

Evaluating Students' Reactions and Responses to Teachers' Written Feedbacks

Ma. Melvyn P. Alamis
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This paper is a replication of Canilao's (2004) study which discusses the reactions and responses that students have with regard to teacher written feedback. This study used the descriptive and analytical methods in gathering data. The instruments which have been utilized in the inquiry are survey questionnaire and student composition. The results of a survey given to a group of students at the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas show that the students generally believe that teacher comments help them enhance their writing skills. It also reveals that praise comments encourage students to improve their written work. Students read teacher comments to know their strong and weak points. Furthermore, students prefer feedback in the area of content in the form of advice or suggestion. This paper also reveals significant insights on Filipino ESL learners who are learning to write.

Key words: English as a Second Language (ESL), Multiple Interactive Processes, academic training, rhetorical pattern, teacher written feedback

Introduction

Writing is a major focus in teaching any English language course. English language teachers hope to help students write better, develop useful revision strategies, and think more systematically. Responding to students' written work is a means of achieving these goals. Teacher's comments are essential if not indispensable to a student revising and rewriting his/her composition. For teacher feedback to be effective, there is a need to discover whether the students will disregard the comments or think deeper about their writing and make revisions. As Sommers (1982) explains, teacher

feedback should motivate students to revisit their texts with curiosity and involvement: "The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned" (p.156).

Over the past two decades, researchers involved in the field of composition writing have continuously sought to shape and refine more effective methods of written feedback on student papers and also to investigate what kind of written feedback students receive and how they react to the comments given. Connors and Lunsford (1993) provide a history of the use of teacher comments on student papers. Early in the 20th century a number of grading scales by which teachers rated student writing were proposed. Subsequently, many teachers only deemed it necessary to assign a letter grade to those papers, a grade scrawled out in ominous red ink. The grade does not explain what the teacher thinks of the content, the mechanics, the style, or even the organization of the paper. The student is left to understand the reasoning behind the grade on his/her own, hoping to find an answer by the time the next paper is due. However, by the 1950s, the manner in which the teachers approached the checking of papers began to change. Connors (1993) asserts that teachers became aware that letter grades alone do not aid students in sharpening their writing skills. Teachers realized that rating scales were only serving "as instruments for administrative judgment rather than for student improvement," (p. 204) thus, they gradually abandoned them. Teachers began addressing students' papers with more care and viewed essays as "real audiences" and regarded marginal and end comments as the most effective ways of explaining to students what needed attention in their writing (Connors, 1993).

Sommers (1982) addresses the purpose of teacher comments on student papers. She states that "commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student papers..." (p.148). Comments communicate to the students what needs to be revised or changed in their writing for the next draft or paper. Sommers believes that the absence of comments sends the message to students that they do not need to revise their text because their meaning has been communicated effectively to the audience.

In general, research in this field usually refers to two main issues a) teachers' mechanisms and attitudes when giving their written comments, and the main focus of this paper, b) students' responses and reactions to the given written feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Hyland, 1998).

According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), knowing about students' attitudes, reactions and preferences to teacher written feedback and assessment of their own weaknesses in writing is important. They also have noted that students' attitudes and preferences have been neglected in many previous error correction studies and reviews.

Needless to say, writing is one of the most important skills that students need to learn as an essential component of their academic training and later on in their professional life. The need for well-organized, skillful writing can be found in everyday situations - a formal letter to a company president, a casual letter to a friend, a poem, a story or a novel, or even a short memo are all examples of writing. Another fact is that teaching/learning how to write gets even more complicated and challenging when it comes to ESL environments where learners have to focus on multiple interactive processes that go well beyond basic writing rules usually meant for native student writers. In conjunction with this intricacy, little research concerning teachers' feedback on L2 writing situations has been carried out. These factors then may well justify the choice of this research topic and also give a genuine reason why this paper is an important study to read.

Taking into consideration Ferris and Roberts' (2001) observation and viewed in the light of relative research as students' perspectives apparently have not received the attention they deserve even if proven to have enormous effect on the whole process of teaching/learning, this paper, therefore, focuses on the students' attitudes and perceptions on the teachers' written feedback. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out:

1. What reasons do the students have for reading the written comments of their teacher on their papers?
2. Do the comments help the students understand how to improve their writing? How or in what way?

