

The Effects of Teacher Feedback on EFL Students' Writing in a Korean University Class

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I examine the inconclusive and contradictory claims about the nature and effects of teacher feedback in second language (L2) writing classrooms. An experimental study was conducted with a university EFL class in Korea. My responses and students' writing processes were analyzed and evaluated with respect to the generalizations that Ferri (2003) derived from previous research on teacher response to L2 writing, particularly regarding the multiple-draft approach called the "process model." The study found that the students had never experienced the multiple-draft activity. Twenty-seven out of 41 students made several drafts during the semester, showing the development of their writing skills. Eleven students submitted only one draft, which meant that they did not receive any written feedback. Three out of 41 did not submit anything. The students' most common request for teacher feedback was for correction of errors. In the process of revisions, the students utilized the comments on grammar more than those on content and rhetorical structure.

As a teacher and tutor of writing at a university, I am constantly searching for ways to help my students become more confident and effective writers. Recently, I have focused my research on teacher feedback, which I considered a complex and troublesome, but important issue in writing classrooms. For the past two decades or so, a number of researchers and teachers have explored the nature and effects of teacher feedback in second

language (L2) writing classrooms (e.g., Conrad. & Goldstein, 1999; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Zamel, 1985). As Ferri (2003) notes, however, many important questions about teacher feedback to L2 writing have not been adequately explored, and research findings in this area have been somewhat inconclusive and even contradictory (p.120). The worst is that, despite the increasing interest in L2 writing as a new field of inquiry, relatively less research has been conducted on teacher feedback in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings than in English as a second language (ESL) settings (Kroll, 2003; Matsuda, 2003). The present study aims at investigating inconclusive claims on the nature and effects of teacher feedback to L2 students by analyzing my own responses to my EFL students in Korea and to provide empirical evidence to theorize about teacher response to L2 writing.

This study employs Ferri's (2003) "Response to student writing: Generalizations from previous research" as a framework for the analysis of my response and students' writings. Ferri presents nine generalizations from previous research concerning major issues and findings in written teacher responses, in peer responses, and in teacher-student conferences. This study focuses only on the findings related to written teacher responses, including student reactions and student revisions. Ferri's generalizations relevant to this study are the following (p. 122):

1. Feedback is most effective when it is delivered at intermediate stages of the writing process.
2. Teachers should provide feedback on all aspects of student texts, including content, rhetorical structure, grammar, and mechanics.
3. Teacher feedback should be clear and concrete to assist students with revision. At the same time, teachers need to be careful not to appropriate student texts.
4. Teacher feedback must take individual and contextual variables into account.

Keeping in mind Goldstein's (2001) claim that "[b]ecause teacher

commentary, student reactions to commentary, and student revisions interact with each other, research needs to look at all three simultaneously” (p.86), for this study, I explored my responses, my students’ reactions to my responses, and their revisions in a university EFL class for one semester (fall, 2003). In order to make the argument, I categorize my responses to students’ work in accordance with the above generalizations. Then, I analyze the data within each category and examine the validity of each generalization. Finally, I discuss implications for further studies on teacher feedback.

MAJOR ISSUES AND FINDINGS IN RESPONDING TO L2 WRITERS

Because L2 writing is a relatively new area of inquiry, some scholars whose research has focused on L2 writing have attempted to give an overview of the research in order to categorize studies and guide future research (e.g., Mathison-fife & O’neill, 1997; Polio, 2003; Reichelt, 1999). As far as teacher feedback in L2 writing classes is concerned, Leki (1992) and recently Ferri (2003) provide useful overviews of the range of issues involved in responding to L2 writers’ work. Besides those studies, some researchers have presented specific issues related to L2 writing such as Severino’s (1993) on political issues in L2 writing class and Reid’s (1994) on appropriation and intervention. In these studies, major issues in responding to L2 writers seem to fall largely into the three categories: class goals, teacher role(s), and strategies of teacher feedback.

