

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION: WRITING INSTRUCTORS' ASSESSMENT AMBIVALENCE.

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Abstract

A recent survey amongst Business English Instructors and their EFL students reveals that a long familiar ambivalence towards and search for tools for assessment and feedback for oral and written presentations continues. Using as background the 1997 research of Dana Ferris and her subsequent revisit to this topic in 2007, this paper will concentrate on the assessment of written presentations by students for whom English is a foreign language (EFL) and highlight three areas: the paucity of research into this topic to date; a discussion of the impact of teacher assessment feedback on EFL student writing improvement; and recommendations for writing assessment tools to bring student and Instructor more satisfaction.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Assessment, Criteria, EFL, Feedback, Standards.

การสนทนาอย่างต่อเนื่อง:

การประเมินที่หลากหลายของอาจารย์ที่สอนการเขียน

บทคัดย่อ

การสำรวจล่าสุดในกลุ่มอาจารย์ภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจและนักเรียน EFL เผยให้เห็นว่าการประเมินที่หลากหลายที่มานานแล้วและมีการค้นหาเครื่องมือสำหรับการประเมินและข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับการพูด นำเสนอและการเขียน การใช้งานวิจัยของ Dana Ferris ในปี 1997 เป็นพื้นฐานและต่อมาได้ทบทวนหัวข้อนี้ในปี 2007 ในงานวิจัยนี้จะเน้นการประเมินผลของการนำเสนอผลงานเขียนโดยนักศึกษาที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) และเน้นสามเรื่องคือ: งานวิจัยที่มีน้อยในหัวข้อนี้ในปัจจุบัน การอภิปรายผลกระทบของการประเมินของครู EFL เพื่อการปรับปรุงการเขียนของนักเรียนและคำแนะนำ

เกี่ยวกับเครื่องมือในการประเมินการเขียนเพื่อนำมาซึ่งความพึงพอใจที่มากขึ้นสำหรับนักเรียนและอาจารย์

คำสำคัญ: ความสับสน การประเมิน เื่อนใจ EFL คำติชมมาตรฐาน

Current Context

A group of Business English students undertook a research project, in mid-2011, which had as one of its three objectives, “To determine the standards lecturers used to grade student presentations” (Fischer, Phromphol, & Busaparkerk, 2011, 3). Further background investigation was spurred after being interviewed about my own assessment criteria, and a subsequent reading of the research conclusions.

Briefly, two findings stood out. Firstly, there was partial though weak agreement – across both gender and ethnicity – amongst Instructors concerning the top three criteria for written and oral project assessment. 19.77% of the 35 Instructors surveyed looked for evidence of “well-preparation” (sic); 18.6%, “comprehensiveness of content;” and 15.12%, “originality of content.” Following these, 12.79% of the Instructors looking for “use of students’ own words” (mainly in oral presentations); and, lastly, 9.3%, “language fluency” (Fischer et al., 2011, 8–9). The low percentiles suggest ambivalence, even distrust, amongst the interviewees concerning reliable assessment criteria.

Secondly, Fisher et al. (2011) reported that a “majority” of Instructors shared agreement that written explanation of assessment criteria should be provided to students before work is submitted. This “majority” was somewhat weakened when 10.3% further stated that students “...should be responsible and ask if they were unsure of what is expected...” (10).

Finally, it was reported that 17.24% of the Instructors commented that they could see evidence of improvement in following presentations, after giving students feedback (Fischer et al., 2011, 10).

A Brief History of Writing Assessment Research

As one begins to survey a sample of available literature on this topic, an initial and common theme soon emerges, the lack of research undertaken, even as long as over the past thirty years, on the relationship between a writing Instructor's feedback and the student's writing skill improvement. However, common agreement does emerge that Instructors continue to be "hesitant towards" "fearful of," "daunted by" and "equivocal of" the benefit their students receive from the suggestions and comments noted on their writing drafts. Composition teacher trainer Dana Ferris (2007) notes that "most experienced writing Instructors know that providing feedback to their students is the most time-consuming and challenging part of the job. Future writing Instructors in L2 (second language) teacher preparation programs tend to view the endeavor with alarm, often citing response to student writing as the primary reason why they would rather do *anything* than become an L2 composition teacher!" (165).