3. What type of comments do the students find helpful to them? What type of comments do students suggest their teachers give them?
4. In what areas would the students like to receive feedback from their teachers?
5. In what form do the students prefer feedback on their papers?

Method

The participants for this study were 141 students enrolled in second year English 102 (Expository Writing) at the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas. A total of 70 (18, 16, 15 and 21) compositions were taken from four writing classes handled by three English teachers. These compositions were written using *comparison and contrast* as the rhetorical pattern.

The survey questionnaire items pertaining to the students' evaluation of their teachers' written feedback on their papers and the student composition were used for data collection.

The questionnaire, a replication of Canilao's (2004) in her study that involved De la Salle University Students has been modified and piloted, and is composed of five questions. The survey forms were then distributed to the students during one of their regular English 102 classes towards the end of the semester. The subjects were given 20 minutes to fill out the survey. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data gathered from the questionnaire to enable her to get the frequency and mean of the subjects' responses.

The student composition was used to analyze the teachers' feedback in improving the writing skills of the students. Compositions written by students that contained the teachers' handwritten commentary - body, margin, and endnotes were obtained from the three English teachers. These students' compositions were photocopied and were returned to the respective teachers.

Although student perspectives were the researcher's focus, she had her own perception of the feedback. She needed to examine it *in situ* - to see, for example, whether there were more feedback on grammar and mechanics than content or organization. Prior to the survey, therefore, she had extracted, coded, and recoded all feedback

on students' compositions. The changes in her categories reflect the fact that on different readings, she interpreted the same feedback differently - in some instances, as interested comment, and in some occasions, as blatant instructions. This observation matches the viewpoint of Zamel (1985) when he underscored that feedback is often vague, cryptic, and inconsistent. Nevertheless, the researcher devised a number of categories based on her perception of the teachers' intentions which included the following as "requesting clarification of meaning", "suggesting comment to be included", "correction of surface grammar, punctuation or vocabulary " as well as "phrasing suggestions as questions".

Results

This part is organized in relation to the five research questions cited earlier. In view of the fact that this study endeavored to determine the students' perceptions on the role and influence of the teacher written feedback on the students' written work, the congruence of current thoughts with the students' stated attitudes and preferences are investigated.

The following tables summarize the results of the tabulated data on the questions raised in the study.

Problem 1. What reasons do students have for reading the written comments of their teachers in their papers?

Table 1
Reasons for Reading Teacher Comments

Reasons	Rank					
	High		Moderate		Low	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. I want to know my strong and weak points.	107	76	24	17	10	7
2. I want a justification of my grade.	35	25	94	66	12	9
3. I am expected to.	6	4	22	16	113	80

From these figures that run parallel to Canilao's (2004) study which discusses the reactions and responses that students have with regard to teacher written feedback, the high percentage (76%) gives the strong impression that UST and De la Salle University (DLSU) students profoundly maintain the belief of previous studies made that the primary reason for reading teacher comments is to gain awareness of the various points they are good at and what they must work on more in writing. The students see value in having both strengths and weaknesses being pointed out in their work. This finding also supports the research findings that written feedback help students improve their written work (Ferris, 1995; Chandler, 2003). More than half of the students find the second reason, justification of a grade, moderately important. These findings uphold what has been widely held by many researchers that the main purpose of comments is to justify the teacher's grade or to point out problems that need to be fixed.

Problem 2: Do the comments help them understand how to improve their writing? How or in what way?

Table 2

Usefulness of Teacher Comments on Student Writing

Uses of Teacher Comments	Frequency							
	Always		Sometimes		Hardly		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
It helps improve my writing	87	61	51	36	2	2	1	1
It helps when the teacher praises what I wrote.	98	70	37	26	6	4	0	0
It helps when errors are shown.	42	30	85	60	10	7	4	3

The results in Table 2 clearly gives ample evidence that UST students find teacher praises most useful in helping them improve their written work. Only very few students do not find any value in their work being praised. This findings support the previous research findings in ESL writing environments that praise comments motivate the students. On the other hand, DLSU students (Canilao, 2004) find teacher comments the most helpful in improving their writing task. This distinction may be caused by the difference in the writing abilities, levels of intrinsic motivation, and personality traits between the students of UST and DLSU. It is interesting to note that although many students find praise useful, a large number of students also find it helpful to have errors pointed in their papers. This finding is congruent to previous studies: Hull (1985) states that “research is beginning to focus on error as a cognitive process” (p.165). Written praise has a positive effect on students but was considerably more effective when accompanied by specific comments on errors. Knowing the students’ attitudes and preferences about error feedback and their own assessment of their weaknesses in writing is important (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Errors can help the teacher identify the cognitive strategies that the learner is using to process information. “It is through analyzing learner errors that we elevate the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process” (Ellis, 1985, p.53).

