responding to student writing is written comments. Advantages and disadvantages of these means have been argued extensively in the literature. This study explores how written commentary and writing conferences can be effectively carried out in a university writing class. The study analyzed teacher-student exchanges obtained from both face-to-face conferences and written commentary in students' portfolios. The students' comments demonstrated the reality and variety of their struggles when composing. The results suggest that teachers should provide them with a more supportive and encouraging environment.

学生にとって英作文を上手に書くのは大変である。彼らは途中で途方にくれ、先に進めなくなることもよくある。ライティングの知識や技術が十分でないからであるが、その救済方法として教師は様々なタイプのフィードバックを行っている。ライティングカンフェレンスが有効であるとする研究結果が多数報告されている一方で、教師による作文へのコメントによるフィードバックも一般的に行われているものである。これらの方法の是非は意見が分かれるところである。本研究は、大学の作文の授業で、コメントやカンフェレンスが効果的に行われる方法を探るものである。教師・生徒間のカンフェレンス及びポートフォリオ内のコメントのやりとりを分析した。学生は英作文を書くに際しての現実と格闘について語っており、その結果として、教師の側からの働きかけや環境づくりの必要性を示唆している。

Teacher response to student writing is important at all levels and in all instructional contexts (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Students are always seeking for answers and advice to solve the problems they face during the composing process, and we teachers justifiably feel responsible for responding to students' needs. In the literature, it has been indicated that sincere responses from teachers can greatly influence student attitudes to writing and their motivation for future learning. Research focused on the effects of teacher responses has extensively examined such alternative methods as teacher-student conferences, response journals and peer group responses of various types. Some researchers say that, because of the authoritative role of the teacher, traditional teacher-student responses may be a better option than peer responses. Teacher-student feedback may involve teacher demonstrations of revisions, teacher mini-conferences in class, one-on-one conferences away from the class, and written comments on drafts. Mostly, of prime concern for writing teachers is what types of feedback are of most help to students to improve their writing.

Writing conferences, in which teachers give students direct feedback, provide a good opportunity for students to analyze and think about their writing by putting their thoughts into words (Freedman & Katz, 1987). This format is said to facilitate learning in that it creates a voluntary learning situation for students to express themselves and to discover their own ideas. Conferences can be a reward for teachers also in spite of possible extra time and effort spent collaboratively with students. However, there are accompanying drawbacks in our EFL environment; Japanese students may lack confidence in their abilities to explicitly and clearly express their feelings. As a remedy for this weakness, teacher intervention should be executed cautiously.

Meanwhile, another type of teacher feedback—written comments—is an indispensable part of the writing course. But what, how, when, and where to make comments has long been argued in the literature. Despite claims against written commentary (Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985; Leki, 1990), there is persuasive counter-evidence to suggest that it is a viable and effective approach when used appropriately (Ferris, 1995). Although comments can be offered at any point in the writing process—idea gathering, before writing, writing, drafting, editing, and after writing—constant in the area of teacher response is the debate over what constitutes *effective* feedback: at what point and how a teacher should make such comments.

Today portfolios are widely used for a range of purposes in education: learning, assessment, promotion, and appraisal. A portfolio of work may involve key learning processes such as self-evaluation, substantive conversation, reflective thinking, and practice (Klenowski, 2002). Portfolios can be seen as a

place to store all writing activities that include creative input from the student. They can be visited regularly by students who are free to work on any piece of writing already in the portfolio (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Later, for assessment purposes, teachers can verify processes that students traced through their writing activities. For instance, when a student has a writing assignment in hand, the teacher and the student can both refer directly to it, alternately exchanging opinions. Both teacher and student can collaboratively examine the strengths and weaknesses of writing in detail. The portfolio allows the students to talk freely about their writing, and more importantly, to reflect on their progress as writers. This plays an important role in learning.

Background

There are a wide variety of studies of teacher response to student writing. Many feel that written commentary may be the least effective form of feedback, concluding that such feedback does little or nothing to help students improve their writing because it is too capricious, too idiosyncratic, too vague, and too focused on students' surface-level errors (Sommers, 1982; Leki, 1990). To avoid students' confusion, Zamel (1985) recommends, in her study on teacher behavior, that teachers should establish priorities in their responses. Despite these problems, both teachers and students still largely feel that teacher feedback is essential to revising student composition.

