Feedback for learning: The student's voice in academic writing

Simon Stevens
Tokyo Joshi Daigaku

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In order to investigate what students say when they are given more "voice" in the Academic Writing feedback process, two studies of responses to first drafts of literature and language essays were carried out at a women's university in Tokyo. In the first study the focus is on students' reactions to an error correction code, while the second examines student response practices and reactions to different forms of teacher feedback. Written evaluation data in the form of students' comments were collected from classroom questionnaires. The data revealed that students needed clearer teacher explanations and more training to be able to make use of the code. Additionally, finding ways to help students' discuss and be accountable for their work gives them voice in and control over the feedback process.

学術論文をフィードバックする過程で、より多く発言する機会を与えたら、どのように学生達が発言するかを調査するため、最初の草稿に対して、文学と言語学の2つの領域での事例研究を、東京の女子大学で行った。最初の事例研究では、教師が用いる訂正記号への学生たちの反応に焦点を当てているのに対し、2つ目の事例研究では、学生たちがフィードバックに対して何をすべきか、そして教師による様々な形式のフィードバックに対してどのように反応するかを調査している。学生たちの書いたコメントのデータは教室でのアンケートによって集められた。これらのデータは、学生たちにとって、教師のより明快な説明と訂正記号を利用するために訓練が必要であることを示している。さらに、学生が自分の論文について、討論したり責任を持って説明しようとしたりするのを、教師が助ける方法を探すことで、学生たちは、フィードバックの過程で説明する機会をより多く持ち、その過程を支配することができる。

Providing an effective individualised response to student academic writing while remaining supportive and non-judgemental can be time-consuming and frustrating. Teachers might adopt any number of roles when providing effective feedback: that of grammarian by correcting errors, that of dictionary by helping with word choices, that of confidence builder by praising, or that of organiser by trying to help shape the structure of an essay. Students, on the other hand, may not even read or act on teacher feedback (Keh, 1990), thereby negating the value of the process.

The purpose of this research was to hear student voices regarding different preferences for teacher responses and methods of feedback with two university English classes. The first class, a second year academic writing class of female English majors, reports on student feedback, which aimed to discover student attitudes toward error correction on first drafts. A particular focus was the use of an error correction code (Appendix A), whereby students revisited their work with a view to self-correction. Written evaluation data was collected from the class regarding the code's usefulness and degree of difficulty (Appendix B). Some implications for classroom practice are also discussed.

The second set of data was collected the following year with a different class. Hence they were not familiar with the codes I had used with their peers the year before. This study assesses student response practices and reactions to different forms of teacher feedback on first drafts. Thirty-six female students in a third year academic writing class responded to an end of course questionnaire. Once again, the results and some implications for classroom practice are discussed.

First study

Introduction

Dana Ferris (2004), in her summation of the "state of the art" of error correction research, makes three main points:

1. "The research base on the 'big question'- does error correction feedback help L2 writers? - is inadequate;
2. previous studies are incomparable due to inconsistencies of design;
3. existing research predicts (but certainly does not conclusively prove) positive effects for written error correction" (Ferris, 2004:2).

In other words, after several decades of research, we do not have many conclusive answers. As practising teachers, therefore, what should we do? Ferris suggests we should continue relying on the evidence that does exist, our own experiences and intuitions, and the desires of our students to inform and guide us, with the knowledge that in the research and teaching community we are still shaping our knowledge and discourse of our discipline (ibid:11).

Leki (1992) points out that corrections and feedback are worthless on a dead paper, or final draft that has been corrected and returned. Her view is that corrections and comments serve no purpose if the student never has the opportunity to rewrite. However, students seem to value feedback on written errors (Cohen, 1987; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). It could also be argued that Japanese students expect correction because of focus on form and controlled grammar practice in the secondary school system The negative effects of a no-correction policy and the potential loss of student motivation and confidence outweigh the arguments of critics such as Truscott (1996), who cites the damage error feedback can provide. Ferris (2002) also states "long-term development is unlikely without short-term improvement, at least in the ability to attend to and correct errors when pointed out by the teachers."