As far back as 1986, Robb, Ross and Shortreed noted that "few empirical studies have been designed to evaluate the effects of different types of feedback on error in the written work of second language writers" (83). A decade later, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz (1996) repeat this (287). Ferris (1997) expands that "even fewer studies have attempted to link teacher feedback and revision" (6). Most recently, Wang's (2011) questions at a recent symposium: "How much feedback should I give? Should I provide clues or make corrections? ... Is all of this feedback actually doing the student much good?" lead one to think that unease amongst Instructors continues and breakthrough research remains to be done.

Ferris (1997) herself conducted a noteworthy research project of one writing Instructor's more than 1,600 marginal and end comments on assignment drafts written by 47 advanced university EFL students, over a full academic, 15 week semester. Her findings are both revealing and familiar and, read in tandem with her 2007 article in the same field, underscore the need for further in-depth and on-going research. Ferris' 1997 research was founded on two key questions most contemporary writing Instructors wait to have answered:

- I. What characteristics of teacher commentary appear to influence student revision?

2. Do revisions influenced by teacher feedback lead to substantive and effective changes in students' papers? (318)

The specific details and parameters of this substantial project do not need to be repeated. However, before discussing Ferris' findings, some general description of her strategy may underscore her results. Ferris' research team collaborated with a college Instructor of ten years' experience teaching EFL composition. They followed the progress and reviewed the assignments of the 47 US freshmen and sophomores who represented some ten non-English language groups. They were all at least high school educated in the States (319). Ferris collected copies both of students' first drafts and then revised assignments. Her team followed up by assessing the impact of the teacher's commentary on the students' revised drafts. They did not address any particular teacher comment or suggestion (320).

The research criteria were applied to 220 assignment papers - 110 pairs of first drafts, then revised assignments (Ferris, 1997, 316). The marginal and end comments were then reviewed. Ferris explains that the "effects of the teacher's commentary on the students' revisions were then assessed according to an original rating scale designed to judge not only the extent to which the revisions had addressed the comments but whether the changes made by the students actually improved the papers" (316).

Instructor's Impact on Student Revisions

The results of the research are of interest and encouragement to writing Instructors. In response to Question I of her research, Ferris (1997) found that the more concrete and direct the teacher's feedback is (i.e., student text-related), the more likely it will be attended to, or attempted to be attended to, by the student. More general and longer pieces of commentary tend to be ignored by the students. For example, Ferris summarizes that "marginal requests for information, requests, and summary comments on grammar appeared to lead to the most substantive revisions. ...longer comments and those which were text specific were associated with major changes more than were shorter, general comments..." (330). Students tend to respond to question type of comments, especially if they focus on a particular piece of the student's text. However, Ferris discovered two, somewhat "conflicting but coexisting truths" (330): students would endeavor to respond, in a second draft, to teacher feedback; yet, in the same

papers there is also evidence of students choosing to ignore, or not noticing, other requests or commentary. Just why similar feedback is sometimes attended to or sometimes ignored, Ferris' research did not seem to discern.

Moreover, within the context of Ferris' Research Question I, an earlier study by Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) found that a good number of writing Instructors of EFL students seem to spend a major amount of correction space on writing mechanics – perhaps the easiest area around which to offer concrete suggestions? They conclude that a teacher's correction time "might be more profitably spent in responding to more important aspects of student writing" (91). More specifically, they counsel that writing skill improvement does not often come from feedback around "sentence-level errors" (91).

Dessner's (1991) dissertation research would seem to support Robb et al.'s (1996) conclusion. This study of ten college EFL writing teachers revealed that "two thirds of the teacher's commentary provided advice and suggestions (i.e., not just corrections) and that these types of meaningful comments appeared to lead to substantive student revisions" (cited in Ferris, 1997, 317)

Robb et al. (1986) also make two further observations. In research undertaken with both first and second language level students, the "mode of writing" seems to have a "significant impact on syntactic complexity" (85, Footnote I). Personal experience with Asian writing students would consistently show that when the assignment mode is creative writing the overall quality of writing style, critical thinking and syntactic complexity is impressively higher than when the mode is more objective and analytic.

Secondly, Robb et al. (1986) observe that writers learn best from themselves, and the revision of their own work is amongst the most reliable skills improvement practices (85).