Leki (1992) explores the problematic nature of teacher feedback and then discusses how an ESL writing teacher’s goals for her students as writers might influence how, when, and what she responds to. These questions lead neatly into a section where Leki brings up the political issues involved in responding to L2 writing. She claims that “however we may resist the idea, our responses to the writing of ESL students and our goals for them in our writing courses, are, in fact, laden with political context” (p.125). Then, what

is the political nature of what the teacher does when s/he responds to L2 writers?

Severino (1993) discusses some useful concepts that help understand political issues in L2 classrooms. Severino begins by suggesting that no L2 classroom context is free from political and ideological issues; many immigrant ESL programs promote assimilation of American values as the pathway to economic success, and even the labeling of students as L1, L2, and bilingual carries political ramifications. Severino identifies three stances toward response that differ in terms of attitudes toward cultural and linguistic difference: separatism, accommodation, and assimilation. Then, in the conclusion, Severino contends that there is no one stance that is better or more politically correct to take, but rather ESL teachers need to realize "that a continuum of choices is available to them" (p.198). After all, it can be said that the teacher's goals for students determine the political stance the teacher holds in responding to students' work.

With regard to teacher's role(s) in L2 writing classes, Raimes (1984) discusses the difficulty of composing in a second language and of how teacher response can shape and potentially get in the way of that process. Raimes' main purpose is to suggest that ESL writing teachers need to pay more attention to the act of writing and less to ESL. She argues that "one remedy for the anguish of composing is to concentrate on the making of meaning, to concentrate on the act of composing instead of peripherals" (p. 92). She offers three areas in which teachers can do this: generating assignments for the class, giving feedback, and providing readings. In terms of providing feedback, Raimes suggests that corrections are not the only kind of feedback teachers can give and that working on developing grammatical forms should be "a parallel activity" to composing (p. 88); it should not necessarily precede it. Though pedagogical practice in most ESL writing classrooms in the US has changed a lot since Raimes' article came out in 1984, the concerns she raises are still valid.

How far should we as teachers go? Should we expect an L2 writer to be indistinguishable from an L1 writer or could we view certain features of L2

writing in the same way we view an L2 speaker's accent, a problem only when it gets in the way of communication? Reid (1994) states that in their attempt to evade the evils of appropriation taking over their students' work, many ESL writing teachers have stopped working with their students' texts altogether. Though this withdrawal may stem from the best of intentions, Reid argues that teachers need to "accept their responsibilities as cultural informants and as facilitators for creating the social discourse community in the ESL classroom" (p. 275). Reid explores how the 'myth' of appropriation developed and discusses how most research on feedback has not taken into account classroom context and the relationships between teacher and student within this context. Furthermore, she discusses how she negotiates issues of power, empowerment, appropriation, and intervention in her own writing classrooms.

Though I think Reid simplifies both the idea of appropriation and the concern of discourse communities in order to make her argument, she does offer an important insight in claiming that ESL teachers need to intervene in the writing processes of their students and to serve as linguistic, rhetorical, and academic resources. Reid sees empowering students as an important goal and believes that intervention is an important tool in doing this. With empowerment in mind, Reid provides a list of questions teachers should ask themselves about the role and nature of response in their classroom.

With regard to the findings in responding to L2 writing, Ferri (2003) provides a well-organized overview of major findings in current research on L2 writing. As mentioned above, she crafts them in the form of nine generalizations. The first four of them were introduced in the introduction in this paper. Below are the rest (Ferri, 2003, p. 122):

5. ESL writers attend to teacher feedback and attempt to utilize it in their revisions.
6. Teacher-student writing conferences may be more complex with L2 writers.
7. There is a great deal of variation in what students talk about during peer

feedback and how they interact with one another - which may be related to how the teacher models feedback and structures peer response sessions.

8. Research evidence is conflicting about the degree to which students utilize peer feedback in their revisions.
9. Students appear to enjoy peer feedback and find it helpful.