Ferris and Roberts note the most popular type of feedback is underlining with descriptions, then direct correction, and then underlining alone" (2001, cited in Chandler, 2003:270). However, this study focused on using a correction code

at the point of error. My aim was to encourage students to actively revisit their first drafts and self-correct as much as possible before handing in their second draft. By mentally engaging in the error correction process, it was hoped students would start internalising the grammar rules, rather than passively receiving my corrections. Self-editing skills are also important in the real world where students need to write to communicate at work, and where employers often demand accuracy. Therefore, in this initial study I wanted to find out students' opinions regarding my error marking code.

The investigation

Research questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions in regard to first draft essays.

1. Was the error correction code useful or not?
2. What did the students find hard about using the code?

The class

The class was a second year academic writing class. It consisted of thirty female students at lower to upper intermediate level. It was their first writing class at the university after leaving high school two years previously. The class aim was to help them produce an English Literature or Language graduation thesis in their fourth year. We spent the year working on structuring an introduction, body, and conclusion for a two-page essay. Particular emphasis was placed on developing paragraph writing.

Procedure

In the second term I started using an error correction code (ECCO) to give feedback on first drafts in order to be more consistent in my marking and to prevent students from copying my corrections into their second drafts. I also wanted them to develop a more active approach to recording common errors.

I gave them a list of common correction codes (e.g. WW = wrong word, WO = word order), and explained the meaning of the code with examples on the board. I began using the code and marking essays by indicating the location of the error above the word or phrase. The students were required to complete three essays during the term, each time rewriting their first draft after receiving corrections. Data was collected in the final class in the form of a questionnaire and analysed through content analysis (Hyland, 2003:267). A number of categories emerged with certain key words or phrases expressing what the students said. In the following summary and discussion of results I have integrated student feedback to clarify and support my points.

Results

Do you think the error correction code was useful or not? (See Appendix B)

Over 90% of the class said that they found the feedback useful. In summarising my results, three themes emerged.

Firstly, they expressed a preference for the error code rather than other methods I had adopted previously. These had included writing in the corrections myself, underlining the error, or putting question marks over the problematic

word or sentence. For instance, *"if the teacher does only underlining or making question marks, I don't understand what is the mistake or I might correct the mistake irrelevantly."*

Another important theme involved student suggestions on how best to move forward with this system. One idea involved redrafting: "*Ideal way is that we write the essay and the teacher check the mistakes with codes and return to the students, then we re-write the essay and the teacher re-check! It takes a lot of time, but very effective."* While another student remarked, *"If it's possible for you to check our papers in front of us in the class, everyone can check and think about errors in a short time. Actually, one day when you check my group's essay in front of us, it was easy for us to understand why grammar or words were wrong, also we thought quickly then."*

A third pattern to comments indicated approval of identifying the nature and location of the error, but encouraging students to think about how to correct it on their own. In the following example, the student appears to be assuming responsibility for self-checking and paying more attention to problematic points: *"It is very useful because we can realize where are mistook in detail, at the same time, we need to think about how we mistook. It is an effective way that we take a second look and come to have a better idea. We can train up our ability by ourselves. If we get teacher to give an answer about a code, we will stop thinking and be convinced that it is the only answer and the best idea."*

What did they find hard about using the code?

The main finding was the potential ambiguity of some of the error correction symbols. For example, with WW (wrong word) students did not know which word was suitable: *"When WW was written, it was difficult to understand why it was a mistake. Especially, when a transition signal was wrong, it was difficult to choose a suitable transition signal."*

Some other comments centred on students not being sure how to deal with the error. For example, they had difficulty dealing with words with more than two meanings, resulting in guessing corrections. One useful idea was that I should give some hints to help students find the correct language: "*If you use these codes, I want you to write a little hint in the wrong sentence. By adopting the hint, part of the mistake is so clear, I can appreciate the answer."* Others indicated that even if it took time to find a possible answer, *"looking again very carefully or referring to a dictionary,"* meant the code was manageable.

In an attempt to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, one student helpfully suggested the following: *"Firstly, teacher explain meaning of the code to students carefully in class. Second, student has to bear them in mind. Finally, teacher and students frequently discuss the essay and the code. Then students will take in the meaning of the code naturally.*" These suggestions have been incorporated in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Clearly my initial explanations had not been clear or detailed enough. Although the majority of students were in favour of

the coding system, some improvements could be introduced.