Problem 3: What type of comments do the students find helpful?

Table 3

Types of Comments That Students Find Helpful in Improving Their Writing

Type of Comments	Rank					
	High		Moderate		Low	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Telegraphic (e.g. vf, t, sp, ew, etc.)	10	7	37	26	94	67
Conversational (e.g., Why do you like it?)	37	26	74	53	30	21
Both telegraphic and conversational	96	68	32	23	13	9

While the figures in Table 3 indicate that majority of the UST students find telegraphic and conversational comments most helpful in improving their writing, the DLSU students (Canilao, 2004) find conversational comments most useful in improving their written work. This slight difference may be explained by the fact that UST and DLSU students have diverse textual issues, such as rhetorical and cultural preferences for organizing information and structuring arguments, knowledge of appropriate genres, and distinct cultural and instructional socialization. Most students from De La Salle University come from rich and prominent families, whose first language is English making them more articulate and responsive to conversational comments. However, a good number of students from the University of Santo Tomas also find conversational comments helpful on a moderate level. This finding corroborates previous studies. Dunn et al., (1989) and Hyland (1990) contend that teachers should not just tell students what to do, instead provide a platform from which students themselves can reassess and redraft their work. Such long comments, almost conversational in nature would respond more to the students themselves and not just to their writing.

Problem 4: What type of comments do students prefer to receive from their teachers?

Table 4
Suggested Types of Commenting

Type of Comments	Rank					
	High		Moderate		Low	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Telegraphic	7	5	37	26	97	69
Conversational	38	27	72	51	31	22
Both telegraphic and conversational	100	71	29	21	12	8

The figures presented in Table 4 are congruent with those shown in Table 3. The comments that the students found helpful are the ones that they want their teachers to use most of the time. Thus, the most useful and highly preferred types of comments are first, a combination of both telegraphic and conversational comments and second, conversational comments.

Problem 5: In what areas do students prefer to receive feedback?

Table 5

Areas the Students Prefer to Receive Feedback from Their Teachers

Areas of Feedback	Rank					
	High		Moderate		Low	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Vocabulary	13	9	30	21	98	70
Language use/grammar	26	18	89	64	26	18
Content/Organization	104	74	22	16	15	11

These figures in Table 5 reveal that majority of the students prefer feedback from their writing teachers in the area of content/organization. This finding echoes previous studies: Connors and Lunsford (1993) case study on content analysis claim that in addition to comments on grammar and mechanics, the ideas of the writer are the necessary components to a good essay; Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) aver that students want to have some kind of feedback pertaining to the content of their writing while Sommers (1982) believe that teachers should not comment with the intention of fixing a student's writing, but rather with the goal of helping the student clarify his own ideas and convey these ideas in a coherent manner.

Problem 5: What form of feedback do students prefer on their paper?

Table 6

Forms of Feedback the Students Prefer on Their Papers

Forms of Feedback	Rank					
	High		Moderate		Low	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Questions	11	8	32	23	98	69
Suggestions	73	52	56	40	12	8
Corrections: Indirect	7	5	10	7	3	2
Direct	50	35	49	35	22	16

The figures shown in Table 6 indicate that a number of students prefer feedback in the form of suggestions. This finding is a solid evidence of Straub's (1997) research which shows that students need direction in their writing, but only take heed of the teacher's suggestions if they are worded as just that - suggestions and not commands. Research sheds light on what "good" or "well-designed" advice may be and teachers should understand what "good advice" entails when commenting on student papers. When advice is worded in an "appealing" way and is thorough, students acknowledge that "feedback and revision are valuable pedagogical tools" and that the improvement of their drafts is a result of these tools (Ferris, 1997, p. 316).