In the area of writing conferences, Freedman and Katz (1987) examined the actual discourse of writing conferences and found predictable characteristics of conferences: The conference is a structured speech event with a predictable

nature; students must learn flexible conference-discourse rules and negotiation techniques during conferences.

In a previous study, we conducted research on the effectiveness of peer editing. We gave the students coaching before they started peer editing and concluded that it can further writing improvement if students are properly guided, or *coached*, for useful advice (Kondo, 2004). Since we knew the efficacy of peer feedback, we naturally decided to incorporate this technique into the writing classes.

For the present study we gave them brief coaching sessions and instructed them to file the peer editing sheets into portfolios, which would also hold much of their other class work. They were also instructed to write their feelings about their work in journals, and in return they received teacher comments. The exchanged journals were also filed into their portfolios.

These portfolios were used to examine how students learn English writing by storing all writing activities as a purposeful collection of student work. As Grabe and Kaplan (1996) described, portfolios are supposed to constitute an ideal mechanism for conferencing with students. Through these procedures, students were expected to become more engaged in the writing activity, more critical of their own work, and better able to express interest or disinterest in their work. We also hoped that they would reflect more on their progress as English writers.

The students of the intermediate writing course were more familiar with written feedback since they had experienced peer editing in earlier courses and research. They were also expected to be more open and honest in expressing their feelings about writing, due to their greater experience and

maturity with regards to English writing. We decided to have this intermediate class try a writing conference in groups with the teacher, in which they discussed their reflections on their assignments.

The following are our research questions, encompassing both the portfolio/journal project and the writing conference project:

- 1) Do elementary class students feel that written commentary is useful?
- 2) Do intermediate class students feel that writing conferences are useful?
- 3) What thoughts about writing can we read out of elementary class student journals?

Method

Participants

There were two groups of participants in our study: one was from two elementary classes where we looked at how journals revealed students' reality at the start of their English writing experience; the other was from one intermediate class in which we held writing conferences in small groups to see how actively students exchanged their thoughts about writing.

Elementary Class (Written Commentary Group)

The participants were 35 (Class A) and 35 (Class B) students in two elementary writing classes in the Education Faculty at Okayama University. All of them had writing classes once a week. This class is required for teacher certification in

teaching English in public schools, and for class management reasons the teacher divided the initial 70-student class into two sections. The student profile varies in English level and year in school, ranging from freshmen to juniors. The teacher used the process approach to teach writing. During the experiment, which lasted for fifteen weeks, the students were assigned four writings: 1) a paragraph on any topic; 2) a description paragraph of a person, thing, or process; 3) a comparison or contrast paragraph; and 4) a short opinion essay on a topic important to the student. The last was intended to be a multi-paragraph essay.

For each writing assignment, students were asked to write two journals on specially prepared sheets distributed to the class. The first journal allowed students to express their feelings about how difficult it was to prepare the assignment, and the second journal allowed students to focus on their peer editing experience and the revisions they made to their papers as a result.

Intermediate Class (Writing Conference Group)

There were 14 students in an intermediate writing course, who made up the writing conference group. They had previously taken the elementary writing course so they were somewhat familiar with process writing techniques, as well as with peer editing. The students were sophomores and juniors.

The students in this course were assigned the topics of 1) a process essay, 2) a division or categorization essay, and 3) a review of a book or movie. All of these assignments were essays.

Between the second and third assignments, we divided the class into groups of three or four students and asked them to make comments on the difficulty of the assignments they had worked on in the class so far. Their assignments had been previously submitted by email and loaded into a PowerPoint file, so that as the students discussed their essays, all the others in the group could refer to those papers on a screen.

Procedure

Elementary Class

At the start of the semester, the students in the elementary class were asked to record their progress during the term. To do this, they prepared portfolios to file everything they produced and received in the class. Included in the portfolio were brainstorm, drafts (first and final), journal A (students' feelings about writing their first drafts; see Appendix 1) and journal B (thoughts about the peer editing activity and finalizing their papers), a pre-test and post-test, materials, references, and class notes. We assigned them journals to write before and after their peer editing sessions to see how they found difficulties in writing and peer editing as a writer and editor (reader).

Intermediate Class

In the intermediate class, the students followed general procedures for writing assignments until just before writing the last paper. They were directed to think about their writing to prepare for discussions in the conference. In the conference, we let them voice their feelings about their writing.

