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Investigating teacher perceptions of feedback

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In writing classes, teacher feedback is important in helping students with their writing. While research has generally focused on the purpose, nature, and form of teacher feedback, attention to teachers' views regarding their own feedback practices has been modest. Yet, it is important to understand why and how teachers provide feedback, as practice is often guided by beliefs. This study, therefore, investigated the factors that shape teacher feedback. Writing teachers at a Singaporean university were interviewed regarding their beliefs about feedback and their feedback practices. The findings revealed that the respondents' feedback practices were shaped by their beliefs about the needs and capabilities of their students, but that contextual constraints created tensions between ideal and actual practice. Practical suggestions are offered to facilitate feedback practice. This study highlights the need for further work in this area in order to inform teachers' practices in providing feedback to their students.

Introduction

The important role that feedback plays in helping students in their learning processes is well reported in the literature. Much research has been undertaken on the form and effectiveness of teacher feedback, particularly formative feedback (for example Stern and Solomon 2006). These have included studies on both written and oral feedback related to the language, organization, and content of the writing. These studies have revealed that teacher feedback should identify problematic areas clearly, and allow students to work out solutions by themselves. Drawing on a range of studies, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have also shown that effective feedback can lead to substantial gains in learning. They propose seven aspects as follows:

Good feedback practice

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high-quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching. (ibid.: 205)

Teaching practice is often guided by teaching beliefs, which are 'personalized theories [that] lie at the heart of teaching and learning' (Burns 1992: 64). However, past studies have found that teaching practice and beliefs are often mismatched (Borg 2003; Phipps and Borg 2009). Although these studies are focused on language pedagogy rather than teacher feedback, they nevertheless reveal interesting areas for comparison. Borg's (ibid.) review study (of 64 articles) noted that teachers' classroom practices did not 'always reflect [their] stated beliefs, personal theories, and pedagogical principles' (p. 91). These tensions are highlighted in Phipps and Borg's (ibid.) study into the area of grammar teaching involving three EFL teachers. Through interviews and in-class observations, the researchers noted that their respondents' classroom practices were often constrained by classroom-management issues, curriculum requirements, and students' expectations, and that practices were not always aligned with their respondents' personal beliefs.

Moreover, work on feedback practices has revealed differences not just between actual and ideal practice (for example Hyland 2013b), the former of which is often constrained by contextual factors, but also between what students expect and what teachers typically provide (Weaver 2006; Hyland 2013a, 2013b). Hence there is a need to consider the impact of context on teaching practice as ‘attention to these factors is central to a fuller understanding of teachers’ thoughts and actions’ (Borg 2006: 16).

Despite the wealth of studies on teacher feedback, however, a search of the major databases (for example Web of Science, Modern Language Association) revealed only modest research interest in teachers’ perceptions of the factors affecting their own feedback practices on academic writing at the tertiary level. Feedback on academic writing is important, not least because the genre of academic writing may not be familiar to students transitioning from secondary schools to university. Sharing of these factors among teachers can help them shape effective feedback practices to help students with their writing. Further, as the beliefs and practices of teachers in different localities are influenced by factors unique to those regions, wider studies are needed to serve as points of comparison (Lee 2014). This will allow teachers not only to appreciate the range of experiences faced by other teachers, but also to enable them to pick up useful strategies through which they can handle specific concerns.

Following the approach of Hyland (2013a), this study investigated the factors influencing teacher feedback on academic writing. In the study, we define teacher feedback as a teacher’s written response towards a student’s written work, with the aim of improving the student’s performance (Van den Bergh, Ros, and Beijaard 2014). This working definition is sufficiently broad for any written response by the teacher to be regarded as feedback, including the use of symbols and short phrases.

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Purpose of teacher feedback: what are the beliefs of the respondents regarding the purpose of feedback?
2. Constraints on feedback practice: what constraints, if any, do the respondents face in their feedback practices?

We expect that this study will serve to encourage similar work in other localities and learning environments. It is through such open sharing of views that practical steps can be suggested on the provision of effective feedback.

