

Effectiveness of Conference Feedback on College Students' Composition in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Context

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Abstract

This article examines the negotiation teacher-student feedback conferences in a college writing course. The conferences were held in groups with one teacher and six participants who agreed to take part in this study. The study includes the right for the teacher to offer advice and to criticize, which is often considered to be threatening in more normal contexts. However, as the data analysis shows, participants also interact in ways that challenge the common norms, some of which might be considered more conventionally attacking. The article argues that conference feedback should be analyzed at the level of interaction (Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2010) and that situated and contextual detail is relevant to its analysis. The study suggests that teachers' in a second language writing classroom should provide conference feedback so that student understand what the teachers' expect of them and, provides a useful theoretical framework for doing so. The conclusion of the study draws on real-life talk-in-interaction (from transcribed recordings), the participants' perspectives (from focus groups and interviews) and situated detail (from field-notes) to produce a contextualized and nuanced analysis.

Keywords: Feedback, Education, Teaching Methodology

1. Introduction

It can be pointed out that providing written feedback to students is one of the English as Second Language (ESL) writing teacher's most important tasks, offering the kind of individualized attention that is otherwise rarely possible under normal classroom conditions (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). However, while generally acknowledged as pedagogically useful (e.g., Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994), the role of written feedback has largely been seen as informational, a means of channeling reactions and advice to facilitate improvements.

At present, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the importance conference feedback. In the conference feedback, students have something to tell and teach the instructor about both their knowledge and writing style. Therefore, it is important and necessary to conduct conference feedback. More importantly, the central issue is using conferences to help students to realize their potential. Thus, it is important to have students not only acquire knowledge related to content matter, but at the same time gain a sense of confidence in them.

On the contrary, Atwell (1988, 1998), Calkins (1986), Murray (1979), Newkirk (1989), Sperling (1994), and Patthey-Chavez & Ferris (1997) argued that most teachers do not regularly include conferencing as an instructional format in the classroom. There are several reasons for this. First, testing writing is a priority. Second, teachers feel that they do not have enough time because they have many other subjects to cover. Third, they do not see the value and necessity of writing conferences in their curriculum. Fourth, they do not feel comfortable holding conferences nor have knowledge of conferences as effective strategies to teach writing (Kara-Soteriou & Kaufman, 2002; Lerner, 2005).

2.0 Literature Review

The importance of conference feedback, however, has been well documented in several studies, which explain their positive effects on students' writing achievement (Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Harris, 1986), attitudes (McAndrew and Reigstad, 2001), and effectiveness toward writing (Harris, 1995a; Kelly, 1995; Wong, Butler, Ficzer, & Kuperis, 1997). The literature clearly points out that writing conferences, in which independence and ownership are promoted, increase students' achievement in writing (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Koshik, 2002). Equally important is that students', seeing their achievement, progress, and potential increase their level of effectiveness (Bandura, 1993; Jinks & Lorschach, 2003, Snowman & Biehler, 2003).

Recent developments in the context of feedback studies have heightened the need to investigate the effectiveness of conference feedback in a second language classroom setting. Therefore, in the study reported, the researcher examined the interactions that occurred in a series of oral conferences between a teacher and first year college students in a writing classroom.

Having these increased skills gives students the confidence and competence to see themselves as authors. On the other hand, when conferences are done inappropriately, the writing conferences might have the opposite outcome, thus holding back students' competence and making them dependent on teachers' expertise and comments. The absence of conferences leaves students with a missed opportunity to develop and in turn, improve their writing (Atwell, 1988; Graves, 1983; Harris, 1995a, 1986; Kelly, 1995).

To this end, the researcher investigated the following research questions:

- i. To what extent does conference feedback motivates students to perform better in their writing drafts?
- ii. How do students understand conference feedback as they improve their writing?
- iii. To what extent does the teacher-student relationship affect ESL student's writing using the conference feedback?
- iv. What are the benefits and limitations of conference feedback in developing writing skills?

