

ESL writers and feedback: giving more autonomy to students

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Using data from a qualitative study into the effects of feedback on ESL writers, this paper looks at the peer and teacher feedback offered to individual writers. The paper suggests that teachers sometimes also override student concerns and decisions on use of feedback, even when peer feedback, which appears to allow for more student participation in the feedback process is involved. It focuses on the cases of two students, whose use of feedback and interactions with their teachers raise questions relating to the ownership of their writing and revision processes. It is suggested that teacher interventions may lead to students relinquishing control of their writing and revision processes, as well as their written products. The paper suggests that in some circumstances, teachers should encourage students to take more responsibility for their own writing, by allowing them to make their own decisions about their use and sources of feedback.

I Introduction

The nature and source of feedback on ESL student writing can vary widely. With developments in writing research and pedagogy, different types of feedback which allow for more student participation, such as peer feedback and feedback through writing conferences, are now more widely used. There is also an increased awareness of the social and political implications of giving feedback. This paper examines episodes which demonstrate that teachers sometimes override student decisions on use of feedback, even when peer feedback, which appears to allow for more student participation, is involved. Data from a qualitative, longitudinal study into the effects of feedback on ESL writers will be used to illustrate this. After examining peer feedback interactions in two

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ESL writing classes, the paper will discuss the cases of two students whose use of feedback and interactions with their teachers raised questions relating to the ownership of their writing and revision processes.

II Background

The role of feedback on writing involves complex issues and needs to be considered within the total context in which the feedback is given. Traditional student/teacher relationships are unequal in terms of the distribution of power. Students tend to accept the authority of the teacher, while the teachers have the authority of their institution behind them, with its power to pass or fail the student. Comments on writing are read by the students within the context of an implicit understanding of this relationship. Teachers also have an ambiguous role, since they are often called on to be both facilitator and evaluator and to act as an audience for the writer (Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994). The responses that most teachers give try to incorporate these different and often conflicting roles.

In the past 20 years there has been some debate about the problem of 'text appropriation'. The topic of ownership of student texts was widely discussed in L1 writing research (Brannon and Knoblauch, 1982; Freedman, 1987; Hairston, 1982; Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984; Onore, 1989; Sommers, 1982; Sperling and Freedman, 1987), after practitioners questioned the traditional role of the writing teacher as a controller and authority (Elbow, 1973). According to Knoblauch and Brannon (1984: 118) writing could be 'stolen' from a writer by the teacher's comments. They argued that by following directive feedback closely, students do not develop either their cognitive or their writing skills through their writing, but merely rewrite texts to reflect their teachers' preoccupations.

These concerns were transferred to ESL methodology. However, more recently teachers have questioned the validity of applying such concepts to ESL writers, since the L1 and L2 writing situations are quite different. Reid has claimed that in terms of the ESL writing situation, text appropriation is 'largely a mythical fear of ESL writing teachers' (1994: 275). She has argued that the concept of text appropriation ignores the importance of the social context, especially for ESL writers and that appropriation concerns have

resulted in teachers failing to give students the concrete help they need, because they are confusing intervention with appropriation. She suggests that to be effective, teachers need to forget appropriation concerns when giving feedback and concentrate instead on their roles as ‘cultural informants and as facilitators for creating the social discourse community in the ESL writing classroom’ (p. 275).

Reid’s discussion reminds us that writing in a first and second language are not the same and that teaching practices from one situation are not necessarily transferable to another. However, to fully understand the ESL classroom context we do have to consider the complex relationships which exist within it in terms of power and authority. The teacher’s authority may have a special potency for ESL students who often lack confidence in their ability to express themselves in their second language and may also be facing induction into a new culture and a new discourse community. Bartholomae (1986: 12) has discussed ‘the difficult and often violent accommodations that occur when students locate themselves in a discourse that is not “naturally” or immediately theirs’. In these circumstances, he argues, learning ‘becomes more of a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention or discovery’.

