

Perspectives on EFL Teachers' Responding to Students' Writing at the Semantic Level

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This study explores perspectives on responding to EFL students' compositions at the semantic level. In the last three decades, there has been a shift from product-oriented approach to process-oriented one to teaching writing. The shift has led to the criticism of the traditional view on teacher response. The traditional view has been under attack for its overemphasis upon form and ineffectiveness on improving student writing skill. It is also noted that research into students' reactions to the traditional teacher response has been inconclusive. The process-oriented approach, on the other hand, draws its attention to meaning and the logical development of thought as well as linguistic matters. In this context, the present study discusses what EFL teachers need to take into account in providing the semantic-level feedback on students' compositions. Firstly, teacher response to student writing is on-going; teacher feedback involves teacher intervention in the drafting process, the revision process, and the presentation of product. Secondly, in the writing conferences, the teacher provides students an opportunity to talk about writing, assistance and advice on the content/meaning of the written text, helping them expand and clarify thinking about audience(reader) and purpose.

I. Introduction

Teacher response to student writing has been an essential part of the ESL writing class. As Ferris(1995:34) points out, the amount of time and effort teachers spend in providing feedback suggests that teachers themselves feel that such response is a critical part of their job as writing teachers. Further, research in ESL writing has demonstrated that students expect and value their teachers' feedback on their writing(for example, Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; McCurdy, 1992).

The shift of perspectives on teaching writing from the product-oriented approach towards process writing has been reflected in the assumptions composition researchers and teachers hold about the way of responding to student writing. As recent overviews of the field of teaching ESL writing(for example, Krapels, 1990; Chang, 1995) have shown, from the traditional view, teachers treat students' texts as finished products, and they respond to and evaluate that product. L1 and L2 composition research(for example, Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985; Freedman, 1987; Reid, 1994) has discovered that the product-based responses are no longer sufficient and may even be counter-productive. Process writing researchers hold the assumption that in the same way that the process of composing is recursive and complex, response to student writing is ongoing. Proponents of L2 process writing suggest that teachers should intervene and respond during the composing process (Barnett, 1989; Keh, 1990; Leki, 1992). As many ESL researchers and teachers have embraced process writing, the roles teachers play in the response process are becoming more important(Jenkins, 1987; Reid, 1993).

The present study aims 1) to provide the theoretical background of the traditional language-based teacher feedback; 2) to review early studies in the effect of teacher feedback on written errors and research in student reactions to the feedback they receive from their

teachers; and 3) to look at assumptions that proponents of process writing hold and suggestions they make about teacher response to student writing.

II. Traditional Views on Teacher Feedback: Focus on 'form'

We shall look at the theoretical background of traditional approaches to responding to student writing, which are essentially language-oriented: 'contrastive analysis' and 'error analysis'. We shall also review studies of the effects of language-based teacher feedback.

1. Theoretical Assumptions

In the 1950's and 1960's the pedagogic approach to responding to student writing became closely associated with contrastive analysis (CA, henceforth) which structural linguists introduced. It was assumed that interference from students' first language caused errors to occur in their target language.

From the view of CA research, it was assumed that one of the major problems in learning a second language is caused by interference from students' first language. As Reid(1993:35) reviews, early CA research was essentially language-focused. Proponents of CA believed that the differences between the native language and the target language, once they have been identified, can be diminished by exposing the learner to drills specifically designed to change his linguistic behavior at the relevant points(for example, see Svartvik, 1973). That is, it was considered crucial to examine features of a native language that contrasted with features of a foreign language to determine what areas of foreign language learning would be most likely to cause difficulty for the students. Transfer errors became the focus of the early composition classroom and teachers sought to anticipate errors before they occurred and to

alert students to them. Moreover, it was assumed that if student continue to produce errors, inadequate teaching techniques or materials are to blame(Corder, 1967). Given the habit-formation theory of behaviorism, CA research suggested that teachers should avoid error if possible and correct all errors immediately.