This research question concerns the extent of motivation to which learning is evidenced in how the conference feedback are implemented within a single conferencing session and from one conferencing session to another. With this study, the researcher aimed to explore whether conferences could be effective in improvising students' subsequent drafts of their compositions. Confidence and competence are said to be necessary (Bandura, 1977, 1993) in conferences. For instance, when conferences are conducted according to practices supported by process researchers, students gain knowledge about writing skills they need.

3.0 Method

The researcher chose to use his own students instead of other lecturers' students for several reasons. Recent evidences suggests that, most lecturers use written feedback as their primary method of individual feedback and conference feedback is used occasionally to support the written feedback (McLaughlin, 2009). In addition, teaching other lecturers the method of giving conference feedback to students would have been impossible, as it would require extensive training for the lecturers. It would also be probably unethical, as lecturers are generally most successful teaching students using their own methods. Therefore, the participants of this study included a lecturer and six students, (3 males and 3 females) from the American Degree Programme (ADP) Basic Composition 1 (ENL 101) classroom from a private college in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. A small number of participants were chosen for this study because of the expected difficulty of obtaining the data from the students and also the time constraint of this study. Therefore only six participants and a lecturer were chosen to participate in this study.

4.0 Results

The study examined the nature of teacher-student writing conferences while also giving attention to the role of effectiveness during writing conferences. Below, the research questions of the study are listed:

1. To what extent does conference feedback motivates students to perform better in their writing drafts?
2. How do students understand conference feedback as they improve their writing?
3. How does the teacher and students develop a relationship in an ESL college composition classroom and how does this relationship change over time?
4. What are the benefits and limitations of conference feedback?

1st Research Question: To what extent does conference feedback motivates students to perform better in their writing drafts?

Moses' motives for taking this course were because he wanted to improve his English writing ability, study abroad after graduation, and make a wise use of his time during the college term break. In addition to these goals, he chose to take this course because he had a high degree of trust in Daisy and her course, which he had constructed by reviewing the syllabus on the website even before the semester started. Moreover, throughout the class activities and writing assignments, and after receiving feedback directly from the teacher through one-to-one discussions, he continued to build his trust in his teacher very quickly.

After a few class meetings, he commented on his teacher and the course to the researcher. He pointed out that when the teacher conducted the conference feedback sessions with him, Moses knew that he lacked certain technical abilities when he writes the essay. These technical abilities are vocabulary which mainly stresses on incorrect word choice, expression where appropriateness for written English, redundancy and non-English usage was given importance and finally the organization of the essay.

Everything that Daisy spoke during the conference feedback sessions was extremely helpful for him. In addition, Moses felt deeply motivated to write better as it served as an encouragement for him because the teacher had also shown care for his written work. Moses knew that Daisy seems to know his weaknesses and wanted him to show gradual improvement when he starts to writes his following draft. Moses felt that he can

learn a lot about how to write in English from this class.

Researcher: *How well do you understand these comments be more specific, not clear enough, or unclear? Did you find the conference session motivating you to be a better writer?*

Moses: *I know my teacher gives these comments to make me think from different perspectives...But it is not too hard to change my drafts based on these comments. Without her detailed explanations during the individual conference, I would have had difficulty revising my drafts. The conference session also motivated me to write better in my following draft, because I feel that I could ask her lots of questions pertaining to my weaknesses and strength and how to improve on this.*

In his view, a caring teacher was able to find students' weak points in their writing, motivate them to improve in their writing and help them improve these areas by providing conference feedback. He expected this course to help him develop not only his writing ability in particular but also his English ability in general. In all, Moses was very much self-motivated to improve his writing ability in English and took everything that his teacher had done for him in appreciation, which seemed to contribute to the development of a caring relationship with his teacher because he accepted and appreciated every comment she made. Moreover, he was a relatively good writer and had a comparatively good command of English, which also seemed to contribute to the development of a caring relationship with his teacher because he was better able than other students to respond to his teacher's conference feedback.