Methodology

Approval to conduct this study was granted by the university’s Institutional Review Board. Teachers at the language centre were invited to participate in the study. Writing teachers (rather than subject faculty as in Hyland’s (2013b) study) were approached, as the centre offers academic and technical writing courses to students across the university.

Email invitations to participate were sent to the teachers at the centre. Nine teachers—six females and three males—responded to our invitation. The teachers are experienced markers who teach and/or coordinate writing courses for the university. All of them have been teaching writing courses for undergraduates for at least eight years. The language centre of this university provides writing courses to the engineering, science, and humanities colleges. These courses are core modules that the students have to complete before graduation. A wide range of academic and professional English courses are offered by the centre, such as Professional Communication, Critical Writing, Research Writing in the Sciences and Social Sciences, and Technical Communication for Engineering Students. The class size is typically about 25 students. The curricula of all these courses are oriented towards academic writing and

professional communication. The medium of instruction for all the courses is English. Approximately 80 per cent of the student population have at least 12 years of education with English as the medium of instruction. The individual writing assignments range from 300 words for abstracts and annotated bibliographies to 1,500 words for discipline-specific writing in the humanities. The word limit is 3,000 words for groups doing research writing in engineering, science, and the humanities.

Data collection took place over two months. Data were collected via focus group interviews. Each group comprised three to four respondents. Each interview session lasted 45 minutes to an hour. With their permission, all sessions were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

At the start of each interview session, the respondents were reminded that the focus was on their feedback practices. The interviews followed a semi-structured format. In addition to four basic questions on form (use of symbols, abbreviations, short phrases, and longer comments); focus (purpose, content, structure, and language); intent; and expectations of feedback, the respondents were actively encouraged to share their views on teacher feedback in general. The four questions were:

1. For written assignments, what form(s) does/do your written feedback typically take?
2. What do you typically focus on when providing feedback on a written assignment?
3. What do you want/wish students to do with the written feedback you provide? Do you think your purpose is achieved? Why do you think so?
4. What do you think students want most from your written feedback? Why do you think this?

To reiterate, this study aimed to investigate the factors that shape teacher feedback on academic writing. Analyses of factors and feedback practices took place over two months. Categories were created based

on recurring themes identified during close reading of the responses; these included 'beliefs', 'practices', 'purpose', 'time constraints', and 'grade justification'. Content analysis of the interview transcripts was performed using NVivo 10. Each transcript was collectively analysed and coded by the research team. Interpretations were subjected to rigorous deliberation by the team, until a consensus was reached.

Findings and discussion

The interviews revealed a number of issues that affected the respondents' feedback practices. These issues are grouped according to the two research questions of this study: the purpose of teacher feedback, and constraints on feedback practices. In this section, the names assigned to the respondents are pseudonyms.

Purpose of teacher feedback

A dominant factor influencing feedback practices was the respondents' beliefs about what their students needed and what they were capable of processing:

Okay, this is not informed by research. But based on my teaching experience, feedback is only useful if I make a comment at the level where you are at. If I made a comment that is over and above what you're capable of processing, it's lost. It's very demoralizing, it's not helpful. (Hillary)

This belief about matching feedback to each student's level was of such importance that at least one respondent, Elaine, cautioned against teachers reviewing students' work at the teachers' specialized level, what Elaine termed 'thinking aloud'. She recommended that feedback should address the needs of students, and not simply reflect the reactions of the teacher while reviewing the assignment:

Sometimes, it's because we have so many scripts, we tend to forget that when we write the feedback, it's actually for the students. But in the end, the way we mark, or the way we put down our comments, it's like us thinking aloud.

Such beliefs about the needs of students revolved around the learning process. The respondents emphasized what they felt was the primary purpose of feedback: to guide students to think about the errors in their writing and, importantly, to learn from them. Feedback was provided to help students work out solutions for themselves and so become active participants in the learning process. That is to say, students needed to be independent and critical writers:

It's our belief that process is more important than outcome. (Caroline)

I don't want to give them everything. So what I do is, sometimes, when major things are wrong, I will just say, you know, you should remember that lecture or that tutorial. I don't want to tell them everything. (Dorothy)

While the respondents acknowledged that such a feedback practice was time-intensive, none of them would change the way they provided feedback, even if it meant, in the case of one respondent (Caroline), waking up at four in the morning to look through her students' work. This suggests the respondents' commitment to fostering learning, underscoring it as a rationale for their practices.