Peer feedback is seen as a way of giving more control to students since it allows them to make active decisions about whether or not to use their peers’ comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers’ feedback (Mendonca and Johnson, 1994; Mittan, 1989). The literature claims many positive effects for peer feedback. Freedman and Sperling (1985) and Mittan (1989) consider that peer response can be more authentic and honest than teacher response. Chaudron (1984) suggests that since students’ reviewers will soon perceive that other students experience the same difficulties in writing that they do, peer feedback may also lead to a reduction in writer apprehension and an increase in writer confidence. It may benefit the revision processes of reviewers as well as writers, making them less reliant on teacher feedback by helping them to internalize an audience and a checklist of evaluative questions to apply to their writing.

However, a question has been posed about the value of this type of response for ESL writers. A study by Connor and Asenavage

(1994) suggested that peer feedback made only a marginal difference to student writing. They analysed student revision after peer feedback and found that very few revisions could be linked directly to peer comments. Researchers also suggest that cross-cultural problems may occur since ESL peer groups often include students from a large variety of cultural and educational backgrounds. According to Allaei and Connor (1990: 24), 'conflict or at the very least, high levels of discomfort may occur in multicultural collaborative peer response groups'. Nelson and Murphy (1992, 1993) found that students from different cultures had different expectations about basic elements of the group situation such as the roles of the members, the mechanics of the group and politeness strategies. Thus the classroom reality may sometimes not match the ideal and deserves further investigation in longitudinal and naturalistic settings.

III Method

1 Research setting and participants

The data discussed in this paper form part of a larger longitudinal study which primarily investigated written teacher feedback, but also examined how such written teacher feedback interacted with other aspects of the context, including other forms of feedback such as teacher oral feedback in writing conferences and peer feedback. I collected data from a full-time English proficiency programme course (EPP) running for 14 weeks at a university in New Zealand, preparing ESL students for university study. The study focused on one class preparing students for undergraduate courses and one class preparing them for postgraduate studies. Two teachers working on the EPP took part in the study. Both these teachers had wide experience of teaching these courses and both had an interest in writing and teaching writing. Joan taught the undergraduate class, which will be referred to as class A, and Nadia taught the postgraduate class, which will be referred to as class B. Six ESL students (three from each class) participated in the case study part of the research. These included students of varying levels of proficiency, from a variety of cultural backgrounds (*see* Table 1).

Table 1 Background information on case-study students

Student	Age	Nationality	Education level	Proficiency level
Maho (undergraduate class)	19	Japanese	High school	Low intermediate
Seng Hee (undergraduate class)	20	Korean	High school	Intermediate
Keith (undergraduate class)	26	Taiwanese	High school	Intermediate
Samorn (postgraduate class)	30+	Thai	BA	High intermediate/ advanced
Liang (postgraduate class)	30+	Taiwanese	BA	High intermediate
Zhang Yue (postgraduate class)	27+	Chinese	BA	Advanced

2 Data collection

Data were collected throughout the three-month course. Data collection included questionnaires and interviews, teacher think-aloud protocols and classroom observations. Written data consisted of all the writing carried out by the case study students during the course, including drafts and revised versions of written assignments, together with teacher and peer written feedback. All the writing tasks and feedback offered were generated by the course and no interventions were made.

Both classes had two hours a week of writing workshops, when the students worked on their writing, consulting their classmates or their teachers when necessary. Observations were made during these writing workshops, to obtain information about the context and the role of peer feedback and oral teacher feedback. As I had taught on a similar EPP course the previous semester, I also brought insider knowledge of this teaching situation to the observer's role. A respondent validation procedure helped to make records of observations more accurate and complete. The notes on observations in class were passed to the teacher concerned, who was then asked to add any extra details that she felt were relevant and write notes on any point which she felt had been misinterpreted or misrepresented. This gave the teachers access to

what was being written about them and gave them the opportunity to add any extra information.

A questionnaire investigating student perceptions of the purpose and value of feedback was administered to students in both class A and class B both at the beginning and end of the course. The questionnaire included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions and focused on student attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and attributes. Students were asked about their previous experiences of feedback, their feedback preferences and their beliefs about the helpfulness of various forms of feedback. They were also asked to report on the actions they took in response to feedback. Questions on both teacher and peer feedback were included.