Just as Moses brought in with him good feelings about his teacher and the course, his teacher also demonstrated a high degree of trust in him from the very beginning of the semester. It seemed to the researcher that the teacher's trust in and care for him arose out of obligation as a teacher but grew stronger and stronger. For example, after returning the first draft of the second assignment, the teacher told Moses that he is a really good writer, and the teacher gave exceptionally good comments on his first draft of writing along with the second highest grade in class.

4.1.6.1 Research Question 1: To what extent does conference feedback motivates students to perform better in their writing drafts?

Nadhrah had chosen to take this course to overcome her apprehension about writing in English, to complete her course work to graduate, and to improve her English writing ability. At the first interview conducted in the second week of the semester, she made positive and negative comments about the teacher and the course. Although Nadhrah demonstrated a high degree of trust in her teacher out of obligation as a student, she did not connect herself with her teacher at the beginning of the semester, mainly due to her perceptions of her teacher as having an overbearing attitude and due to the difficulty of the content presented in the class.

In the same way, the teacher did not seem to care for her at first because of her perceptions of his attitudes toward her instruction. For example, although she gave her students clear instruction about the format at the beginning of the semester, she did not use double spacing, but single spaced his first drafts of his writing. Looking at her draft, she commented, "Look at her format. She used single spacing." She also told this to her during the individual conference.

In terms of frequency of talk even though Nadhrah and Alex had balanced conferences in terms of turn taking, since Nadhrah's responses were limited and incomplete, she had only one conference session with the teacher.

Daisy dominated the conference talk. As discussed earlier in most of those conferences the recommendations and suggestions were mainly provided by the teacher which also led her to dominate the conference talk. Likely, in the first and the fourth conference Nadhrah was also an active participant and provided lengthy responses that led to having more balanced conferences.

Out of six conferences, the sixth conference was the only one where Nadhrah received specific and positive praise from the teacher as seen in the scripts below.

Nadhrah: *(reads from the text) "Going overboard"*

Daisy: *Put that.*

Daisy: *That's a good detail...*

Nadhrah: *(reads) "Finally, fun and candy was up to our heads and we left"*

Daisy: *Oooh good.*

Daisy: *That's like a metaphor.*

Daisy: *You're so smart.*

Nadhrah's first, third, fourth, and fifth conferences were coded as balanced where Daisy provided general statements such as "Okay; Alright; and Umm humm". In her second conference, all the responses that came from the teacher showed only active listening thus that conference was coded as teacher-centered.

However, the sixth and the eighth conferences were excluded from the analysis because there were no general or specific praise statements generated by the teacher.

Throughout conference sessions it was clear that the draft stage affected the effectiveness of the conferences. Nadhrah conferred with the Daisy six times while she was writing her essay. The first conference session was labeled as a topic and content conference where Nadhrah introduced her topic and they both talked about possible events to be included into her story. The second, third, and fifth conferences were labeled as content conferences where again both parties brainstormed together to create scenes and events for her story. In the fourth conference, Nadhrah stated that she mostly wrote about her experience when she used the Social Networking Websites such as Facebook and HighFive.

Daisy reviewed Nadhrah's texts and pointed out strengths and weaknesses. Thus, this conference was labeled as a content and assessment conference. In the sixth conference, the teacher used a trade book as a sample to teach indenting paragraphs and separating dialogues from regular texts.

5.0 Discussion

Students' confidence in their writing ability can improve when writing conferences are provided in a student-centered approach where students are seen as active participants and were provided opportunities to share and highlight their ideas and suggestions during conference dialogue. Besides engaging in student-centered writing conferences, a student is able to gain opportunity to pay attention to their previous learning and progress, observes the teacher to improve writing skills, and utilize verbal feedback to better recognize and determine skills and level of confidence towards writing. The information gained through these important aspects of writing conferences ultimately may help student writers to assess their level of effectiveness (Bandura, 1993). Furthermore, by being aware of their progress students can increase their motivation, confidence, and the effectiveness of the conference (Bandura, 1993; Jinks & Lorschach, 2003; Snowman & Biehler, 2003).