In her second Research Question - *the impact of teacher commentary and student subsequent revision on overall writing improvement* – Ferris' (1997) findings are heartening: "when changes (minimal or substantial) were made, they overwhelmingly tended to improve the students' papers. Very few changes (less than 5%) were rated as negative" (330). On the other hand, she found that more than 60% of general, non-text specific

feedback produced no changes. Whereas, “51% of the text-specific marginal comments (and 40% of the end comments) led to positive changes” (329).

Of course, lack of student response to teacher feedback may also happen if the Instructor’s comment is not understood, or the student does not catch its significance to improve writing quality. Ferris (1997) does not categorically rule out student laziness. However, her findings seem to indicate that students’ lack of understanding of feedback is a more common cause of their ignoring it than laziness (331). More positively, she later ponders that sometimes a student’s ignoring feedback could also be the sign of a writer’s independence and creativity rather than non-compliance – surely “an ultimate goal” she adds, “of all writing teachers” (334).

Ferris (1997) concludes with two specific suggestions to her student teachers. Writing Instructors should clearly brief their students about their “responding strategies.” As well, a more specific tool such as a “revise-and-resubmit letter” is suggested. This letter is written by the student to the teacher summarizing received feedback, explaining how a revised draft responds to each correction and/or why some suggestion has been ignored. This tool would seem to strengthen the teacher/student relationship as well as highlight the commitment of both parties to a more collaborative learning model (331).

Ferris (1997) also has some direct challenges to the Instructor. Firstly, there is general encouragement to a constant review of one’s assessment methodology; specifically to review one’s questions to the student. For example, she pointedly asks, “... whether the question itself is really necessary (If the student answers it, will it improve the paper?)...” (332). Ferris also found that a “significant number of (‘give more information’) comments did not lead to any changes...” (332).

Towards the end of her summary, Ferris (1997) refers back to a study conducted by Fathman and Whalley in 1990. Here, she concurs that “the mere act of rewriting leads most writers to make changes without feedback from anyone (333).

Quality Assessment Tools

The question remains, then, about the “essential qualities of a good assessment instrument.” Cushing Weigle (2007) proposes four key guidelines: “setting measurable objectives, deciding on how to assess objectives..., setting tasks, (and) scoring” (195-6). As well, two very practical recommendations are added. Since teachers are to assess specific assignment goals, these objectives need to be [1] expressed in terms of “observable behaviors or products” that can be directly and transparently assessed – easily judged as having been met (197). (In this context, Cushing Weigle suggests an interesting adaptation of David Allen’s (2003) three-step model for stating business outcomes to compose writing assignment objectives.) [2] “Decisions about assessment should not be left until the end of instruction... but made) from the very beginning” (196).

Cushing Weigle (2007) further explains that an effective assessment tool is *reliable*, *valid* and *practical* (195-196). A *reliable* assessment tool is “consistent”. A student should not score higher because of the topic they choose to write about. All topics should have equivalent challenge and all writers have the same time boundaries. Secondly, a *valid* assessment tool is “appropriate” for allowing skilled students to demonstrate their proficiency and for unskilled students to reveal their weakness. Finally, a *practical* assessment tool is able to be constructed and used to evaluate submitted work “within the constraints of available resources, particularly time” (196).

In summary, the literature concentrates on three major areas of assessment issues and problems. These are faced by Instructors who are motivated to evaluate, as well as encourage and challenge their students. The three categories of correction are (a) feedback, (b) further information requests and, finally, (c) scoring. However, Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) consolingly point out (even in 1986) that there is “... no consensus... on how teachers can best react to student error or at what stage in the composing process such feedback should be given” (83). This paper’s motivating survey would indicate the ambivalence amongst Instructors has not softened.

(a) Feedback

From the student's perspective also, it would seem that Robb et al.'s (1986) finding is still relevant. Research "suggests that EFL writers can assimilate only a small proportion of corrective feedback into their current grammatical system, especially when the corrections are not detailed enough to be applied to the more complex and problematic aspects of order and syntax..." (89-90). In this context, age-old advice still stands: a helpful mentor urges the student, step by step, towards good writing quality. The goal is not to make "this assignment" the best piece of prose ever written. As well, Robb et al. (1986) point out that "more direct methods of feedback do not tend to produce results commensurate with the amount of effort required of the instructor to draw the student's attention to surface errors" (88). Both Instructor and student seem to benefit from an editing, rather than a micro-corrective, strategy.