Two interviews with each student were carried out at the beginning and end of the course. These used a series of interview prompts, but if the students raised other issues during the interviews, these were also pursued. The interviews provided information on students' beliefs and expectations about feedback at the start of this course and showed how these changed over the period of the course.

Interviews with the teachers on their feedback practices and teaching strategies were also carried out. In addition, they conducted think-aloud protocols as they gave written feedback to the draft of one piece of writing for each case study subject. They were asked to select an assignment where they would be giving feedback on a draft and expecting a revised version of the writing as part of their normal writing programme. Specific instructions were then given asking the teachers to try to say aloud everything they were thinking as they responded to the essay. A retrospective interview was also conducted with the students within a day of their revising this draft, to investigate their responses to the written feedback and their individual revision strategies. Using a series of oral prompts, students were asked to explain how they revised, the reasons for their revisions and their reactions to, and interpretations of the actual comments and corrections on their papers. They were also asked to evaluate the success of their revisions.

Teachers and students were given pseudonyms, and feedback and debriefing procedures were put into place, so that everything written about the class settings and feedback procedures could be

read and commented on by the teachers before publication. Cohen and Manion (1994) discuss the need for regular checking and negotiation of findings during both the data collection and the writing up of the research. The teachers were kept fully informed on the procedures, aims and progress of the research, and findings related to their classes were made available to them for discussion before publication.

3 Data analysis

An analysis of both the written feedback offered to the case-study subjects and their subsequent revisions was carried out. Each written intervention was considered as a separate 'feedback point', and was analysed from the following perspectives: its purpose, whether it commented on process or product, its focus, the degree of intervention that it represented, its position in the student text and the span of text it covered. Revisions carried out to drafts were also identified and categorized, according to the following criteria: their focus, level, span, the effect of the revision on text improvement and the extent of the use made of written teacher feedback. The revisions and the written teacher feedback were then compared and cross-referenced to investigate how written teacher feedback triggered revision and at what level. This analysis is discussed in more detail in Hyland (1998).

In addition, the field notes made during the workshops were examined to trace the relationship between oral and written feedback. The interactions in the workshops were classified into a number of categories: teacher to whole class, class discussion, group discussion and individual interactions. The individual interactions were then examined to see whether they involved student/student or student/teacher. This gave a fuller picture of the nature of response in the workshops, including information on the amount of peer interaction and the degree to which oral feedback from the teacher or peers was actively sought by the students.

IV Findings

1 *The role of peer feedback*

Peer feedback sheets are a common practice in the ESL classroom. Teachers employ them as they believe they help to guide the students and help them to focus on appropriate aspects of the text. However, they have been criticized for turning the peer review exercise into ‘a kind of conspiracy geared less toward communicating peer to peer than pleasing a teacher’ (Dipardo and Freedman, 1988: 144). Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) also suggest that if the focus of the peer feedback is dictated by the teacher, this makes it more mechanical and less interesting for the students.

Peer feedback sheets were used by both classes in this study, but to varying degrees. Joan was ambivalent about the usefulness of peer feedback, seeing it as a low priority and therefore class A only used peer feedback sheets once. On the other hand, class B completed them for all the writing they did. Nadia also asked students to include their peer feedback sheets when handing in their drafts and often referred to the comments on them when giving her own written feedback. However, the questionnaire revealed that this had a negative rather than positive effect, since attitudes towards the helpfulness of peer feedback in class A became more positive, while in class B attitudes generally became more negative. In class A, at the beginning of the course, only one student rated peer feedback as very helpful, while at the end of the course, four ranked it as very helpful. In class B three students initially thought that it would be very helpful, but at the end of the course only one ranked it as very helpful (*see* Table 2).