1. I should limit the number of error code symbols to high frequency errors. No list of codes can cover all possible permutations, and the more symbols, the greater the probability for confusion.
2. Training students about types of correction should be done as a whole class activity, on an OHP, both at the start of the term and when the first feedback is given. This will allow for asking questions and clarifying ambiguities.
3. Feedback training should be supplemented with plenty of pair and group activities where students have chances to practice working through feedback.
4. With student permission, it might be good to go over a sample essay in front of class so they can see my thinking and checking in action.
5. I need to be specific about the exact location of the error and offer hints to aid comprehension.
6. Students should also follow up their work by noting high frequency errors in a notebook to remember common difficulties.

Study two

Introduction

Previous studies on student views of feedback have fallen into two categories. Firstly, research into student preferences (both grammar and content) regarding teacher feedback. Leki (1991) found students wanted more attention paid to grammar, while Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (1994) discovered that although foreign language students also preferred a grammar centred response, ESL students wanted both content and grammar. It should be stressed, however, that only Hedgecock and Lefkowitz's study required multiple drafts.

Another group of studies looked at student responses to feedback they had already received (Cohen, 1987). Cohen's study reported a limited response by students to teacher feedback, whereas another study (McCurdy, 1992) indicated students were more active in their strategies toward processing feedback. In general, Hyland (2003:180) reminds us that what students do with feedback varies enormously and it is difficult for teachers to deal with different demands, "but a full dialogue with individual students is often beneficial." Thus, this study began such a dialogue.

The investigation

This study sought to investigate student views on different forms of written teacher feedback on first drafts only (Appendix C).

The class

The third year Academic Writing class contained 36 female students of different abilities ranging from lower intermediate to lower advanced level. The class ran over two terms and was held once a week for one and a half hours each lesson. The class aim was to prepare students to write a graduation thesis in English Literature or Language the following year. In particular, we looked at how to organise

and structure an essay, integrate quotations and construct a references section.

Procedure

The students were required to produce six essays over the year; essay topics included three on language and three on literature. The feedback procedure involved writing a first draft; peer checking in class; submitting a script for my comments, and subsequent clarification of comments in class; re-writing outside class and finally re-submission of revised essays for evaluation. Questionnaire data was collected from all students in the final class of the year. The questionnaire contained an even number of qualitative and quantitative questions. The results, together with student comments, will be discussed.

Results and discussion

How did students respond to teacher feedback?

In this question I used the same multiple-choice format as Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990: 169) to analyse the strategies used by students to respond to feedback. Cohen and Cavalcanti found students either made a mental note or wanted additional teacher explanation. Regarding my results, as Table 1 indicates below, I discovered the most common re-writing strategy for incorporating my comments was revising and expanding (27 students ticked this box). It shows they took their work and my feedback seriously. On reflection this is not surprising since they needed to produce a second draft for evaluation. This may explain why no students said they did nothing at all.

Table 1. How did students respond to feedback? (N=36)

Rewrote their essay; Incorporating my points and/or Revised and expanded their essays	27
Referred back to previous essays and Made a mental note of my points	15
Asked for teacher explanation	14
Consulted a grammar book	13
Identified points to be explained	10
Wrote down points by type	7
Did nothing at all	0

What was the most useful for them when I checked their first drafts? Errors, organisation and structure or both?

This question was designed to assess to what degree student attention focused on areas other than error, since the class was specifically aimed at teaching how to structure and organise a graduation thesis.

The response is summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Student numbers (N=36)

Checking errors	Organisation & Structure	Both
0%	11% (4 students)	89% (32)

As Table 2 illustrates, both areas are important to students. This is consistent with research carried out by Ferris (1995), where students reported that content and organisation, as

well as grammar, was important. However, this also conflicts with other data gathered by Cohen (1987) and Leki (1991) when students expressed a preference for grammar rather than content. This indicates my aim in increasing student awareness of the importance of organisation was productive. As one student remarked, *"our organisation and structure should be checked objectively by teacher because students have little basics to judge which organizations are good or bad."* Also of interest is her view that the teacher is in a better position than students to check an essay. Overall, it could also be said students realised this was the first draft and so grammar errors alone were not as important since a degree of revision would be required later.

What types of comments are the most useful? Positive, negative or both?