In this study, as noted earlier, the four generalizations (1 to 4) from the findings in written teacher feedback are taken under the consideration in order to scrutinize the nature and effects of teacher feedback.

STUDY

Subjects

Members of an EFL class at a university in Korea participated in this study. The class was titled Basic English II, offered primarily to freshmen (mostly 19 years old), but not restricted to them. It was a 14 week, 3 credit, required course, open to any level of students. The purpose of the course was to achieve basic English skills in speaking, reading, listening, and writing. I chose this course for the present study first because, for most university students, this course was the first one in which they would have a chance to compose their ideas in English, so I could expect that I would gain vivid samples in what is Korean EFL beginners' most troublesome area. Second, since the class consisted of students from different ages, different levels, and different academic disciplines, I anticipated diverse reactions from the students, which could enrich the results of this study.

The class consisted of 41 students (14 females and 27 males; 28 freshmen, 6 sophomores, 5 juniors, and 2 seniors), from various disciplines. Most students had had a similar English education experience: 6 years formal English education in middle and high school and one or less year English

study in private institutes in Korea. One student had attended a language school in the U.S. for 5 months.

Process of the Study

In the second class session, I assigned a task of writing a one- or two-page essay about oneself, an essay that introduces what one has achieved in her/his life. The due date was the last day of class. Students were formed into groups of 5 to meet every two weeks to discuss progress, and were asked to hand in drafts at least three times during the semester to receive feedback drafts. Adopting Charles' (1990) idea of "self-monitoring" and Storch and Tapper's (1997) "student annotations" as a means of interaction between students and teacher, I also asked them to write annotations on their drafts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I analyze and discuss my responses and the students' writing processes according to Ferri's (2003) generalizations rearranged in a way that aids discussion.

Teachers Should Provide Feedback on All Aspects of Student Texts, Including Content, Rhetorical Structure, Grammar, and Mechanics

At the beginning of the semester, I asked my students if they had done any writing in English and if they had experienced the process approach. None of my students had experience of either, so I explained in detail what the assignment was, how it should be processed, and what I expected from them.

Influenced by the process approach to student writing, I told them that I would respond to content and organization as well as errors in grammar. I also explained that I would respond to each draft of their paper differently. In the early drafts, I would be a reader, then I would become a reader and a

writing consultant (offering advice about structure and organization), and finally, I would read as an editor and error analyst, focusing on the grammar and mechanics in the papers.

After I assigned the task, the students started to send e-mails to say that the group meeting had not been held, and they asked not to have it. They did not want to do group work first, because their different schedules made it hard to arrange a time to meet. Second, because most of the group members did not know each other, it was uncomfortable to work together. Last but not most important, they preferred to work alone because they did not expect that they would get any useful help from peer review. Since more than half of the class did not want to do group work, I agreed to drop that requirement.

Surprisingly, only 27 (16 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 5 juniors, and 1 senior) out of 41 students handed in rough drafts, and 21 out of 27 drafts had annotations. My initial concern about student annotations was over whether students would only note places where they had grammar problems, but the students also expressed concern and asked questions about form and content issues. Unlike Storch and Tapper's (1997) findings that L2 students focused their comments mainly on content, then grammar closely followed by structure, while L1 students made annotations mainly on the structure of their essays, in this study, all 21 students who made annotations about grammar, and 17 out of 21 asked me to look at the content of the paper. Interestingly, none of them mentioned the structure of the paper. This can be interpreted as indicating that the students were not aware of the importance of the rhetorical structure in conveying their ideas.

Based on the student annotations, I made comments mainly focusing on the content and organization of the paper. Three weeks later, 19 (9 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 4 juniors, and 1 senior) out of 27 students who received written comments from me brought revised drafts. The revised drafts appeared to have utilized my comments and suggestions about the content of the paper, but a closer look at them revealed certain features: most students simply deleted the paragraph or the sentence that I had commented on, or added completely new information in the places that I commented on. I found

hardly any structural changes or rearrangement of paragraphs to improve coherence or logical flow.