Data from the observations and interviews as well as the questionnaires suggested that students did not take much interest

Table 2 Student attitudes towards the helpfulness of peer feedback for both classes (end-of-course figures in brackets)

Helpfulness of peer feedback	Class A	Class B
Very helpful	1 (4)	3 (1)
Helpful	4 (3)	4 (2)
Sometimes helpful	6 (4)	6 (9)
Not helpful at all	1 (1)	0 (1)
<i>Total</i>	12 (12)	13 (13)

in filling the peer response sheets in. In class B one case-study subject, Liang suggested that most students only did them because they had to. Liang found that her classmates didn't answer all the questions and did not attempt to say what the strengths and weaknesses of the essay were, or to tell her which paragraphs were not clear:

- Interviewer Did you make any use of your peer feedback?
 Liang Oh this one nothing special. [Laughs] Yeah.
 Interviewer Because they've really said?
 Liang Yes, yes, yes. [Laughs]
 Interviewer [Reading] 'All are good.'

(Retrospective interview)

Under all the headings in the peer response sheet Liang's peer had simply written 'yes' and ignored the blank lines left for further comments. For example: 'Does the essay have a clear introduction? – Yes.' Liang felt that this type of feedback was of little help. However, she felt that peer consultations and support during the writing process might be more useful:

I think that peer feedback is yeah. Um maybe *before* the first draft I get some ideas I can talk with the other classmates, talk about the ideas. Maybe they have more ideas than me.

(Retrospective interview)

When giving peer feedback, Liang tried to make it the kind of constructive feedback she would have liked to receive herself. She tried to give more detailed comments and tell her classmates when she found their writing hard to understand. She said she was 'happy to do that, but it depends on if the other people accept or not', suggesting that she was aware of the cultural problems involved in critically examining a peer's work. Other case-study students also felt that there were cultural problems to giving negative feedback. Zhang, another student in class B, who actively sought peer feedback on his oral presentation, was disappointed by the response:

I just given a presentation and just now I asked Chan for some comments for my presentation. Well, he said 'oh it's all right'. Nothing important, nothing useful. Maybe he didn't like to comment. Especially for Chinese, for Chinese people you know, they seldom comment on some other people's work. . . . I think it's not good. I want to know more about how I done.

To counter this problem, another student, Samorn, in her retrospective interview, described how she had written a comment on her peer feedback sheet before handing it to her peer responder, to relax her and make her feel at ease with the role of critic:

[Reading her own comments on peer cover sheet] ‘Nothing, I am pleased with nothing.’ [Laughs] I wrote this because I want my friend to feel comfortable to write every comment that she think that I have a weak point.

Originally one intention of this study was to examine the written peer feedback in conjunction with the written teacher feedback to see if the two sources were focusing on similar aspects and to compare the effects they had on student writing. However, it soon became clear that the focus of the written peer response was largely teacher selected. Student comments in interviews and on their questionnaires showed that they felt that it was an obligation and took very little trouble over it. In many cases the written peer feedback was also so neutral and non-specific that it was impossible to link it to any revisions. Overall, then, the formal written peer feedback appeared to play a marginal role in these two classes.

2 Emergence of a peer support mechanism

Dipardo and Freedman (1988) suggest that encouraging spontaneous peer talk during the writing process is a better strategy than using formalized peer feedback sheets, and in fact the observations in the writing workshops suggested that such peer talk had an important role to play. The students encouraged, supported and helped each other, without providing specific comments on writing products. The atmosphere in the workshops came across very clearly as ‘a community of status equals’ (Bruffee, 1984: 642), as the following evidence from observation notes in both classes will show. Most of these interactions did not involve audience response to completed drafts. Instead, the students turned to one another for support during the writing process:

Keith turns to Jun and sighs and says ‘big problem’. Jun asks him what the problem is. Keith says ‘Too much errors’. Jun asks ‘Grammar?’ and Keith replies ‘Yes grammar’. They look at Keith’s essay together.

(Class A)

Meeta gets up and goes over to Jan. There is no spare seat so she sits on Jan's lap and they read Jan's essay aloud together. Every few sentences, they pause and talk in Thai. English sentences from the essay are mixed into the conversation.