By the early 1970s, CA had been extended to include Error Analysis(EA, henceforth). Although the primary aim of EA is different from CA, it is an offshoot of CA. As Reid(1993:36ff) explains, EA studies examined the actual language performance of learners in order to find out what the source of errors was, that is to determine whether the source was 'first language interference' or 'developmental'. EA research found that an error was a natural by-product of student risk-taking, an overgeneralization of rules, the transfer of a rule from the student's first language, or the level of difficulty of implementation the target language rule(see Richards, 1974; Dulay et al., 1982). It was also found that 'developmental' errors were similar to the errors all language learners make, for example errors in the development of Wh-questions in first and second language learners(Ravem,1974). EA studies provided significant insights into the understanding of the strategies that learners employed in second language acquisition. Corder(1967) claims that errors are a necessary part of linguistic development, and that they are of significance because they provide a window on learners' 'transitional competence'. According to him, developmental error analysis has as its principle goal understanding the second language learner's strategies. It has become a truism to say that making mistakes is a normal, and even necessary, part of the language learning process(Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1978).

Although EA studies have declined in the last two decades, early research continue to influence the literature of ESL writing(Corder, 1981; Nickel, 1989). It is recognized that EA can serve remedial purposes. In other words, language teachers can identify their students' errors, classify them into categories and use them as a basis for preparing lessons and materials in the classroom. As Clark

(1975) indicates, information about errors need not be regarded as punishment, but may be a form of information feedback to the learner, as well as to the teacher. In a similar way, Allwright (1975) suggests that the learner cannot learn in class without knowing what kind of errors are made when and why.

Both CA and EA see learner errors in the process of learning a target language as a cause of much concern to teachers and textbook writers alike. The difference is that CA is concerned with predicting and preventing error occurrence on the basis of formal divergence between the first and target languages; EA is closely associated with defining, identifying, and distinguishing errors in order to have information about learner's interlanguage (Richards, 1974). From the influence of the early CA and EA studies on teaching ESL writing, it was suggested that errors in students' written work should be meticulously treated. It was assumed that teachers' error correction would help students write more grammatically correct forms in subsequent writing (Semke, 1984). As Hendrickson (1978) notes, it was suggested that the teacher should assume the responsibility for correcting students' written errors. The provision of correct forms was believed to lead to the accurate use of the target language. In the subsequent section, we shall review research on the effects of the traditional teacher error correction.

2. Effectiveness of Teachers' Error Correction

Research into the effectiveness of different error correction methods has suggested that any particular correction technique has no effect on improving ESL writing quality. Arnold (1963), in a comparative study of the effects of full correction¹⁾ and moderate correction²⁾ for a year, found no significant differences in writing ability by the end of a year. Stiff (1967), examined the effects of

1) Every error was marked by the teacher, corrected and rewritten by the student.

2) Only one aspect at a time was marked.

marginal and terminal corrections on composition. Marginal correction means that teachers provided comments on the margin of papers. Terminal correction means that students' papers were marked with only summary comments at the end of the paper. He found that there was no significant differences between two groups. Hendrickson(1980) found that identical errors appeared repeatedly in students' compositions, in spite of the teacher's implicit or explicit correction over a period of time. Similarly, Semke's(1984) study revealed that the teacher's marking errors and supplying correct forms did not increase writing accuracy or writing fluency. In a more recent study, Robb et al(1986) demonstrated that there were no significant differences in effectiveness between different error correction methods. From the findings of those early studies, it can be said that teacher feedback on written errors seems to have no significance in improving student writing.

3. Inconclusive Students' Reactions to Teacher Response

As Zeller Mayer(1989) observes, the issue of student processing of teachers' written feedback has had little attention, compared with the body of research on how teachers respond to student written work but recently, a related area of research in teacher response to student writing has examined students' reactions to the feedback they receive from their teachers. Several different studies have surveyed and /or interviewed ESL students to obtain their feedback on teacher written feedback. Students were given questions such as: Did they reread their papers when returned? Did they pay attention to their teachers' comments? The earliest study(Cohen & Robbins, 1976) revealed that students did not seem interested in knowing about teacher response, particularly if the grade was low. Many students in Marzano and Arthur's(1977) study did not even read the teacher's comments. They found that marked papers ended up in the waste basket after having received only a quick glance from students. In similar ways, Burkland and Grimm(1986) demonstrated

that if there was a grade, students read it and simply discarded it, often in disgust at the injustice of receiving a low mark for an essay they had worked hard on. In the investigation into student processing of written feedback, Cohen(1987) also repeated Marzano and Arthur's findings. Cohen(1987:66) concluded that his results suggested that the activity of teacher feedback might have a more limited impact on the learners than the teachers would desire. A more recent study by Cohen and Cavalcanti(1990) also demonstrated that the mismatch between teacher written feedback and what students think about and do with the feedback. In the review of L1 studies on this topic, Leki(1990) noted that L1 students similarly reported not paying much attention to teacher commentary, or feeling some hostility about teachers' attempts to take over their ideas and writing. These findings are rather disappointing to ESL writing teachers who spend hours marking student papers and expecting students to learn from their feedback by applying it to subsequent papers.