Others prefer it in the form of direct corrections. This finding still confirms Straub's (1997) research which shows that students prefer teacher comments be explicitly expressed. Students do not want to question what the teacher is actually saying and therefore, clarity in commenting is preferred. It has been demonstrated through various studies that students do not find "traditional teacher

responses" (p. 94) such as editing symbols, abbreviations, cryptic marks and comments ("frag," "not clear," "tighten") helpful in their writing. Students want comments to be clear and specific. Clarity and specificity are more important to students, as was the impression that the comments were offered as help and not as directions.

Discussion

The results of the survey of the students' reaction to teachers' written feedback have several implications on the teaching of English 101b and English 102 in the Department of Languages of the University of Santo Tomas. First, students find teachers' written feedback beneficial. They read teachers' comments because they want to develop their writing skills by getting feedback on their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Clearly, such desire is of utmost importance to a teacher of English as a second language for it is only through this realization that students can achieve greater confidence in improving their writing abilities.

Students who are motivated to write pay attention to teacher's feedback; for students who are not motivated ignore written comments but nonetheless are still concerned about grades. Such concern has implications on how teachers can enhance student interest in writing skills development. One effective method is to shift the emphasis in the classroom and on the returned papers from teacher comments to student comments on their own writing and learning. By asking them to examine their feelings and thoughts about themselves as writers and the effects of comments on their written work, students can better understand the process of revision and the purpose of their writing. Also, students can come to regard their written output as something within their control and for which they are responsible. Comments that provide strategies for improving future drafts, rather than justifying grades, will allow students to set goals for themselves and can make learning efficient.

Second, students believe that praise comments help them improve their writing skills and abilities. English teachers need to identify strengths in student's writing. Since praise encourages students to overcome writing apprehension and offers "the psychology of positive reinforcement" (Daiker, 1989), students

develop a more positive attitude about their writing. Also, praising student writing will make the students realize that they are doing things well. However, students deserve to know why they have earned such praise remarks. A simple “good” may please the student, but the reason for the “good” can teach something.

A third implication that can be deduced from this study is that students find a combination of telegraphic and conversational comments the most helpful type for them. This finding confirms what most composition experts assert about the value of written feedback – that it is a way for the students to view writing as a means of learning (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Frodesan & Holton, 2003).

Although UST students have expressed their preference for telegraphic comments, teachers should direct them away from the traditional practice of commenting. They should be taught that rewriting and revision are integral to writing, and that editing is an ongoing, multi-level process, not merely a hasty check for correct grammar. Instead of keeping an ideal standard, teachers may adopt a flexible standard that takes into account student level and ability. Feedback on writing would also be more meaningful if it can also blend with the oral. Such will stimulate the students’ minds to reconstruct their thoughts and ideas.

The result of this survey also shows that students want to receive teacher comments on content rather than on form. This finding supports previous researches that students will improve their written performance if teachers shift their concern for errors on the written product to concern for the evaluation of ideas in their texts (Flower & Hayes, 1981). If writing teachers aim at really giving effective feedback, they must go beyond the traditional emphasis on the correction of grammar, sentence development, spelling, punctuation marks and other concerns of form. The response that a teacher gives to written compositions must encourage the students to find new ways of elaborating their thoughts. Such feedback will provide the student writers with a direction on how to revise their work to deepen their meaning.

Lastly, this survey discloses that students prefer suggestions on their written work. “Giving an assignment involves more than selecting a topic for the students to write on. It means giving suggestions as to how to go about writing it” (Raimes, 1985, p. 243).

Writing teachers should be reminded that it is a mark of intellectual respect for the students and the paper to refrain from giving arbitrary comments on its content or substance. Teachers should write their comments in such a way as to avoid imposing their own visions or purposes on the written composition. Instead, the focus should be on guiding the students' ideas and allowing them to make modifications with confidence and competence.

Conclusion

With the new concepts in teaching composition emerging, new attitudes of teacher response to student writing have been generated. No doubt, one of the most important criteria in ensuring effective writing among students is the quality of feedback given to them. Writing teachers need to revisit their commenting behavior and respond to the students' insights, attitudes, and preferences on how they can be helped. Feedback should be used as tool to develop students' writing skills. Making comments should be part of the teaching and learning process, not something for learning to fight against. It is very important to note that different situations and certain kinds of students call for distinctive types of feedback.