(Class B)

Students also sometimes used their peers for help with understanding task requirements:

Four students are discussing what they have to do. Keith explains to the others 'You see this is my first draft, yesterday I checked my essay, now I will change some ideas and write my second draft.' Abdul nods. They continue to discuss the task requirements. Keith says that there are three types of writing they can do in this course and in the writing workshop, journal writing, theme writing and assignments. The other three students listen carefully and nod.

(Class A)

They asked other students for help with language and vocabulary problems:

Samorn checks her sentence with Mei Ling. 'So research shows that food colouring provoke an allergy?' Mei Ling says 'induce'. Samorn queries this. 'Induce an allergy?' Mei Ling says 'yes'. Lyn joins in. 'What is the difference between provoke and induce? Do they mean the same thing?' Mei Ling says that provoke means put forward and induce means cause.

(Class B)

Other peer interactions gave information on issues of genre and academic conventions. These could be specific points or might deal with more general ideas:

Kimiko asks about using the phrase 'in my opinion' in an academic essay. Van tells her 'That's OK.'

(Class A)

Van and Grace are discussing the need to be specific in writing. Grace is not sure what this means and Van explains it using the example of what he wants to learn on this course, in general and specific terms.

(Class B)

These interactions illustrate the presence of a peer support mechanism functioning in the writing workshop, without the control or direction of the teacher. By contrast, in terms of the formal feedback sessions, when providing written guidelines for the

students to follow while they gave feedback, the teacher effectively 'took over' the peer feedback, so that the focus was teacher directed. At this point, the peer response became just another class task and lost its meaning for many of the students as a communicative event. Students responded better when they were not directed and could make decisions about the focus and timing of the feedback themselves.

If the peer feedback was sometimes overcontrolled by the teacher, how much autonomy were students granted in making decisions about the use of feedback generally? Two of the case study students showed a great deal of independence regarding decisions on feedback use. One case involved choice regarding the source and use of peer feedback and the other involved the way that feedback from the teacher was integrated into the student's learning process. In both these cases, the students' decisions led to a conflict with the teacher, with the teacher wanting more control of the feedback situation. These two situations will now be examined in some detail to illustrate the complexity of the feedback situation in terms of the issues of student autonomy and teacher control.

3 Controlling the feedback process: Liang and Nadia

One important point about peer feedback is that it is not necessarily confined to the classroom. In both classes examined in this study students reported independently seeking the advice and guidance of others *outside* the classroom. Two students, Liang and Keith, reported using their spouses (both L2 speakers), while two others, reported using flatmates or other ESL students. Another student also showed her writing to a native speaker student, her boyfriend. These peer responders were selected by the students because they were at a higher level of proficiency. However, in terms of status they were equal and close and therefore the relationship was a relaxed and friendly one in which constructive criticism could be freely given, and feedback and correction could be supplemented by detailed discussion.

Liang was a mature student in class B (*see* Table 1). She was from Taiwan and had considerable work experience as a librarian. Her husband was an academic in Taiwan, whose English language

skills were much better than hers. In her retrospective interview Liang described how she made use of her husband to help her with her drafts. She gave each draft to her husband to look at and he corrected the grammar and also gave her some suggestions about the comprehensibility of her writing:

I think the most important feedback from my husband is when I hand him the essay and ask him to correct that, also to correct grammar and vocabulary. But I think the more important thing he can tell me which paragraph he don't understand what I mean, what I'm talking about. He always ask me 'Why you say that? I don't understand what you speaking or why you use this sentence, can not understand the meaning.' So when he asks the question I will think about what can I make it clear?

Nadia became suspicious of the very accurate language of Liang's writing and asked her on her draft of her first assignment: 'Did you get some help with the editing?' After discussing Liang's use of her husband, she asked her to submit drafts without consulting him in the future. Liang completely disagreed with this and used her writing journal as a means of communicating her disagreement:

I got the long essay yesterday. There were some mistakes and some sentences were not clear. I didn't ask my husband to revise the first draft, so there were lots of grammar mistakes. When I finish an essay, I usually give it to my husband. My husband corrects my mistakes and points out which sentence is not clear. I think it is good for me to learn how to write a correct essay. Sometimes I have good ideas, but I can not explain very well in English. My husband can give me advices to improve my writing. I always discuss some sentences with my husband and he teaches me grammar. In this way, I think I can improve my English ability. I like this kind of feedback. I can have more ideas about my essay during the discussion.