Regarding correction feedback, earlier literature demonstrates that student writers attend to their Instructor's feedback with positive results if the correction is presented as a "problem solving activity" (Corder, 1981, and Brumfit, 1980). Ferris (1997) refers to this time saving strategy when she observes that the teacher in her research gave "limited grammar feedback to summary comments at the end of the paper, paired with underlined examples of particular error patterns in the body of the essay" (327). Again, Lalande (1982) supports this by recommending the use of an "error code" (Robb et al., 1986, 84). Students made "significantly greater gains" when their Instructor used such a code rather than when each error was directly corrected (84). Semke (1984) found, in fact, that an EFL student can feel discouraged, even overwhelmed by their low skill level in a second language, when the teacher corrects each error (see Robb et al., 1986, 84-5).

On the other hand, a somewhat different approach suggests that Instructors should "respond to more global problems of planning and content" (Griffin, 1982). Krashen (1984) advises leaving any error corrections until the final draft of the assignment, presenting correction more as a polishing up of completed work, than a (negatively) highlighted focus right from the beginning of the process. Yet again, Wang (2011) has a more holistic approach recommending that "effective feedback" is provided not at the end, but during the "intermediate states of the writing process."

For her, it includes all areas of concern to the teacher, but does not “hijack the student’s writing.”

Finally, Zamel (1985) makes an interesting observation when doing a cross-discipline study of approaches to writing correction and feedback by teachers. Language teachers seem to concentrate on grammar and mechanics in their comments, whereas Instructors from other disciplines will focus their feedback on the student’s presentation style and information (Robb et al., 1986, 84)

Contrastingly, Ferris’ (1997) research shows that EFL students do respond to grammar commentary and correction. In fact, she found that 78% of such comments made at the end of a paper and nearly 68% of comments made in the margins “influenced positive changes in the revisions” (327). However, the suggestion is made that the end, summary comments are most effectively attended to if begun with a “note of encouragement” (327).

(b) Further Information Requests

Some comment on an Instructor’s suggestion/request for further information is also made. These requests can take at least two forms, as Ferris (1997) notes. They can be a reflection of the teacher-as-reader’s reaction to the student’s information or argument. As well, they can be a request for further research to document stronger support for a point made by the student. However, it is a not too encouraging to note that while students take these requests seriously and make “substantive changes” to their rewrite, an improvement in the new draft’s overall writing quality is not always found. Ferris finds that 10% of the substantive changes were rated “as being *negative* or *mixed* in their effects on the paper” (325). More specifically, she reports that some “24% of the marginal requests for information” seemed to be missed or ignored by students. This statistic gains more significance when it is learnt that such requests for further information are more often in marginal than end comments - only “7% of all end comments” (325).

Two comments stand out regarding further information requests. Firstly, the concepts of research and citation of sources are not always clear to EFL students. Hence, how to attend to requests for further information

and, perhaps more significantly, how to incorporate this new information into the text can be a challenge for them. Secondly, teachers need to express their requests simply and clearly, as misunderstanding about precisely what is being recommended can be missed. Ferris (1997) found that requests made as “questions or statements” resulted in a more positive outcome (55-62%) than those made as an imperative (325). She cites one amusing, and familiar, misunderstanding where a teacher stipulates, “Your essay needs an introduction.” Whereupon the redraft dutifully began, “My name is Le. I am 19 years old. I have black hair and a girlfriend...” (171).

(c) Scoring

Evaluating a student’s writing is a third issue of concern for both Instructor and student. In fact, Cushing Weigle (2007) would call such assessment an “essential skill” (195). This, even if she underlines the “troublesome aspects” of assessing students’ written work with a letter grade or numerical mark (203). Along with a doubt about the true meaning of a particular mark or score, in this “student-centered” pedagogical era, most diligent writing Instructors probably view their role more as a mentor ‘with’ than an evaluator ‘of’ their students. Nevertheless, as both students and institutions do want that grade, some guidelines around grading and assessment can be found.

