

Feedback (and forth) in a university English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class

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Abstract: This paper describes a small action research project – an instructional change – related to providing university ESL students with feedback on their written work. The intent was to make the feedback more interactive, more dialogic, and involved providing readings oriented towards student agency as well as a protocol that students were asked to follow which mediated the nature and quantity of the feedback I provided.

Keywords: academic writing; feedback; dialogic; EAP; mediation

1 Introduction

The prompt for the study was the desire on my part to engage more interactively in the feedback process with undergraduate students who are learning to write academically. I take seriously what Markee (2004) has referred to as ‘zones of interactional transition’; what O’Donnell (2013) calls ‘the pedagogical encounter’; Tharp and Gallimore (1988) the ‘instructional conversation, and what others have called ‘the contact zone’ (cf Doherty and Mayer, 2003; Pratt, 1991). I am referring to those potentially transformational moments when an instructor interacts directly with a student. How can I make the most of that encounter?

Evaluating a student’s work is an intimate act (Lerner, 2005) — leaving a mark not only on the person’s artifact but also on the writer herself. Whether the student attends to the written feedback or tosses the paper, the evaluation has had *some* effect, cognitive and affective. Here I provide the details of a small action research project—a curricular effort, really—that I conducted with a recent class of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students. This project did provoke *and continues to provoke* my efforts to introduce change into my own feedback practice—with the development of my students in mind.

2 Terms

A note on terms: *Corrective* feedback has always had a punitive ring to it (for me) and conflicts somewhat with my leaning towards the principles of hybrid voices and intercultural rhetoric (Steinman, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009). *Suggestive* feedback might describe more closely what I intend my practice to be. That is, I try to make distinct what is actually incorrect and leads to confusion or lack of comprehension, and what might be simply a different way of making or supporting a point. The student then determines what to make of the feedback. So I am trying to think about *dialogic* feedback rather than corrective feedback.

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3 Context and participants

My context for this present study is a university credit ESL/EAP class. All the students have ESL backgrounds and most are beyond first year and are in a wide range of faculties and programs across the university. They self-select into this course. The course runs a full year and is offered in a fully face to face format. Electronic communication occurs only on listserv posts and e-mails, as needed. The twenty students represent fifteen different first languages (L1's)—almost a record in my classes. Their diverse L1's, the range of programs, and the differences in ages and stages (ages ranging from 18 to 50, stages ranging from first year to several who have degrees from other countries) make it even more likely that their approaches to writing, to academic writing, and then to academic writing in English will be equally diverse.

4 Past practice

In my long career as an ESL teacher, my marking strategies have varied but generally fell on the side of global correction—direct correction with efforts to balance 50/50 between content and form. Sometimes I used a rubric that made evident to the student (and to me) how the mark was reached; other times not. Sometimes I provided opportunities (and extra marks) for revisions; other times, and most often times, not. We forged ahead with an array of writing genres—no time for revisiting. My hopes were, I think, that students would transfer what they noticed from one assignment to the next assignment. The times I did require revisions incorporating the feedback I provided, the results seemed like a rote exercise with little energy or will on the part of the students. They were not particularly interested in building on their previous work. It seemed as though they were channeling the ancient mariner:

I take the hint from the ancient mariner who told his tale in order to be rid of it. I too will tell my tale for once and never hark back ever more. I will write a bold "Finis" at the end, and shut the book with a bang!" (Antin, 1912, Introduction)

5 New practice

The nature and intention of the course kit that I assembled for the class I am discussing today required me to adapt my feedback. Everything about the course was dialogic—all readings related quite closely to students' lives as bi-and multilingual university students—lives past, lives present, lives future; and, whenever possible, students were afforded maximum agency and input. They were to be the knowers as often as I was. All readings deal with language and languages. Examples include several academic articles you may recognize: written about university ESL students by Leki (1992), by Morell (2007), by Zappa-Hollman (2007), by Lu (2011); newspaper articles on language such as Semeniuk's piece on Bilingualism (2013); poetry about language such as "Marsh Languages" by Margaret Atwood (1995), and language memoirs like Bharati Mukherjee's (2004). We listened to TED talks about the linguistic genius of babies (Kuhl, 2010) and read magazine articles about out of the box teaching methodologies such as "Crazy English" by Evan Osnos in the *New Yorker* magazine.