The discussion up to now indicates that research results about the effect of teacher response on student writing have been inconclusive, sometimes contradictory in second language writing. Indeed, this is the main point. As Leki(1990:66) notes, more research is needed in order to discover what forms teacher responses can most profitably take. Much still remains to be investigated to solve the contradiction. As an attempt to find out the answer to the contradiction, in the subsequent section, we shall look at the issue of teacher response from the perspective of writing process.

III. Perspectives from the Current Process Approach: Focus on 'meaning'

As the review of the traditional approach to teacher feedback has indicated, ESL writing teachers have sought to communicate their evaluation of student papers through written comments in the

margins. As Walker and Elias(1987) point out, all too often the interaction between teacher and student stops where teachers mark spelling errors, logical inconsistencies, or problems with organization. Therefore, teachers have no way of knowing how their students perceive their comments. Proponents of the process approach argue that the problem stems from the product-oriented view of the traditional approach to teaching writing(for example, Zamel, 1985). As Chang(1996) indicates, the process approach sees writing as a process whereby the writer facilitates his thought, shapes and reshapes it. The current process approach has shifted the teacher's role from one of evaluator or corrector to that of facilitator, helping student writers discover meaning(Reid, 1993). This perspective provides a new direction for the way a teacher responds to student writing with focus on meaning as well as form. We shall consider some of the insights that the current process-oriented approach provides for this new direction.

1. Teacher Response as Ongoing Process

In the traditional approach, the teacher's role as evaluator is overemphasized and it seems that little attention is given to his role as a concerned reader. Sommers(1982) observes that the product-oriented approach limits students' concern to errors marked by teachers, inhibiting their motivation for writing and shifting the focus excessively to the form of the message instead of the content, that is meaning. In the process-oriented approach, it is suggested that the teacher should make commitment to providing feedback within which students can use writing as a tool to invent, to discover and to think. In other words, teachers should seek a means to help students develop thinking through writing.

As the early discussion has indicated, the current approach to teaching writing puts emphasis on the recursive nature of writing. According to Flower and Hayes'(1981) view, writers are constantly planning and revising while they compose. Writing is seen as a

multiple-draft process which consists of pre-writing, writing and rewriting(see Smith, 1982). Revision assumes a central importance in the process of writing. From this view, Charles(1990) suggests that the teacher should be involved in intervening during the process of writing to offer constructive feedback and to help students revise their writing. Keh(1990:294) defines constructive feedback as that which pushes the writer through the writing process on the eventual end-product. As a proponent of the process school, Bissex(1982:74) also argues that writing is not just an end product awaiting correction and evaluation by the teacher, but rather an evolutionary process that requires teacher involvement at every stage.

Research on the process approach suggests that teacher feedback is useful when it comes during the writing process, that is, between drafts. In other words, it is suggested that the teacher-as-reader intervene at various points in the writing process(Raimes, 1983). Teacher feedback becomes an ongoing process while students are involved in the writing process from planning to editing. As Keh (1990) and Hyland(1990) suggest, teachers should provide comments at intermediate stages to encourage students to rewrite. In similar ways, Krashen(1984) emphasizes that teacher feedback should provide a reason for students to revise and induce them to go back to their drafts and to resee their texts. This means that the teacher's constructive feedback must prompt revision and must allow the students the opportunity to reconsider their text according to the reader's response.