Creating different types of opportunities for students to respond to teachers' feedback on different types of writing tasks may help students become more actively engaged in their writing and change their perceptions of their role in the writing process. With the appropriate structure and modeling, multiple draft assignments along with the invitation to students to respond to teacher feedback can help students gain control over their writing and become more conscious of the choices they make in their writing.

Students writing in a second language environment are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. L1 models of writing instruction and research on composing processes have been the theoretical basis for using the process approach in L2 writing pedagogy. However, language proficiency and competence underlies the ability to write in the L2 in a fundamental way. Therefore, L2 writing teachers should take into account both strategy development and language skill development when working with students. Focus on the writing process as a

pedagogical tool is only appropriate for second language learners if attention is given to linguistic development, and if learners are able to get sufficient and effective feedback from their teachers.

By asking students to respond to teachers' comments and by the teachers listening to students' responses, a more meaningful second language teaching and learning may be expected.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Teachers' Written Feedback

I. Check the best answer for you:

	Always	Sometimes	Hardly	Never
A. Teachers comments help me understand how to improve writing.	—	—	—	—
B. It helps me improve my writing when the teacher praises what I wrote on my paper.	—	—	—	—
C. It helps me improve my writing when the teacher points out only the errors in the paper.	—	—	—	—

II. Rank each item according to your level of priority:

High	1
Moderate	2
Low	3

A. I read the teacher's comments because

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. I am expected to | — |
| 2. I want a justification of my grade | — |
| 3. I want to know my strong and weak points in writing | — |

1. The type of comments I find helpful are telegraphic comments e.g., sp (spelling) agr (agreement) t (tense) frag (fragment) vf (verb form) pro (pronoun)	—
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2. conversational comments e.g. Tell me more about the distressing experience	—
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What would happen if you move sentences
2 and 3 to paragraph 3?

3. both telegraphic and conversational comments	—
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B. My suggestion to improve teacher commenting is

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Use telegraphic comments | — |
| 2. Use conversational comments | — |

- 3. Use both conversational and telegraphic comments _____
- C. In which of the following areas would you like to receive feedback from your writing teacher?
 - 1. Vocabulary _____
 - 2. Language use/grammar _____
 - 3. Content/Organization _____

D. How do you prefer the feedback on your paper?

- 1. In the form of
 - a. Questions _____
 - b. Suggestions _____
 - c. Corrections _____
- 1) Indirect _____

(indicating only the location of a error) e.g., His father is an imminent governor in our province.

- 2) Direct _____

(indicating not only the location of a error, but also provide the correct answer) e.g., His father is an imminent governor in our province

eminent

2. Please give the reason for your preference.

About the Author

Ma. Melvyn P. Alamis teaches English at the University of Santo Tomas. She finished her degree in Bachelor of Science in Education major in English with co-major in Religion and minor in History at the University of Santo Tomas (Cum Laude). She earned her Master degree in English from the University of Santo Tomas and is currently writing her dissertation paper on Contrastive Rhetoric for her Ph. D in English Language Studies in the same university. She has read papers, "The Linguistic Cohesiveness of Philippine and Singaporean Editorials" in the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) International Conference and "Current Perspectives on World Englishes and its Implication for Second Language Teaching and Learning" in the Language Society of the Philippines (LSP) International Conference. She has authored papers such as "Current Perspectives on World Englishes and its Implication for Second Language Teaching and Learning" published in Philippine Journal of Linguistics (LSP). She wrote a paper, titled, "Exploring how Computational Tools and Techniques Contribute to Linguistic Research: A Preliminary Study" when she was granted sabbatical leave by the University. She is active in various professional organizations: elected as Regional Coordinator for National Capital Region (NCR) of the Alliance of Language and Literature Teachers, Inc (ALLT), board member of the Council for Department Chairpersons in English (CDCE) and College English Teachers' Association (CETA), member of the British Council English Club and American Studies Association of the Philippines (ASAP) among others. She has authored and co-authored books and instructional materials for use of UST students. She has also served as coordinator for the UST Languages Department of the Faculty of Engineering.