Based on characteristics of effective writing conferences identified in the literature (Atwell, 1987; Boynton, 2003; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Harris & Silva, 1993; Kaufman, 1998; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001; Murphy, 2000; Murray, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1985; Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984; Straub, 2001; Wilcox, 1997) research observations uncovered several ways in which the teacher's conferencing approach could be characterized as student-centered. For example, she played a supporting role by creating a conference environment in which both parties shared authority and were treated equally (Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1983). A table to carry out the conferences was designated and the teacher always sat next to the student, not across from them. It can be pointed out that for less confident students; the seating arrangement was less threatening because it did not force them to make unwanted eye contact. To give the student authority during the conference and promote an equal sharing of authority (Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1983), the teacher was observed placing the essay in front of the student or between teacher and student. Furthermore, in order to allow students to determine the conference agenda (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1980, 1985; Walker & Elias, 1987) the teacher generally started writing conferences with a predictable question such as "So how did you manage to write your essay?" or "Okay, how are you doing?". Students were also encouraged to lead the conference talk and were able to speak up at any time allowing the teacher's role to be more of a coach instead of being a strict teacher (Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1983; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001; Murray, 1980; Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984). Therefore, this led students to explain about their texts and ideas because the teacher often asked them open-ended questions (Murray, 1978, 1979; Smith, 2005).

As a result of keeping the conferences brief and focused, the teacher allowed students to have several conferences over the period of the writing process (Atwell, 1987; Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1983). During these conferences the teacher remained attentive by listening carefully to students' ideas, questions, and responses. Her role encouraged students to be more open and share their topics and concerns (Kaufman, 1998). Observations showed that the teacher provided opportunities for students in terms of turn-taking by using pauses as their sign to generate a response (Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1994). This allowed students to become more actively involved in turn-taking and consequently most of the observed conference interactions were coded as balanced in which the two participants took an almost equal number of turns.

Another promising observation was the teacher's use of longer pauses with less confident students since these students might have needed extra time to formulate a response to unforeseen questions or comments. The teacher also provided both general and specific praise statements in order for students to learn more about their strengths and to assure them that their opinions were being heard.

In order for students to be positive about the writing process, the teacher used a positive approach when revising and editing. Consistent with the literature (Harris & Silva, 1993; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001; Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984; Straub, 2001; Wilcox, 1997), she mentioned that students should be first concerned about higher order concerns of content and meaning before dealing with the lower level concerns such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The teacher reassured students through eye contact and very often used her wittiness as a tool for lightening the mood whilst providing recommendations for revisions and editing (Boynton, 2003; Graves, 1983; Kaufman, 1998). When making editorial corrections to students' texts, the teacher often attempted

to identify with students by mentioning that she had also experienced similar difficulties with writing and spelling.

It can be pointed that students recognized the importance of the writing conferences and their role as active participants when the teacher reminded other students in the classroom not to interrupt her while she was conferring with their friends (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003; Hansen, 1987). When there were interruptions the teacher focused on getting the writing conference back on topic as quickly as possible and returned the discussion back to the point where it had left off. Her actions therefore were helpful in promoting student-centered conferences.

To summarize, by means of engaging in student-centered activities, the teacher tried to share the authority and decision making process with her students. Consequently, this encouraged the study group students to see themselves as writers who were experienced enough to assess their strengths and weaknesses of a written text. Prior researches by Wong, Butler, Ficzere, & Kuperis (1997) supported this notion stating, "trainees gained writing skills in areas specifically targeted in the intervention, and increased their self-efficacy in writing because of awareness of their learned skills in planning, writing, and revising" (p. 209). Similarly, Kelly (1995) argued that during writing conferences students worked with their partners and by gaining feedback on revisions, students wrote their essays repeatedly. This re-writing may have increased the effectiveness of the conference because gradually students became more experienced writers.

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