The course readings included multiple genres and content all relevant to the lives and times of students who are learning and writing in a language other than their mother tongue. Following this intent, the oral presentation topic for the first semester was to

relate a critical language learning (literacy incident) that mediated (as an affordance or as a constraint) their acquiring of one of their languages. Students were asked to make some connections to one or several of the course readings. The second semester oral presentation was a contrastive analysis between their first language and English, a topic in which, supremely, they are the genuine knowers/experts.

Making thinking evident and trying to foster dialogic feedback and forth was attempted in several ways. There was group focus on frequent errors from each particular assignment. On slides, I present errors or ambiguities from the papers students wrote that week and together we determine how the sentence, the phrase or the general point might be improved. This has always engaged students because the models are authentic and the route to the improved version takes an inductive and in my view more retentive and attentive route. If a similar error comes up in the next assignment (obviously in a different context/sentence/essay) we revisit the original slide and link it so students can see that this issue has already been discussed and they can add this second layer of confirmation.

This practice makes thinking public (student thinking and teacher thinking) and makes writing public. It opens the discussion to all students working towards perhaps a group zone of proximal development (ZPD). I was inspired by the Zimmerman and Kitsantas article (2002) which examined modeling and its effect on writers.

But this is post evaluation and I was still concerned with making the marking-on-paper action more *interaction*. That is, my desire was to move from student action followed by teacher action into dialogic [\leftrightarrow] interaction. To continue this space for voice and agency, I examined the literature on feedback to see how I could make room for collaboration of some sort with the students on their writing. Since everyone is present for the in-class writing and all is fresh in their minds as they write, and there *is* energy about the writing at that moment—that is, momentum, investment, online processing—I designed two assignments during which time was allotted for reviewing their work and making evident to me what parts they had concerns about.

Secondly, as part of the writing assignment, students were asked, before handing in their work, to indicate those parts they felt particularly unsure of (underline once). As always, I provided feedback, but this time it was *minimal feedback* (Haswell, 1983) based in part on concerns expressed by students as they wrote. (Please see Figure 1 below.) The encounter, the zone, was extended by one or two interactions (at a meta-level) when compared to my previous practice. I responded to their concerns and often there was a further response by the student. The feedback became more dialogic, dynamic, emergent, and particular to the student's claimed needs rather than her assumed (by me) needs. Engaging in this dialogue (while writing and then responding to feedback) comprised part of the student's grade.

6 Student reaction

Students were engaged in the process. Because I handed out sheets when there were twenty minutes left in the writing and told them to complete the sheets worth five marks, students got better at timing themselves. In order to complete the worksheet, they had to review their essays for which they most often do not leave time. Even if they had not had the *form* to fill out, this forced review time would have been valuable. Underlining the parts they were unsure of- indicating the nature of their concern if they could.

slide in the next class to see if the others could determine what the problem was, what they would call it, and how they would correct it. This was fun and I called the exercise “Oops”. Oops became the subject line of many messages and it was a way to engage in some one-to-one dialogue albeit electronic with each student.

9 My response

Herein I have described a small change that seemed to improve the tenor of the class and the nature of my interactions with students. I will definitely engage in this activity again. This small study is informed by Vygotskian sociocultural theory—primarily the concepts of: self-regulation (I hoped students would engage in this way with their writing beyond my class); zone of proximal development (an interaction that was better calibrated by the students posing their questions and underlining concerns); and mediation (the forms mediated my marking and their learning).

10 Teacher essay

This article seems to have morphed more of a *teacher essay*—what Sharkey (2004) referred to as *conceptual teacher research*. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) refer to teachers reflecting on their experience to construct an argument about teaching learning and schooling. It is personal and retrospective; it selects and analyzes events from an ongoing stream of classroom life; it locates a single teacher’s experience in relationship to the teacher’s own practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993, p. 36).

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