(Journal entry)

Nadia responded to this extract with the following comment: 'This is true – specially when you do university assignments next year. But now in terms of English learning, sometimes it's more important to try and learn from your own mistakes and self correct.'

Liang was not a confrontational student and therefore she followed Nadia's instructions. In her first interview she expressed the opinion that 'the teacher always is right'. However, remarks made off-tape after her final interview suggest that she did not

agree that it was a better way to learn and this may have affected the student/teacher relationship.

One interesting aspect of this dialogue is the separation that Nadia made between writing as an English learner and writing in an academic environment. She suggested that when Liang was actually working in the academic context, all the resources she had (including her husband) would be legitimate tools for the completion of academic tasks. However, at the present she gave priority to her situation as a second language learner. Liang was more focused on her future situation as an MA student and this may have contributed to this conflict.

The analysis of the teacher feedback and student revisions indicates that Nadia was quite right in assuming that Liang's very accurate drafts were 'cleaned up' by her husband. In her later drafts (after she had been asked not to use her husband's feedback) there were more revisions overall. For example, in her first assignment she made 42 revisions, 29 of which could be linked to written teacher feedback. In her later assignment she made 109 revisions, of which 55 could be linked to written teacher feedback.

The analysis of the span of revisions on her two major assignments is shown in Table 3. On her second assignment (2BA2) there was a greater percentage of word-level revisions. Many of these were surface-level revisions concerning formal language features. In the first major assignment there were a total of 27 surface-level revisions, whereas on the second assignment (of similar length), there were 103 such changes. Many of these revisions dealing with language accuracy might also have been needed in the first assignment. However, if as Nadia suspected, Liang was using her husband mainly as a proofreader, these would already have been corrected before the draft reached the teacher and would not have shown on the analysis.

Table 3 Span of text covered by Liang's revisions in percentages (for each assignment)

Assign	Global	Multi-sentence	Sentence	Clause	Phrase	Word	Graphic	Total
2BA1	0 (0)	14 (15)	21 (8)	7 (8)	27 (8)	24 (46)	7 (15)	100%
2BA2	0 (0)	0 (2)	16 (15)	5 (12)	18 (25)	60 (48)	1 (0)	100%

This episode illustrates the kind of difficulties that teachers and students face in the feedback situation. In this case, Nadia felt that Liang was misusing peer feedback by an overreliance on her husband's help. Liang believed that this was not the case, that her husband's help was strongly developmental and beneficial to her as a writer. Her own feelings were that her husband was improving her writing process, her grammar, and her revision strategies. For Liang, the interaction with her husband was a 'collaborative endeavour' (Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994: 480). Liang viewed her drafts as part of the writing process, but Nadia saw them as products, whose ownership had to be confined to the student writer. Liang could not see why it was unacceptable for her husband to give her the same kind of feedback as her teacher gave her, but with more opportunities for relaxed face-to-face interaction. Her stance is supported by Vygotskian theory which suggests that communicative collaboration with more skilled peers can lead to the development of the ability to solve problems independently (De Guerrero and Villamil, 1994).

More communication and discussion on this issue was obviously needed, but because Liang was reluctant to openly oppose her teacher, this did not take place. Nadia did not feel that there was a problem, but Liang felt cheated of an important learning resource. In this case freedom for deciding on the appropriate source of feedback was removed from the student. This resulted in some resentment and remained an unresolved issue to the end of the course.

4 Taking risks and playing safe: Keith and Joan

Another conflict regarding the use of feedback was noted in class A between Keith, a 21-year-old student from Taiwan (see Table 1), and his teacher, Joan. Keith was an active and enthusiastic language learner who was deeply concerned with the creative aspects of writing. He strongly believed in the potential of feedback to help him develop his writing abilities and was determined to use all the feedback he received. This resulted in a misunderstanding, where Keith was trying to expand both his linguistic knowledge and his writing through experimentation with

new vocabulary and phrases, whilst Joan was urging him to be more restrictive.

