

Providing Feedback on ESL Students' Written Assignments

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This paper looks at ways of providing effective feedback on English language learners' written assignments. It examines some of the more common methods of feedback and why they are at times ineffective. It also looks at effectual ways of providing feedback as well as student preferences for feedback. Suggestions and examples for providing effective feedback are provided.

Introduction

Written feedback is an essential aspect of any English language writing course. This is especially true now with the predominance of the process approach to writing that requires some kind of second party feedback, usually the instructor, on student drafts. So dependant is current writing instruction on instructor feedback that Kroll (2001) describes it as one of the two components most central to any writing course with the other being the assignments the students are given. The goal of feedback is to teach skills that help students improve their writing proficiency to the point where they are cognizant of what is expected of them as writers and are able to produce it with minimal errors and maximum clarity.

Common Practices

The most prominently used methods feedback fall into two common categories: feedback on form and feedback on content.

The most common methods of feedback on form are outright teacher correction of surface errors, teacher markings that indicate the place and type of error but without correction, and underlining to indicate only the presence of errors. The first requires students to copy the corrections and the latter two require students to correct the errors on their own.

Feedback on content consists mainly of comments written by teachers on drafts that usually point out problems and offer suggestions for improvements on future rewrites. Students are usually expected to incorporate information from the comments into other versions of their papers.

What Is Not Working

There are several faults that lie with traditional methods of correcting grammatical errors. The outright correction of surface errors has been found to be inconsistent, unclear and overemphasizes the negative (Fregeau, 1999; Cohen, & Cavalcanti, 1990). Moreover, when this type of feedback is given, students for the most part simply copy the corrections into their subsequent drafts or final copies. The vast majority of students does not record nor study the mistakes noted in the feedback. Having students merely copy teacher corrections into rewrites is a passive action that does not teach students how to recognize or correct errors on their own. Fregeau discovered that the method of teachers indicating the presence or types of errors without correction is also ineffective. Many times the students do not understand why the errors were indicated and simply guess the corrections as they rewrite. Other ineffective aspects of the marking of student errors are that it causes students to focus more on surface errors than on the clarity of their ideas, and it only stresses the negative.

Just as with feedback on form, many faults have been found with standard practices of providing feedback on content (Cohen, & Cavalcanti, 1990; Leki, 1990; Fregeau, 1999; Fathman & Walley, 1990). Fathman and Walley, as well as Fregeau report that teacher feedback on content in the form of teacher comments is often vague, contradictory, unsystematic and inconsistent. This leads to various reactions by students including confusion, frustration and neglect of the comments. Leki reports that when presented with

written feedback on content, students react in three main ways. The students may not read the annotations at all, may read them but not understand them, or may understand them but not know how to respond to them. Teacher comments on content are of little use if students do not know what they mean or how to use them productively to improve their skills as writers. Finally, Fathman and Walley note, much like correction of grammar mistakes, comments on content tend to be negative and point out problems more than tell students what they are doing right.

What Is Working

Despite these negative aspects, there are effective points to some of the common methods of teacher feedback. Fathman and Walley (1990) discovered that when students receive grammar feedback that indicated the place but not type of errors, the students significantly improved their grammar scores on subsequent rewrites of the papers. This idea is echoed by Frodesen (2001), who notes that indirect feedback is more useful than direct correction.

Written feedback has also been found to be effective when it is coupled with student-teacher conferencing (Brender, 1998; Fregeau, 1999). As noted earlier, many students find understanding written feedback problematic. Conferencing allows both students and teachers a chance to trace the causes of the problems arising from student writing and feedback, and to develop strategies for improvement. During these sessions, teachers can ask direct questions to students in order to gain a deeper understanding of student writings. Also, students are able to express their ideas more clearly in writing and to get clarification on any comments that teachers have made. Finally, teachers can use conferencing to assist students with any specific problems related to their writing.

What Students Want

One important aspect of feedback that is often overlooked is the desires of students as to the kinds of feedback they wish to receive. Fregeau (1999) notes that students want to participate in a process approach to writing that allows for multiple rewrites as well as conferencing of some sort. Brender (1998) asserts that students want to take part in conferencing and find it more effective than written comments. Leki (1990) points out that students prefer error correction methods that label mistakes and let them make corrections on their own. Finally, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) mention that students want to have some kind of feedback pertaining to the content of their writings.

Suggestions for Appropriate and Effective Feedback

Teachers have to come up with an effective method of feedback that takes into account the shortcomings of common methods of feedback, the positive aspects of them and the desires of students. The goals of a particular writing course are one of the main factors that need to be considered when determining how to provide feedback. Feedback that is a mismatch with assignment or course goals may be one of the factors contributing to students not knowing how to properly respond to it. Among these are consideration of course and assignment goals, the stage of the writing process and the form of the feedback.