At the end of the semester, all the students in both projects were handed a questionnaire asking them to respond to their respective experiences.

Analysis

The materials we analyzed came from the following:

- (1) Portfolios, which were compiled files of all the students’ work in class, were collected at the end of the semester to trace how the students developed using these various feedback methods, and how students understood and organized the tools to trace their learning processes.
- (2) Written comments in journals were scanned to find and categorize problems that they were having, as well as discoveries they were making, as they worked through the writing process. Additionally, comments from the teacher were categorized to see how the teacher was addressing those student problems and encouraging further discovery.
- (3) Writing conferences were recorded, transcribed and categorized to find what students felt they could share with other students about their difficulties in writing.
- (4) Questionnaires were given to the elementary class students at the end of the semester to evaluate their experiences with writing, peer editing, and journal

exchanges with the teacher. For students who had the writing conference, we also included questions on what the students had expected to get from the conference, and how much they actually did get from it. The questionnaire responses were analyzed to assess students’ overall attitudes toward peer editing and journal and/or conference feedback.

Result

All the teacher/student exchanges recorded in conferences and portfolios, along with the students’ first and revised drafts, were analyzed to examine how they revised their texts based on the feedback they received.

Portfolios

Table 1 shows a numerical summary of our collection of students’ portfolios. All the students submitted, for each of the four assignments, first and final drafts, a peer editing sheet, and two journals, A and B. We counted the number of all the collected items.

Table 1. Portfolio Sum of Elementary Class

Portfolios	Pre-Tests	Post-Tests	Questionnaires	Final Drafts of Papers	Peer Editing Sheets	Journal A	Journal B
66	67	64	64	272	225	255	252

Written Commentary: “What Did the Elementary Class Students Write in Their Journals?”

From 507 journals in total, we looked at how the students expressed their thoughts during their writing process. Students faced problems in all stages of writing, including brainstorming, pre-writing/idea development, writing, peer editing, and rewriting. Also, categorical problems such as how to write “description”, “process”, “comparison/contrast”, and “opinion” were raised. Areas in which they felt they had learned included brainstorming, writing, peer editing, and rewriting. Some of them even made self-reflection on their problems after writing, which might influence their future writing in a positive way.

We came up with a long list of problems and discoveries that the students expressed in their journals throughout the semester. A sample list of these items is in Appendix 2. Some of the most prominent problems students faced in improving their writing were:

- difficulty in narrowing the topic
- difficulty in gathering ideas
- concern about grammar mistakes
- insufficient or inappropriate advice from peer editing partners
- lack of sentence variety
- lack of sufficient research

Students also expressed positive development in their writing, and some typical examples are shown below. There are also examples in Appendix 2.

- by writing my opinion on a piece of paper, I could think about it more deeply than before
- two people’s opinions make the paper better than one
- I changed my writing because I could think about it again from a different viewpoint
- by cutting examples, rewriting details and using many adjectives, I made my paper easier to understand
- if possible, I want to edit my paper myself, or else I won’t be able to write a good paper without a peer editor
- I write my draft to tell my opinion to others, not to myself

These comments also reflect a keen awareness of the effect that third readers can have on writing. The students seem to have a greater sense of audience.

Writing Conference: “Which Did You Prefer, the Process Paper or the Categorization Paper?”

Some typical comments which appeared during the intermediate class writing conferences are shown in Appendix 3. To aid them during the conferences, certain questions were given to the students in advance, so they could prepare their answers. One specific question the students prepared for was: “Which of the two writing assignments you have completed so far did you prefer writing?” In answer to this question, one student expressed her preference for writing the process paper. Responding to her opinion, another student expressed her opinion on writing a categorization paper. Some students

said they preferred writing the categorization paper because the topic was more familiar, and because the process paper is too ordinary. Meanwhile others preferred the process paper because processes are what we go through everyday, and because the categorization paper was too common and they wanted something new to write about.

The writing conference created an entirely different environment for students to express their successes and frustrations in writing. Most of these students were already familiar with the peer editing process, having taken the beginning writing class in previous years. But a group setting, in which students were asked to focus publicly on their own writing rather than a partner's, presented new challenges to them. The students were slow in getting the conversation going, but with the help of the questions given them in advance, and also with the help of PowerPoint slides displaying each student's paper for everyone, they were able to begin talking about their papers and their writing.