Keith gave vocabulary development as one of his main aims on this course, and feedback on vocabulary issues was consistently given throughout the course by Joan, who focused on Keith's inappropriate and inaccurate lexical choices in nearly every piece of writing he did, underlining problem words and highlighting this area in her summary comments:

Some words are remembered wrongly (e.g., authority? advantly?)

You need to be more careful when you introduce new words.

You sometimes try to use idiomatic phrases, but not correctly. Do you check these in a monolingual dictionary before using them? My advice would be to check their use or avoid using them. They can make it hard to understand.

You have made good attempts to use new vocabulary, but you need to be more careful with this.

You really need to check the meaning of words (especially uncommon words) that you are using. Do you use a bilingual dictionary? This can often lead to the selection of inappropriate words.

Try to express yourself with simpler words unless you have time to check usage of more difficult words.

It may have seemed as if Keith was deliberately ignoring this feedback, since he persisted in using complex and often inappropriate vocabulary throughout this course. However, the retrospective interview suggested that Keith was aware of his vocabulary problems, but continued to use complex vocabulary, because this was one of his own learning strategies. He saw the draft as an ideal place to test out his knowledge of new structures and words, knowing that he would receive feedback which would show him whether he could use the new forms.

In this course, I am concentrated to the vocabulary and newspaper read. So I try to use the new vocabulary. Maybe sometimes I will make mistakes with wrong way, but I think that's OK because mistake is necessary.

Keith explained this strategy in some detail in an essay on language-learning strategies.

Thirdly I will launch more opportunities to practice what I've inputted. As it turned out that more practice will seize what you've learnt impressively. Fourthly, feedback is another significant process, even though mistakes are inevitable, I still go through the feedback to shape up a correct skeleton and

help me to center on the focuses which the weaknesses exist in my learning strategies.

Joan was aware of this strategy of Keith's, as these extracts from her protocol responding to the draft of his first major assignment show:

'To induce' – he tries to use a word he studied but not quite correctly – *induce someone to do something*.

'We can manifestly perceive' – oh – he's trying to use that word – ... manifestly perceive – *good try but not appropriate* – we can clearly perceive.

'On the contrary' – hmm, that's not a good use of that – difficult to use that phrase as I said in class.

(Teacher protocol 3A)

Joan and Keith appear to have focused on different objectives. Keith was developmental in his focus, happy to try out new vocabulary, feeling comfortable with making mistakes, since he wanted to test his knowledge and believed that the process of making mistakes and receiving feedback would alert him to any problems and help him to learn correct usage:

Interviewer	[reading] 'We can manifestly perceive'
Keith	Obviously perceive.
Interviewer	So why did you use manifestly?
Keith	Just try to use.
Interviewer	So what did you do when she underlined manifestly?
Keith	Maybe wrong way.
Interviewer	How did you change it?
Keith	Check this word in dictionary.

(Retrospective interview)

I heard a sentence from radio and then I used it in my conversation immediately. ... Making mistakes is helpful for you to learn a language.

(Extract from first essay)

Joan, however, had quite a different focus. She was plainly disturbed by the effect of Keith's inaccurate language on the comprehensibility of his message and so sent him signals through her feedback to restrict his vocabulary use to words he already knew, or check vocabulary more thoroughly before submitting writing to her. Her focus was on the immediate product, while Keith's was on his whole language-learning process. The draft for

him was an opportunity to learn through experimentation and feedback.

In his essay on language learning, Keith stressed that the most important factors in language learning were to be active and to be an extrovert. He put this philosophy into practice in his writing, by not being afraid to take risks and make mistakes. He used the feedback he got on wrong usage and wrote correct sentences in his practice book and he felt that he was showing development in this area, even if his drafts did not show this. Joan however interpreted this as carelessness. From her point of view, Keith was taking too many risks and his writing was suffering because of this. From Keith's point of view, he was extending his learning through use and feedback would help him to see how successful this was.