The reported feedback practices of the respondents is heartening as it aims to facilitate the development of self-assessment in learning (i.e. reflection), which has been regarded in the literature as a feature of good practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick op.cit.). The term 'learning process', however, is general and encompasses numerous aspects in the teaching of writing. What need to be clarified are the specific areas that the respondents tended to focus on when providing feedback. The interviews revealed a range of areas: grammar (Adeline, Dorothy), purpose of the writing task (Belinda), and writing concepts such as communication contexts and organizational patterns (Hillary, George, John). However, it is not clear from the interviews why the respondents focused on such areas (rather than others) in the wider context of the learning process. We conjecture that the teachers' focus on certain areas may be guided by their own postgraduate training and specialization. As Dorothy noted, 'our expertise is on language [and] language use ... I'm very confident when writing comments on grammar'.

Indeed, a teacher's belief about the specific needs of his/her students may not always match the students' actual needs. While this of course does not mean that students necessarily know what is beneficial for them, it would also be presumptuous of teachers to assume that their students need feedback on certain areas but not others. For feedback to truly benefit students, teachers could carry out action research to better understand not only the challenges facing students in the writing process but also their own feedback practices as well. Teachers, in other words, should aim to become more critical and reflective of their own practice. This will allow them to tailor their feedback according to what is needed, rather than what they assume is needed.

Contextual constraints on feedback practice

The other dominant factor affecting feedback practices was situational in nature. Such contextual forces included the students' attitudes towards feedback and institutional constraints, such as the class size, teaching load, and number and length of written assignments. The respondents' comments revealed a

tension between their espoused beliefs about learning (as discussed above) and their feedback practices. One source of tension stems from the institution's stipulation of grade distribution in norm-referenced marking, as expressed by one respondent:

I feel that my feedback these days is a mixed bag of motives—to help students improve, that's true. But it's also determined by course requirements, marking schedule, institutional requirements (including self-preservation motives), and doesn't always reflect my most deeply held, personal beliefs about teaching. (John)

Indeed, the students' response to feedback—particularly their fixation with grades—was often raised by the respondents as a major influence on their feedback practices. In reality, this tension often translated into the use of feedback to justify the grades awarded to students:

Now, since joining the university, I have changed the way I give feedback. Because, you know, they are so concerned about the grades. So I have learnt from my colleagues, and from my own experience, to write more and more comments to justify the grade. So I have become more explicit in that way. (Dorothy)

I'll become very explicit once it's the summative stage, when I have to give a grade, because, to me, when you give a grade, you'll have to give feedback that indicates why the student got that grade. (Hillary)

Therefore, while teachers perceived that feedback could aid learning, they also felt obliged to employ it as a form of justification for the grades awarded. In doing so, the feedback ran the risk of being less about learning, and more about avoiding any objections or unhappiness from students in relation to their grades.

Implications for practice

This tension between ideal and actual practices, which is experienced by the writing teacher in the Singaporean context, highlights the need to rethink current practices and make appropriate adjustments. Our findings may be useful to those working in similar contexts. In Figure 1, we summarize our findings by modelling the factors influencing feedback practices and offering several practical recommendations.

Figure 1. Feedback practice: factors and implications

It is perhaps not uncommon to find educational institutions in Singapore using a top-down approach. An implication, then, is that change needs to be initiated at the institutional level. One way to ease this tension between ideal and actual practice is for the institution to allow teachers to give only qualitative feedback and not award grades, thus downplaying their perceived importance. This could hopefully focus students' attention on learning rather than 'just' on scores. However, this suggestion would probably work best when the practice of qualitative feedback is emphasized across the board, thus addressing students' expectations regarding grades and grading.