Questionnaire

From the elementary class using journals and portfolios, we collected 64 questionnaires out of 70 students, and from the intermediate class using writing conferences, we collected 6 out of 14. For this study we gave essentially the same questionnaire to the elementary class students as we had to students in our previous study in 2003 (Kondo, 2004). The students' overall impression about peer editing showed a slight difference in their thoughts. The students of 2004 (the present study) seemed to have a bit less confidence in their comments as editors compared with students in 2003 (Kondo, 2004). We don't know why this difference occurred.

As for the intermediate class questionnaires, the sample size was too small (6/14) to generalize their ideas.

Discussion

Concerning research question 1, "Do elementary class students feel that written commentary is useful?", many wrote more than we expected about their feelings on writing and the peer editing sessions. They seemed to appreciate having one-to-one exchanges with the teacher. Yet, there was a limitation of students' ability to express their feelings well with the teacher in English. It is interesting that many of the problems they faced during writing can be traced to the fact that the students had to allow other students to read their essays during peer editing, and this exercise may have made them more conscious of such things as creating interesting sentences and showing authority on a topic.

As for question 2, "Do intermediate class students feel that writing conferences are useful?", they seemed to find it difficult to express their thoughts well in English. Still, one comment from a student could generate many other comments from students who might have been afraid to speak before. Although this was a writing class, such experience could benefit their communicative competence. They were already learning to express their critical ideas more and more in writing through peer editing, so this activity potentially helps extend that ability in speaking. Bigger groups can be daunting at first, but with more practice they can relax more, just as they have learned to do in peer editing sessions.

And finally there is question 3, “What thoughts about writing can we read out of elementary class student journals?” As we have already seen, the students expressed both positive and negative reactions to the composition process of their papers. Such thoughts were perhaps more easily expressed in writing, since the students had time to prepare their thoughts more than they would if asked the same questions verbally. The process allows them to think more deeply about their creations, and by doing so, to facilitate their improvement in writing.

We faced some problems during the study. In journals, organizing the portfolios in an orderly manner was a lot of work for the students. We found many of their portfolios to be quite disorganized: many had missing parts (e.g., missing drafts or journals), peer review sheets were swapped (i.e., kept by the peer editor rather than returned to the writer), brainstorming and pre-writing notes were absent (although these should be voluntarily filed if the students acknowledge the importance of their reflections on the writing topics). For the teacher, distributing and collecting so many journals became a bit confusing at times. We felt it a need to streamline the journal-writing process, and reflected that it might be better to have all journal-writing take place between two consecutive class sessions, on a single sheet of paper instead of on separate sheets.

In the conferences, the main drawback was hesitation to speak. They were still hesitant to speak critically about others’ papers (despite one year experience giving peer feedback) when they felt that their own writing skill was not satisfactory. We had thought that students were getting over this feeling of inadequacy by participating in regular

peer editing, but as stated before, the bigger groups probably presented a new dimension to the process. More practice with conferences may help. As Goldstein and Conrad (1990) conclude, students should be encouraged to participate actively in conferences because negotiation of meaning can result in better revision.

Time for conferences was also a minor problem because while one group was in conference the others had to be on task doing something else, without much teacher direction (in this case, they were brainstorming for their next writing assignment).

Conclusion

Students find it worthwhile to exchange with the teacher on their drafts or to receive written commentary from the teacher, as they do not have confidence in their products and they sincerely hope to improve their writing ability.

In the writing conference, the students can share their joys and frustrations not only with the teacher on paper, but also with other students in an open discussion.

Their free comments demonstrated their attitudes and frustrations about writing as well as their expectations and needs for improving their writing. In our study, we tried to learn the merits and demerits of written (commentary) and oral (conference) feedback to student writing. Perhaps portfolios can offer a place for the students to receive teacher feedback that they definitely need and to have good opportunities to reflect on their writing.

We think that the portfolio concept should be promoted and developed further to feed the students’ sense of

achievement, creativity, and individuality. For further study, we think it is worth developing a model portfolio for the writing class. Especially, for novice writers who are not familiar with process writing, a model portfolio will serve as a good guide to develop their writing skills.

As we stated above about problems with the study, we need to find better ways to organize written exchange in the portfolio including its method and content, because students find it worthwhile to exchange thoughts with the teacher on their drafts. For conferences, we need to find ways to stimulate more verbal interaction as well as to facilitate the procedure in terms of using class time.