In the revised drafts, I tried to correct errors in grammar and mechanics. Students' annotations revealed that error correction is one of the major concerns when they write in English. While correcting errors, I thought that Hyland's (1990) Minimal Marking method would be useful for the students to edit their drafts. Minimal Marking involves putting a mark next to the line where an error occurs rather than using some sort of code or actually correcting the error. Hyland has found that his students can correct almost three quarters of their errors in this way.

When I do error correction in L2 writings, I am used to analyzing errors. Kroll and Schafer's (1984) article suggesting that we look at the logic behind the writer's choice reminded me of the cognitive theory behind what I was trying to do and made me realize that I want to incorporate more error analysis into my classroom pedagogy. As an L2 writing teacher, I am still struggling to balance an emphasis on content with an emphasis on form. I want to provide my students with the linguistic knowledge they so desperately need, but I feel I am not doing enough to address my students' linguistic needs, so error analysis seems an important concept. However, the downside of error analysis is the time involved in addressing each individual student's needs. The question to ponder is how I might incorporate the cognitive notions of error analysis into my class in a less time-consuming fashion.

Teacher Feedback Should Be Clear and Concrete to Assist Students with Revision; At the Same Time, Teachers Need to Be Careful not to Appropriate Student Texts

Some studies on teacher feedback reported that when the teacher asked for specific information or gave clear and concrete suggestions, the student appreciated it and produced more-effective revisions (Ferri, 1995, 2003; Straub, 1997). This led me to consider whether my corrections had helped.

Do my comments lead students to positive learning experiences in their revision processes? How do my responses shape their view of what revision is? It would be very useful for me both to look back and analyze the types of responses I make on students papers. Though content-focused, am I still vague or contradictory? Do my comments help students to see what actions they should take when they revise?

The students reactions to my comments appeared in a few different ways: 16 out of 19 students who handed in revised papers more or less utilized my content comments, and 3 students brought a completely new paper saying that it was easier for them to write another paper rather than to revise the draft. I asked them in the interview at the end of the semester if my comments were understandable and useful in their revision process. Most of them said that comments were understandable, but since they had not had experience with the multiple draft approach, the revision process was so formidable that they were very irritated at the process.

Another issue that I was concerned about was appropriation. In giving feedback to my students, where is the line between appropriation and intervention? Because I was aware of the issue of appropriation in L2 as well as L1 writing classes, I asked the students when they brought the revised paper if I used the imperative mood, made directive suggestions, or substituted their ideas. As a writing teacher, I have worked with too many students of L1 and L2 who have come to me mystified and alarmed by the comments scrawled across their paper to be able to dismiss the issue of appropriation as a myth. However, my thoughts about appropriation and power have not led me to a hands-off attitude towards student writing; instead, it has led me to ponder the nature of the interventions I make and the roles I play. As noted earlier, Reid (1994) accounts for how she mediates issues of power, empowerment, appropriation, and intervention in her own writing classrooms. Reid's article made me realize that I view appropriation and intervention not as a dichotomy, but as a continuum and my choices as a teacher locate me in different places on it. This is where Reid and I seem to concur. We both see empowering students as an important goal and that

intervention is an important tool in doing this. With empowerment in mind, Reid provides a list of questions teachers should ask themselves about the role and nature of teacher response in their classroom. I found these questions so useful that they are now word-processed and taped to the wall in my office.

Teacher Feedback Must Take Individual and Contextual Variables into Account

A profound effect of teacher feedback can be expected when feedback is given the student based on her/his needs. Ferri (2003) succinctly states that “not all L2 writers are identical in their experience, knowledge, and motivations simply because they are writing in a second language” (p. 126). In other words, writing teachers need to know their individual students’ prior experiences, knowledge, and expectations, and give different types of assignments and feedback to meet individual students’ needs and desires.