Table 3. Student numbers (N=36)

Positive	Negative	Both	No answer/ unclear
8% (3 students)	3% (1)	83% (30)	6% (2)

Here the most interesting point is the number of students who clearly wanted both sets of comments. Many said negative comments are needed for progress, while positive feedback indicates good points and acts as encouragement. One student's comment illustrates the overall view, *"if you comments about positive points, I can use for another essay or explain it to other students. Of course, I need negative comments because I want to know what is wrong or what I should do for a good essay."*

What did students feel about the advantages and disadvantages of peer checking?

This question generated the greatest amount of comment possibly due to the fact that we did a lot of pair and group work on process writing and looking at handouts with models of academic writing styles. On the plus side students remarked they could learn from each other, think about their essays again, and take an objective and thoughtful stance, *"it can give a lot of new ideas…a new interpretation of the narrative…realize weak points which can't be found until other person mentions it…we notice the part which is not understandable to other person…."*

On the negative side personal issues were of paramount concern. Comments ranged from *"some friends do not tell me the bad points directly or tell me only good points"* to *"it's difficult to tell someone we don't know well that her paper doesn't make sense at all"* or *"it's up to the person who checks, sometimes it's a waste of time"* and finally, *"the discussion is sometimes not meaningful, the level of students is different."*

One way forward is to emphasise the benefits of training students in peer checking, giving them a reason to read and explaining the reasons behind these various strategies. Additionally, I need to include simple, achievable aims, connected to work covered in class, such as integrating quotations and referencing. Furthermore, pairs and groups should constantly be changed to ensure a variety of student input.

How did students see my role in checking their essays?

Mindful of my role as the only person who checks and evaluates student writing, I tried to design activities for use in class and give students opportunities to learn outside class, which emphasised my position as collaborator rather than judge, helping writers to take the next steps in their work. My interest in answers to this question stems from this position.

Table 4. Student numbers (N=36)

Helper	Judge	Both
47% (17 students)	3% (1)	50% (18)

Results indicate students were aware of my different roles and that ultimately a grade was always given at the end of the process. Student feedback included many comments along the lines of, *"teacher gives me a grade and some comments. I can find my weak points and the points I should improve next time"* and *"not all students can write a good essay, particularly at the beginning…the role of the teacher is change for good, not just judge it."* Whereas the one student who saw me as a judge remarked, *"your comments to my essays are deeply related to your own viewpoint toward essays, so I feel like being examined and judged."*

Did talking to me face to face help them with their essays?

While I always made myself available for advice and questions during class, due to time constraints and student numbers, it was hard to pursue as much one-to-one feedback outside class as I would have wished. Conferencing was limited to the beginning and end of the course. However, due to the importance of the course, I encouraged students to contact me during office hours if necessary.

Certain themes emerged after summarising student comments through key words and phrases. Results showed 95% of the class felt face-to-face contact helped. Benefits included finding out why their essays were incoherent and the opportunity to ask follow up questions to clarify weak points, while negatives included lack of time to see me and time spent waiting outside my office. Interestingly, two students said they felt frustrated at not being able to express what they wanted to say and consequently preferred to communicate by e-mail, thus opening up another avenue of communication. As a result, the problem of creating time and opportunity for student questions, together with face-to-face feedback, is a potential area for further research.

Were there any other comments about feedback or the course in general?

It is always rewarding when students feel confident and free enough to not just comment on the questions asked but also to make suggestions on how to improve feedback in future classes. One such example was a student's suggestion that I show my response procedure during class time. She says, *"how about using one of our essays as a sample. It's easy to understand. Most of us have same problem, so checking it with everyone might be useful for us, I guess."* Other students suggested setting up small groups of four carrying out autonomous writing tasks while giving them the chance

to come up to the front of the class to obtain one-to-one feedback on their essays (like a mini-conference); to have their essays checked with red pen since it showed I was being thorough; and to have more specific remarks and not vague comments such as *"unclear."*

Conclusions and implications for classroom practice based on Studies 1 and 2

Any number of student and teacher factors influence the dynamics of teacher and student feedback. Teacher beliefs on how they should comment and attitudes to different students are juxtaposed by student factors such as preferred learning styles, cultural background and attitudes toward the teacher. All of these factors make analysing responses problematic. However, it is possible to identify some areas for improvement in future classes, including:

1. Better use of class time
2. Clearer explanations behind teacher preferences for feedback
3. Give reasons why praise is given.
4. Find ways to encourage students to revisit their work.
5. Give students more opportunities to talk about the drafting process.