V Conclusions and implications for teachers

The two cases discussed above highlight the need for teachers and students to communicate on a one to one basis, not just about texts and writing problems, but also about approaches to writing and learning and feedback strategies. Clear and full communication is an essential ingredient for effective feedback. Liang and Keith and their teachers may not have communicated adequately over the issue of feedback. Liang felt frustrated at having her decisions about the nature of feedback she sought overridden by Nadia. Joan and Keith focused on different objectives; Joan on correctness and comprehensibility and Keith on the development and extension of his writing skills through experimentation. Both teachers and students had good reasons for their stances, but because these stances were implicit rather than explicit, they were not fully understood by the two parties involved.

The teachers tended to view student use of feedback as a fairly passive process, focusing on the immediate products. They treated the drafts they dealt with as finished pieces, and although their protocols showed some awareness of individual students and their specific problems, there was a tendency for them to focus on 'fixing up' the texts in front of them when giving feedback. On a number of occasions, both in her interview and in her instructions to students, Nadia suggested that she wanted the students to use her written feedback to 'fix up' their mistakes. Joan doubted that

feedback on grammar could be ‘incremental’, i.e. could be passed on to future pieces of writing.

The student views were more developmental and more focused on the whole process of learning to write than those of the teachers. From the student perspective, feedback on grammar was not a simple question of error correction or proofreading, it also had potential for enhancing their learning. Teachers may sometimes need to remind themselves that drafts are developmental and do not represent a finished product, but are a part of the writing process. Teachers sometimes accuse L2 students of having limited ideas on what revision is all about, but these episodes do not support this, and suggest that this view does not give students enough credit for initiative and active participation in their development. Future research could investigate this mismatch between student and teacher views of feedback’s potential for development.

The place of written peer feedback in this study was marginal and students did not appear to benefit much from their peers’ formal written responses. The imposition of a teacher focus on the peer feedback had a negative effect in terms of the commitment shown by the responders and in terms of the value placed on the response by the writers.

The student attitudes to the teacher-directed peer feedback contrasted quite clearly with their attitudes to the informal peer response situations in the workshops, where they were in control. The observations of the writing workshops, responses given in the questionnaires, and the discussions in the interviews showed that the students valued the presence of their peers in the workshops for the support they provided at various stages of the writing process, in an informal manner. Teachers conscientiously devise structured peer feedback sheets, but may be unaware of their possible negative effects. They can take away the spontaneity from the response situation and may be viewed by the responders as just another worksheet to fill in. Teachers should look closely at their peer response sheets and also at the comments that students in their classes write on them to determine whether they have real value for the writers. In some circumstances, they may also like to consider relinquishing control of the peer response, so that it becomes truly an alternative form of feedback, although they

should consider the cultural and educational backgrounds of the students carefully before doing this since students from some cultures might prefer closer teacher guidance.

The students in this study also pointed out that cultural factors made them feel uncomfortable with the peer response situation and discouraged them from being critical of each others' work. As we have seen, the case-study students independently found responders outside the classroom to give them feedback. Characteristically these peers were close friends or spouses. The interactions were therefore more frank and relaxed and could be controlled more by the students themselves, with the writers and responders often sharing the same cultural expectations. The value that the students placed on these responders, illustrated by the case of Liang and her husband, contrasted with their negative attitudes to the formal peer response. Teachers might think about the potential benefits of such responders and encourage greater use of these out of class resources, where they were available. Researchers could also consider further investigations of the role of such outside responders.

This study suggests that teacher interventions are made within the classroom context where the relationships between teachers and students are both complex and unequal in terms of power. The two episodes illustrate Hall's point that appropriation can involve both concepts of good and bad writing products and good and bad writing behaviour (1995: 162). These students were at a crucial stage in their development since, after this course, they would be expected to take full responsibility for their own writing and to revise it on their own, using their own strategies. Teachers should consider ways of helping students to do this and try not to control the feedback process too rigidly.

VI References

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