Aside from the aforementioned effectiveness of marking errors for student self-correction, other methods of feedback on grammar can be productive in improving students' writing skills. To lessen student confusion, teachers should consistently use a standard set of symbols or markings to indicate place and type of error and train the students in what kinds of corrections to make based on each symbol. Lists of proofreading symbols can easily be found in most writing textbooks, or teachers can create their own. Furthermore, teachers should familiarize students with the system so they will not be surprised when new symbols occur.

Many of the same kinds of improvements that can be made for feedback on form can also be made for feedback on content. The failure of written comments dealing with content comes from a combination of using inconsistent, unclear comments along with not training students in how to properly use the feedback to improve. Teachers should consistently use a standard set of clear and direct comments and questions to indicate place and type of content feedback. These types of comments and questions should focus students' attention on the content of the composition and the process they followed instead of merely pointing out areas that the teacher found interesting or lacking. As Leki (1990) points out, these kinds of questions and comments can be used to create a dialog between the student and the teacher in order to give both a clearer understanding of how the assignment was and should be conceived and executed. Furthermore, teachers should, as with grammar, familiarize students with the types of comments that will be used and train students in how to make use of the comments. Without training in how to use the comments to better their writing, students are likely to either ignore the comments, misunderstand them, or fail to use them constructively (Cohen, & Cavalcanti, 1990; Kroll, 2001).

The comments that the teachers use and training that they give students can be further developed in individual conferences. Aside from using conferences to determine if students understand and are making use of feedback, teachers can also use them to explain their comments to the students. Conferences are an excellent time for teachers and students to ask direct questions to each other and uncover any misunderstandings by either party. One way to do this would be to present students with pre-conference sheets that allow them to prepare questions for the teacher beforehand. Likewise, the teacher should also prepare a list of comments and questions before the conference.

Examples

I developed the following and found them to be very effective in providing feedback to my EFL students and fostering improvement in their writing skills.

Questions for Consideration when Giving Feedback

General Questions

1. Is the feedback consistent with the goals of the course?
2. Is the feedback consistent with the goals of the assignment?
3. Is the feedback consistent with the goals for this phase of the assignment?
4. Is the form of the feedback consistent with the three previous questions?

Form

1. Is the feedback clear and easy for the students to understand?
2. Did I use the system and symbols that I made the students aware of?
3. Have I consistently marked the same error or types of errors?
4. Have I only marked errors that I told the students I would or that I covered in class?
5. Have I marked anything not gone over in class? Why?
6. Will the student know what to do with the feedback?
7. Did I correct the errors or mark it for the students to correct? Why?

Content

1. Is the feedback clear and easy for the students to see and understand?
2. Did I use the system and symbols that I made the students aware of?
3. Have I consistently marked the same error or types of errors?
4. Have I made only negative comments or did I also add some praise?
5. Did I rewrite student words? Why?
6. Did I make any specific comments or ask direct questions? Why?
7. Are the comments I wrote specific to content and problems that we are covering or have covered in class?

Comments for Feedback on Content

I usually insert the numbers instead of writing out the comments.

1. I like this very much.
2. This is a good example.
3. Tell me more about this.
4. Can you think of another example?
5. Do you have a personal example about this?
6. Can you make this clearer?
7. Can you think of another way to say this?
8. Why do you think so?

9. Is this paragraph complete?
10. Do you think this is necessary? Why or why not?
11. Should this paragraph be divided?
12. Is your thesis clear?
13. Are your topic sentences clear?
14. You are repeating yourself here.
15. I am not sure what you mean.

Conferences

Pre-conference Questions for Students

1. Were there any comments or markings that you did not understand?
2. Were there any comments or markings that you understood but were not sure what to do with?
3. Were there any other things about the assignments or class that you have questions about?

Pre-conference Questions for Teachers

1. What aspects of this course/assignment are the student performing well on?
2. What aspects of the course/assignment do the student need to improve on? How?
3. Are there any errors that are consistent?
4. Are there any other points to cover in the conference?

Conclusion

To sum up, most of the frequently used and relied on methods of teacher feedback on written assignments are ineffective when it comes to developing and promoting students' English writing skills. Methods such as outright correction of surface errors, inconsistently marking errors, unclear and vague responses on content have all been found to have little positive and some negative impact on student writing skills. They can lead to feelings of confusion and frustration as well as passive action and indifference on behalf of the students. Teachers need to develop more systemized and consistent forms of feedback that take advantage of the process approach and make it clear to students what the feedback means and what they are to do with it. Moreover, teachers need to familiarize and train students in how to effectively use the feedback in order to make gains in their proficiency and competence as English writers.

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