In order to acknowledge my students’ prior experiences with writing an essay in English and their expectations from the course, I surveyed them at the beginning of the semester. The results of the survey showed that none of the students had experienced writing and revising an essay in their English classes. When I explained the writing assignment for the course, their initial reaction was strong negative. All except one student who had attended in a language school in the U.S. said that they had never written an essay in English and did not have abilities to do it. However, when they were told the purpose of the assignment, improving English skills, they agreed to do it.

As noted above, 29 out of 41 students handed in first drafts, and 21 out of 29 drafts had annotations on them. Reading their annotations, I made comments mostly on the content and organization of the paper, ignoring errors in grammar and mechanics, although they asked me to look at them, telling me that those were their main concern in writing. After my first feedback to the students’ drafts, 19 revised drafts were handed in. Even though I did not point out grammatical errors in the first drafts, the students corrected by themselves some errors that occurred in the first drafts. This

may imply that error correction can be implemented to a certain degree by students themselves.

Feedback Is Most Effective When It Is Delivered at Intermediate Stages of the Writing Process

Compared to the product model, one of the strengths of the process model, the multiple draft approach, is that the student can receive feedback during and between the writing of drafts. In the process of subsequent revisions, the student can respond to feedback and may more actively attend to the teacher's comments and suggestions (Ferri, 2003; Zamel, 1985). For this reason, the process model has been for quite some time adopted by writing teachers in L2 as well as L1 classes in the U.S. In other words, the process model has become pedagogical practice in most L1 and L2 writing classrooms in the U.S.

My initial concern about my response to the students' drafts was how the students attend to and utilize it in the subsequent revisions. I was afraid that I might be making the same mistake that Zamel points out in her 1984 study:

ESL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments. (p. 86)

Zamel provides many examples of this from the data she collected and looking all the scratch outs, brackets, and COIK (clear only if known) comments made me wonder what my students thought when they got a paper back from me. Compared to the first drafts, the final drafts of 19 students who had received my comments revealed sufficient improvement in terms of logical flows and grammar. These final drafts also noticeably differed from the papers of 11 students who submitted only one final at the end of the semester without receiving any feedback from me. A few salient differences

between them were that (a) multiple-draft papers were at least an average of half pager longer; (b) the content of multiple-draft papers was more likely to be coherent; and (c) multiple-draft papers contained fewer grammatical errors. These differences proved what some researchers (Ferri, 1995, 2003; Leki, 1990a; Zamel, 1985) claim; that is, feedback is most effective when it is delivered at intermediate stages of the writing process.

CONCLUSION

While exploring the practical and philosophical issues of teacher feedback in L2 writing classrooms, I realized that finding specific answers was less important than developing insightful questions to ask both myself and my students. What is the best sort of feedback to give a student? When can a student best respond to feedback? There are some teacher feedback techniques introduced by scholars (e.g., Charles' s (1990) self-monitoring, Hyland's (1990) Minimal Marking and Taped Commentary, Miller's (1996) error analysis). Though my readings in the area of teacher feedback have made me doubt that there is a best way for all students and all situations, there can be a better way that the teacher can employ in her/his own classroom. I am very interested in any activities that give students more responsibility for their own learning and that create more interactions between me and my students because I have learned from my experience that interaction between teacher and student enhances the effects of teaching and learning.

The literature suggests that there are various ways that the teacher can interact with students (e.g., teacher-student conferences, spoken and written feedback). Written feedback was the one that I chose. This study found that Korean EFL students do not have experience with the multiple draft approach. Clear and detailed instructions were needed for the students to be led into an effective revision process. In addition, the students seemed to believe that the most troublesome area in their writing was English grammar, so they

appeared to less concern about the content and organization of the paper.

As mentioned earlier, only 18 out of 41 completed their assignments in the way I wanted. My task in the future is to make sure students understand the multiple draft approach and follow instructions. An obvious limitation of this study was that it lacked the systematic analysis of students' revised papers, explaining what and how the students had utilized the feedback they had received. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted with a carefully contextualized research design that contains effective methods to analyze students' revision process with respect to theories about the effects of teacher feedback in EFL classrooms.

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