Cushing Weigle (2007) describes a difference between a “holistic and analytic scale.” The former approach is one which can be used with any assignment writing mode and is usually more quickly applied. On the other hand, an analytic scale which applies a mark or score for particular aspects of the assignment (e.g., presentation, cogency, documentation, language fluency, etc.) may be more helpful because it allows the student quickly to see steps of progress or regression (203). The challenge to most Instructors is to find an assessment rubric which addresses the student’s response to the assignment’s parameters, yet within real life grading constraints – time, resources, and energy.

Ferris (2007) recommends a twin-headed approach, in her discussion of assignment assessment. Firstly, she stresses a more deliberate requiring students to re-read and self-evaluate their work. She says this is not a “cop-out for lazy or exhausted teachers. ... the mere act of rereading and rewriting one’s own paper usually results in at least some improvement” (167). She then urges some Instructor self-reflection. “We all have (an

'approach'), whether we realize it or not. ...we sit down with a student writer or with a stack of student papers, and we do *something* with them – because we must" (I67). A pause to reflect on and articulate one's individual expectations and assignment goals may, in fact, ease the pressure and time issues sometimes associated with submission review.

Comment is also made on the need for a writing Instructor to find the balance between what Ferris (2007) calls "intervention," the positive guidance a teacher will offer to hone a student's skill, and "appropriation," the unhelpful and, sometimes, heavy handed imposing of an outside slant or direction on a student's argument (I68). Such a balance is key to helpful feedback for any student, but perhaps more poignantly so for an EFL student whose intended message may not be immediately clear. Appropriation is not always deliberate, but must always be guarded against.

Secondly, Ferris (2007) has some arresting findings regarding the attitude of EFL students to their Instructors' written comments and corrections. Striking contrasts may be made by those who have worked with students from a Western background where fearing resentment, only glowing comments may be given and accepted. In this context, one Instructor was told that his feedback made the student's "growing edges sound like gifts." Indeed, Ferris does begin by noting the obvious need for any teacher to balance comments with "encouragement and constructive criticism." She observes that EFL writers "know they need expert feedback and correction – they are well aware that they are not proficient English academic writers – and that far from being offended by it, they will be disappointed, anxious, or even resentful if teachers withhold it" (I68).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In short, experience and research findings demonstrate that writing is a skill, best honed through practice, feedback and revision. Students seem to learn best from feedback which is text specific, given in either marginal or end comments. Vague comments which are not directly related to a specific point or paragraph tend to be ignored, while feedback which is framed using a problem solving model is found to be an attractive challenge. Specifically, 'more information' requests are better phrased as questions, avoiding a judgmental tone. In contrast, feedback highlighting every error in a sentence

can be overwhelming. In summary, the goal of feedback is to guide the student to better express an idea, not to express a better idea.

Ferris (2007) has some specific recommendations: read the student's assignment through totally before going back to begin commentary (I73); give sufficient time and comfortable space, during class, for students to review comments (I74); take time to ensure the EFL student knows how a request for further information can be smoothly incorporated into the working draft (I74); keep "error-feedback" distinct from content feedback (I75); in end comments, use the student's name and sign your own; make text-related comments and, where possible, refer back to previous work; use realistic and helpful tools to get to know the students - interview, questionnaire, journal entries, etc. (I69).

More generally, few Instructors would disagree that the goal of an assignment review is to guide the student to express an argument more clearly and authoritatively. To offer this feedback well requires experience, certainly, and also reflection and commitment. However, experience alone while an excellent teacher will not a sagacious reviewer make. Experience plus "solid principles, useful techniques, and thoughtful reflection and evaluation probably will" (Ferris, 2007, I79). To provide contemporary examples of and insight into such principles and techniques, new research, even that mirroring the strategy and methodology of Ferris in 1997, would be beneficial.

Secondly, a need for writing Instructor collaboration and mutual support is also observed. Within this context, adoption of a departmental writing assessment standard is strongly recommended. For example, the Advanced Placement rubric used in the United States and Canada might be considered for assessment of all writing assignments ("AP Central - Advanced Placement Scores, Courses & Exam Center," 2012). This tool offers benefit to both Instructor and student. It relieves pressure and anxiety for Instructors who would follow the same assessment rubric across a department/faculty. As well, the student gains because, as veteran Instructor J. Gesiakowska points out, "If the rubric was standard perhaps the students would improve over courses because they would know the guidelines" (personal communication. January 1, 2012). Writing is often described as a solitary task, perhaps the role of guide and evaluator need not be?

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