The relative response to journals and writing conferences shows that students in general still prefer feedback from the teacher to feedback from other students. But both experiments demonstrated that increasing opportunities for feedback can make students think more about their processes and their products in English writing. Even if they initially express a lack of confidence in their ability to critically observe the writing process, these feedback-sharing activities automatically generate critical thinking, which will ultimately reflect on their writing by making it more thoughtful and sensitive to audience.

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Appendix 1

Journal A on Writing Process: Paragraph #1

Name: _____

Student No.: _____

Journal A is for you to write your feelings so far about making this paragraph. Is it easy, difficult? Do the idea-gathering processes that Scott told you about work? Is your topic interesting or boring? Anything you say here is OK, because this journal is supposed to help you think about what you do while you write. After the peer editing session, you will write another journal where you can talk about how working with your peer editing partner helped (or didn't help) your writing.

A) Date: _____

Feelings about the writing process
before peer editing:

Teacher's comments on A:

Appendix 2

Samples of "What Did the Elementary Class Students Write in Their Journals?"

problems students faced (Note: not verbatim quotations)	teacher comments
brainstorm difficult to narrow the topic topic may not be interesting to others → forgot to use brainstorm brainstorm confused me → before writing/idea development difficult to gather ideas	→ part of the challenge of writing is to make the topic interesting to others → it can give you a lot of ideas, and may confuse you, but it's better to have many ideas than to have no ideas
during writing don't know special words for the draft too long as a paragraph → my draft has some special viewpoints so that readers may not understand what I mean maybe I had some grammar mistakes → no link between sentences peer editing said my sentences are too long but I decided not to change → both of us could not find any corrections except for misspellings	→ narrowing topics into one paragraph is important; later you can put different ideas together to form longer essays → did your partner help you? → you don't have to follow all of your partner's advice

<p>couldn't get any good advice from my partner →</p> <p>rewriting</p> <p>used same words many times there were too many examples</p> <p>my sentence is childish →</p> <p>after writing</p> <p>I should have checked (made research) more about my topic difficult to arrange my idea in order teach me how to make a topic sentence</p>	<p>→ convince peer editor to read carefully and try to ask many questions; questions can give hints to writers; we all need to learn better how to give, and receive, criticism</p> <p>→ combining sentences can make them sound more "mature"</p>	<p>helped me finding good examples → partner's and mine are similar in topic so his/her draft helped me fixing my paper</p> <p>could see my draft objectively → two persons' opinion makes the paper better than one</p> <p>changed my writing because I could think about it again from different viewpoint</p> <p>from partner's comment, thought mine lacks of specificity, so added some specific examples →</p> <p>fun to find thoughts that I have never thought</p>	<p>→ sometimes what your partner says to you can lead you to new ideas that neither you nor he had thought before</p> <p>→ two heads are better than one</p> <p>→ even small comments from another person can turn into big ideas</p>
what students learned	teacher comments		
<p>brainstorm</p> <p>useful to hit on many ideas by writing my opinion on a piece of paper, I could think it more deeply than before</p> <p>peer editing</p> <p>partner had good ideas and structures so I learned from it →</p> <p>it is interesting to read essays of others can find weak points which I can't notice myself noticed an irrelevant sentence that seemed to be difficult to decide its deletion</p>	<p>→ it's smart to use your partner's paper (good or bad) as an example to improve your own</p>	<p>rewriting</p> <p>my structure was not good so I remade cutting examples, rewriting details and using many adjectives, readers now understand what I say →</p> <p>after writing</p> <p>if possible, I want to edit my paper myself, or I can't write a good paper without peer editor happy to know new words → I write my draft to tell my opinion to others, not to me</p>	<p>→ a good combination of quantity (more examples) and quality (more adjectives) can make a paper better</p> <p>→ you can learn from your own writing</p>

Appendix 3

Samples of “Which did you prefer, the process paper or the categorization paper?”

Comments about the process paper	Comments about the categorization paper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - process papers are easier because we go through processes everyday - process papers are boring because the events are too ordinary - some processes are very complicated; sometimes instructions are very confusing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - categorization papers are difficult because finding ways to divide and trying to avoid overlap for something that fits in two categories is difficult - categorization papers require some kind of research - categorization papers were difficult if they had a common topic which everybody knows and the writer has to find something new to say about - if the topic is too big, the writer has too much to write