A body of research exists to support this proposition about the benefit of teacher responses between drafts. In his early study, Beach(1979) found that teacher evaluation and correction between drafts had a positive effect on the writing quality of high school students. Hillocks(1982) demonstrated that students, who had opportunities to revise texts with the skill to implement the teacher's suggestions, derived benefit from the teacher's comments. Dohrer's(1991) study repeated Hillock's finding: students, given a

chance to revise after the teacher's feedback between drafts, showed improvement in their writing skills. A more recent study(Ferris, 1995) indicates that students pay more attention to teacher feedback provided on earlier drafts(as opposed to final drafts) of their essays. Ferris further found that teacher feedback provided on preliminary drafts helps students utilize a variety of strategies to respond to their teacher's comments. From the results of studies, it is assumed that teacher response during the writing process might effectively encourage students to reshape their drafts through learning how to reflect critically on their own work.

2. Student-Teacher Writing Conference

According to Reid(1993:220), the writing conference is a face-to-face conversation between the teacher and the student. As a negotiated teaching event, the conference approach is based on counselling techniques helping students build self-esteem, reassuring them and giving them further confidence to write(Keh,1990).

The conference approach gives students as an opportunity to talk about writing and reflect on individual processes in a supportive and collaborative dialogue with a teacher. Reid(1993:220) points out that for the student, talking with a teacher about his work is a way to expand and clarify thinking about audience and purpose as well as an opportunity to receive assistance and advice on the content/meaning of the written text.

Bissex(1982:75) insists that writing conferences are not an oral mode of red penciling, but dialogue that increase the writer's awareness of what he is doing and encourage his responsibility for his own writing. In a similar vein, Walker and Elias(1987) observe that writing conferences can be used to foster active participation by the student in the feedback process. In writing conferences, students are not passive recipients of teacher feedback, but rather active participants in the actual feedback process. Conferences can be valuable for student writers because they allow them to clarify the

teacher's responses through dialogue with the teacher. In addition, the conference approach can allow the teacher to see exactly what the student does and does not understand. Problems that students have faced while writing are shared in the conference. This makes it possible for teachers to know student writer's intentions and needs. Charles(1990:286) summarizes this advantage of conferencing: 'The editor(teacher) is, in fact, a very special kind of reader, one who through this dialogue, has privileged access to the writer's intentions, and whose job it is to help the writer realize those intentions'.

Hedge(1988) shows that student-teacher conferencing can take place in class, particularly during small group work. The teacher may sit beside one student in the group, or individual students talk with the teacher outside the group, about the writing in progress. The teacher makes suggestions about the organization of ideas, gives support, assists with the language, or extends the students' thinking about the topic(see Hedge 1988, for activities).

While student-teacher conference has become an important and valuable instructional technique in ESL composition classes(see Ziv, 1984), there are some possible problems with student-teacher conferencing, for example, time constraint. Reid(1993:224) summarizes them as follows:

- 1) Structuring and implementing conferences may take excessive amounts of time, particularly for new teachers.
- 2) It may be that teaching styles and /or some of students' learning styles make some students more open to advice-seeking and conference intervention than others.
- 3) Teachers may differ greatly from each other in how they interact with individual students in a conference, so some teachers are more comfortable and more successful than others(see Freedman & Sperling, 1985).
- 4) There is tremendous variations across students in the

way they interact with the teachers in a conference (for example, students who need help most with their writing are often the least successful at getting help from the teacher during the conference because they are unable to take charge and to negotiate meaning).

Therefore, it is necessary for EFL teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of the conference approach very carefully before they decide to introduce the student-teacher conference to their composition class.

V. Conclusion

Emphasis in the last three decades has shifted from product to process in the field of teaching ESL writing. The current process approach has offered insights into understanding the importance of teacher response with focus on the content/meaning of written text. Firstly, while the teacher in the traditional form-focused paradigm assumes the role of an examiner of the student's written work, the current content-focused process approach suggests that responding to student writing is an ongoing process not a single act. Teacher response begins immediately after students start writing on their topics and parallels the writing process of idea generation and revision. In the same way that the writing process is recursive and complex, teacher feedback on student writing is ongoing. Secondly, instead of being a linguistic judge, the teacher in the process-oriented classroom becomes a reader sharing experience, ideas, attitudes and feeling with student writers. The notion of the writer as discover/creator suggests that the teacher should provide optimum opportunities to develop the writer's ideas and to engage him in interaction with the reader, that is the teacher-student writing conference approach. From the present discussion, it can be

said that the role of the teacher in the writing class is becoming more demanding and even difficult.

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