The teacher, too, can bring about change. As the following respondent suggested, the teacher could provide regular feedback on ungraded assignments so that the opportunity to learn is given prominence:

I think students learn better if feedback is given on a regular basis, for a number of 'nugget' assignments (ungraded) that culminate in a big and final assignment that is graded. It is based on my own experience in a writing course many years ago. [...] It was one of those courses in which I feel the students were dealt with fairly; we were informed about our strengths and weaknesses progressively, given a chance to work on them, and attended to as learning individuals. It was not simply a writing course I underwent, but an education. (John)

Clearly, the emphasis here is on assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning (Wiliam 2011). The idea of an opportunity for regular feedback can be taken further, for example by creating an environment where feedback becomes a two-way conversation between the teacher and student. It allows the teacher to have a clearer picture of the students' needs, thus allowing more pertinent feedback on these needs to be offered. The implications of this recommendation for small and large classes are elaborated below.

While such an approach is appealing, it is time-intensive and may therefore be easier to implement in smaller classes. Curriculum designers might incorporate such sessions into the curricula rather than leaving them as peripheral events impinging on the teachers' time. Another component that curriculum

designers could consider introducing is planned peer feedback on writing. As a learning strategy, peer feedback trains students to be sensitive to what is good or lacking in an essay (Lee, Mak, and Burns 2016). In other words, students develop as independent learners capable of self-assessment.

In larger classes, the peer-feedback aspect can be retained. Teachers may also want to consider Bloxham and Campbell's (2010) recommendation to use an interactive cover sheet. Students could be trained to indicate their preferences for feedback in specific areas so that greater attention can be devoted to these points. In this way, the teacher's feedback becomes customized to the needs of their students, thus avoiding the problem of a blanket focus on specific areas (for example grammar and content) as practised by several respondents in this study.

We recognize, too, the time and workload constraints facing writing teachers, particularly those teaching large classes. To complement the interactive cover sheet suggested above, teachers can also use a formatted feedback sheet containing a list of key issues related to the assignment with boxes or numerical scales for easy use, and further space for additional comments. As recommended by Moses:

I think having a feedback sheet is good. The students get numbers from 1 to 5, some comments in a box, or things that the tutor can tick off – 'there is an objective statement', 'yes/no', or 'needs work'. That would make it a little faster for grading.

This standardized feedback sheet could complement the interactive cover sheet: while the latter offers specific feedback on areas that students need, the former highlights the key indicators of their work in other areas.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

Two key limitations of this study are the small sample size and the use of only one data-collection method. Further, the findings were based on self-reported, rather than observed, data.

Future studies could include a bigger sample size and the use of more than one research tool, such as exploration of actual feedback texts. As the views of students on the effectiveness of teacher feedback are also essential to the shaping of that feedback, future research should also include students as participants. The works of Hyland (2013b) and Weaver (op.cit.) in this area are valuable as points of reference. For our part, we are in the process of reviewing and analysing data on student perceptions as part of a larger study.

Conclusion

Our study investigated the factors influencing teacher feedback on students' academic writing. The findings revealed that teacher beliefs and contextual factors appeared to be the main influences on the respondents' practices. In general, feedback practices were shaped by the teachers' beliefs about the needs and capabilities of their students, but such belief-based practices were often limited by contextual factors.

The study offers a glimpse into the challenges facing writing instructors and, in part, explains the tension that teachers often face between ideal and actual practice. Some factors, particularly teacher beliefs and institutional requirements, cannot be easily changed. But there is one area that is well within the teacher's control and merits closer attention. In the interviews, none of the respondents indicated that they actively sought to find out what the real or perceived needs of their students were. However, beliefs about the needs of students may not always match what the students actually need or perceive

they need. What teachers could do is to engage students in the feedback process. We agree with Nicol (2010: 503) that feedback cannot be a monologue, but should be 'a dialogical and contingent two-way process that involves coordinated teacher–student and peer-to-peer interaction as well as active learner engagement'.

A study of this nature is helpful in drawing attention to the perceptions of teachers themselves regarding feedback practices. Their perceptions help us to understand the rationale for their practices (which is not always evident in past research work), and so highlight specific areas for attention. Needless to say, much remains to be done, as recommended in the preceding section. We hope that our study will help teachers to rethink the way they give feedback to their students in order to foster their learning and reduce the tension between ideal and actual practice.

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