Firstly, class time could be used better by incorporating a variety of lesson types. These might include not only writing but also the creation of more time for feedback training, mini-conferencing, peer checking, and group work with a variety of meaningful activities. For example, with error correction, students could try and identify errors important to them while I focus on either high frequency errors or those which impede understanding. Additionally, follow-up activities should encourage students to return to their texts to consolidate what they have learned.

Secondly, students need clear classroom explanations of the goals behind my preferences for certain forms of feedback. For example, they need to know the error correction code is designed to help them re-visit their drafts and work through their errors to aid long-term retention. Also, the reasons behind the value of peer checking need to be clearly explained before showing students how they can make comments on each others scripts. Students should also be given checklists to work from, which are based on work already taught, ensuring aims are achievable. If teacher-student conferences are held outside class, I need to explain how students can take the initiative by coming with prepared drafts and specific questions. If students do not want a conference then they might prefer e-mail communication.

Thirdly, if praise is given, it is important to say why, while comments can also be framed as questions that invite students back to a particular point in their work.

Fourthly, I return to one student's negative feedback and its importance: *"Your comments to my essays are deeply related to your own viewpoint toward essays, so I feel like being examined and judged."* For me, this illustrated the power relationship between student and teacher. Feedback was unidirectional and her comment showed how uninvolved she felt. On reflection I realised she was not required to give any reasons for her writing choices, and had not been shown how to critically revisit her text. My

commenting style perhaps limited her work and she had no voice in the process. In effect, it seemed strange that as the person planning, writing and editing, she was not accountable for her essay.

Finally, looking forward, one way for students to become more active and accountable is to get them to write or talk about the drafting process, and so initiate a dialogue. The aim would be to help them reflect on their work after their first drafts and give me more insight into writing issues important to them and how they are editing and revising. As a result, it would better inform my teaching and make the process more focused and student oriented.

Simon Stevens has been in Japan since 1990, and is teaching at Tokyo Joshi Daigaku. His interests include learner feedback, ESP-teaching presentation and research skills, and academic writing. He can be contacted at <simons@lab.twcu.ac.jp>

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Appendix A

Examples of error correction code symbols (ECCO)

Meaning		Incorrect student examples
P	punctuation	Jane Austen lived, and grew up there
Sp	spelling	Research in linguitics shows that…
Sing	singular	Female literatures often indicates a bias towards…
Pl	plural	Mobile phones are overused by student everyday.
Art	article	E.M.Forster wrote essay about…
Prep	preposition	Looking this example we can see…
MW	missing word	My main here is to say…
WW	wrong word	How is we answer this question?
WO	word order	I no can tell if this novel is fictional.
WF	wrong form	The character is interesting in art.
NN	not necessary	To catch the reader's attention the author tells says to us that…

Appendix B

Student feedback

(Please note- student errors have not been omitted)

1. Why was the code useful? Or not useful?

   I think the code was useful. If you use the code, I can think carefully what is wrong. Also, the code does not teach me the answer, so I must find out the answer to consult a dictionary. That is to say, I must check for spelling, vocabulary, tense, grammar mistakes again. To do that I can learn new things that I misunderstand or do not know how to use until now. Besides, I can expand my knowledge through mistakes. I may not forget things that I mistook once and learn again. It is the most important thing that I try to study myself again after mistakes.

2. What did you find hard about the code?

   Codes " NN, Pl, Sing, P, MW" maybe understand and can write the sentence. However, when you correct mistakes to use only codes for example "WW, WO" it is a little difficult for me to understand what is mistake. If you use these codes, I want you to write a little hint in the wrong sentence. By adopting the hint, part of the mistake is so clear, I can appreciate the answer.

Appendix C

Student questionnaire

How do you respond to feedback? (Multiple-choice list of options).

What do you think is most useful for you when I check your essays (errors, organisation/structure)?

What types of comments are useful (positive/negative or both)?

What do you feel about peer checking?

How do you see my role in checking your essays? And why?

Does talking to me face-to-face help you with your essay?

Are there any other comments about feedback/the course?