Chapter 13
Don’t Get It Right, Just Get It Written: Making Feedback Work

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ABSTRACT

Writing is an essential skill for students, as it helps them meet persistently changing social and academic demands. They are often evaluated based on written assignments, reports, term papers, and essays. For second and foreign language learners, mastering writing is a very challenging task. Therefore, many of them find it the most difficult of the four skills. To encourage students to develop this crucial skill and consolidate their learning, providing them with clear feedback is essential. Most ESL and EFL teachers perceive feedback as paramount for students’ improvement in this vital skill. However, providing effective feedback is a complex process, as many factors and issues have to be considered. This chapter deals with feedback from different angles. The aim is to demonstrate to teachers the most effective ways and alternatives of giving feedback with the aim of guiding them to choose what works best for their students under various circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

All aspects of modern life, such as government, education, industry, commerce and healthcare, depend not only on oral interaction but also on written communication. Regarding this, Geremew (1999) points out that one has to write in order to meet persistently changing social demands and pursue personal interests. Similarly, Guth (1989) emphasizes that students are judged mainly by their ability to put ideas down on paper. At all levels they have to write notes, assignments, term papers, reports and essays, and hence must develop their writing skills in the instructional language. Jordan (1997) supports this view, contending that writing skills are a prerequisite for academic writing and for university study in general.

Learning to write coherently, in a way appropriate for one’s purpose and audience, is something that many students never achieve in their first language. The process, then, is even more difficult in a second language. However, the writing skill at
every level - school, college and university - is low and declining and this has become an increasingly popular topic in recent years, the reasons suggested being many and varied. Little wonder, then, that writing in a second or a foreign language is one of the most difficult skills and ineffectively dealt with in the classroom (Al Noursi, 1996).

Educationalists see feedback to students on their written assignments as critical for both encouraging and consolidating learning, a view recognized in the area of second language writing. Hence, feedback is a fundamental component of second language writing programs around the world, with product, process and genre approaches all employing it as a central part of their repertoires (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b).

Teachers certainly see response to their students’ written work as an integral and significant part of their job. It is of paramount importance, they feel, to give students meaningful feedback on their essays, reports, letters, and other guided writing genres. Students need to be corrected as part of the learning experience and receive feedback that assesses their performance against clear criteria and offers suggestions for improvement. Teachers like myself devote much time and energy to providing students with feedback. And, as Ferris (2003a) suggests, giving feedback may well represent the largest investment of time we make as writing instructors. However, it is not enough to identify the problem. We must show students how their mistakes affect their performance and suggest ways for improvement. Correction is often mixed in with marking. It needs to happen and is expected and desired by students (Hyland, 1998).

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN ESL/EFL WRITING

Responding to students’ written work is a means of assisting them to write better, develop useful revision strategies, nurture confidence and think more systematically. Teachers comments are essential if not indispensable for students revising and rewriting their compositions. The role of feedback in formative assessment has been reported as very positive for improving the quality and quantity of learners’ written work, especially if given while students are in the process of writing drafts.

Tummons (2005) lists a set of feedback’s benefits. It helps:

- To facilitate learning
- To see whether learning has taken place
- To provide comment for students concerning their progress, clarifying what they need to do to improve, extend or enhance learning
- To diagnose students’ needs or barriers to learning and to inform necessary changes to the curriculum (pp. 34-5).

Knight and Yorke (2003) add to the list, saying that feedback also helps “to encourage emancipation by alerting the student to possibilities which they may not have hitherto discerned ... and to move the student into richer intellectual territory” (p. 35-36).

Another valuable impact of effective feedback is its ability to promote learner autonomy. Students tend to become self-regulated learners when they are provided with detailed feedback on performance as well as guidance for future improvement. Feedback which specifically identifies weaknesses in student writing, such as structural and language issues, and then offers guidance in addressing them, can equip the student to proofread and self-correct in the future (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Even better, self-regulated learners are often more successful learners, being more resourceful, tenacious and confident.

In addition to improving learners’ autonomy, feedback raises students’ awareness of the informational, rhetorical and linguistic expectations of the reader (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996). As Williams (2005) suggests, feedback in writing can stimulate explicit knowledge in student