A Critical Examination of Teacher Feedback on L2 Writing

Xiangying Huo
The University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada

Abstract

Feedback has numerous advantages and is conductive to L2 writing teaching and learning. However, although feedback is believed to benefit ESL students and enhance their writing achievements, there are critiques that feedback has various problems and does not seem so effective. This paper examines three major problems existing in feedback in L2 writing: problems of feedback environments (i.e., cultural problems and interactional problems), problems of teachers' feedback, and problems of students' reactions to the feedback. The paper proposes the negotiations between teachers and students, teachers' awareness of contrastive rhetorics principles, and the improvement in the teachers' culturally responsive pedagogical skills, to better understand students' cultures and writing norms, to tackle global errors over local errors, to empower students to project their authentic voices, and to ensure that the teacher feedback is not in vain.

1. Introduction

Feedback is an essential part of second language writing teaching and learning [1]. Writers always need readers' responses to examine whether the writers have conveyed their meanings and whether there are any queries or contradictions from the readers' perspective. However, it is usually hard for L2 students to envisage the reactions from their readers. Hence, teacher feedback aims to make students imagine that they are readers and encourages them to keep questioning their writing as if they were in the readers' shoes. In this way, teachers may gradually train their students to become more capable writers [2].

In addition, teacher feedback gives guidance and instructions that students can follow in re-examining their essay writing [3]. The feedback also enables students to be aware of the right situation to use the language knowledge that they have learned [4]. However, although feedback is believed to benefit students and enhance their writing achievements, there are critiques that feedback has various problems and does not seem to be so effective to students. This paper examines three major problems existing in feedback in L2 writing: problems of

feedback environments, problems of teachers' feedback, and problems of students' reactions to the feedback.

2. Problems of L2 feedback environments

L2 feedback environment has its own uniqueness, complexity, and problems. There are two problems of L2 feedback situations: cultural and interactional problems. Cultural factors determine students' attitudes to feedback as well as feedback's effects on students. Students' adaptation to the cultural situation is important for them to make progress. Meanwhile, the interaction between teachers and students also affects students' academic success [5].

2.1. Cultural problems

In L2 teaching and learning environments, feedback conditions are rather complex. According to Leki [6], the influence of feedback on students largely depends on their accommodation to the new cultural situations. It has been argued that students who find bigger differences between their own and the new cultural environments and between their previous and the new schooling find it harder to accommodate to the feedback situations [7]. Hence, cultural conflicts may result in different interpretations of errors between teachers and students. For example, students may not agree to their teacher's stress on content instead of grammar which was the focus of their former writing training [6].

On the one hand, students are expected to be aware of these cultural distinctions. On the other hand, teachers are assumed to understand students and help them change their language, as well as cultural models, in order to make them adapt to the feedback environments more smoothly [5].

2.2. Interactional problems

In effect, cultural and interactional problems are interwoven with each other. It has been found that L2 improvement can be enhanced by interaction [8]. Although this claim refers to oral interaction, it may

have some relevance to writing, yet there are limits to its application. Friedrichs [5] investigates the determinants of the success of feedback in L2 situations. She finds that the active participation and effective interaction of teachers and students are prerequisites for the successful implementation of feedback. Feedback may reveal information to both teachers and students. Feedback can thus be treated as an interactive process in which teachers respond to their students' reactions to the original feedback and make appropriate alterations to make the feedback more comprehensible [5].

Where cultural factors are involved, interactional problems occur, partly due to the partial feedback from the students caused by their ignorance of cultural differences, and partly owing to the teacher's feedback, which fails to take account of cultural differences and how these are expressed in language. It is also true that the teacher feedback may be incomprehensible sometimes because the teacher has not experienced the students' cultures before [5]. This two-way communication is affected by the teachers' and students' different characteristics, interests, cultural patterns, and relations with each other [5]. A detailed discussion of the problems of teachers' provision of feedback and the problems of students' reactions to feedback will be followed in section 3 and section 4 respectively.

3. Problems of teacher feedback

Teachers, as a source of input, play a crucial role in the feedback process. Understandable feedback is argued by some researchers to be an essential condition for second language acquisition [9]. Nevertheless, teacher feedback has numerous inherent problems, affective variables, and negative impact on students.

3.1. Arbitrary

First, teacher feedback seems arbitrary, which means that teachers perceive themselves as the authority and correct students' writing at their will. The reason may be that teachers have a fixed model in mind. Before recognizing students' original intentions, teachers offer students feedback by approaching this ideal model [10]. Arbitrary feedback may produce biases. For example, forty teachers were asked to evaluate a student's composition about a trial. Simultaneously, they all pointed out that the student's language was too emotional. Surprisingly, when the student's composition was compared with that of the real text in the trial, it was found that both bore much resemblance [11].

Although this example is not closely related to L2 writing, it indirectly suggests that teachers' ideal model may influence the fairness of teachers' evaluation. Arbitrary feedback may discourage students from producing writing since students need to follow their teachers' expectations and standards. No wonder students often say to their teachers "Tell me what you want me to change." Their focus has been changed from "what I want to say" to "what my teacher wants me to say." There were cases in which students' revised essays according to their teachers' suggestions were even worse than their original ones since students could not comprehend the connotations of their teachers' comments, or even if they managed to understand, their teachers might have misinterpreted their messages, and thus gave them impractical feedback [2, p. 150). Multiple-draft revision is recommended as a remedy for the problem. It is suggested that students should be given "authority" and manipulation of their own writing process and teachers need to change their attitudes to listen to student writers' voice [11].

3.2. Inconsistent and contradictory

The second problem of teacher feedback is that it may be inconsistent and contradictory [2] Inconsistency lies in the correction process in that teachers mark salient errors at some time and inconspicuous errors at some other time. Teachers also diagnose students' problems inconsistently [3]. Teachers are often found to make contradictory comments. They can stress both minor and major errors, and both local (form) and global (meaning) errors in one essay [10]. Their end feedback may treat the essay as a fixed, finished text and the marginal feedback may concentrate on development, regarding the essay as being in progress. Teachers also require both conciseness and elaboration in one text [2]. This contradicting information puzzles students and they may put the comments aside and do not bother to solve the contradictions [10].

3.3. Vague

Thirdly, teachers' comments may also be vague [12]. Vagueness rests with its universality and imprecision. It is universal in that teacher feedback is not text-specific and can be applied to any text such as the comment "think more about your audience." Students have to guess their teachers' meanings from time to time. They get the impression that their teachers merely ask them to obey empty rules instead of offering them concrete techniques. However, these rules such as the fixed norm of "five-paragraph essay" writing are useless to students' specific problems in their revision processes since students' ideas need to evolve, but the rules may only apply to finished essays [2, p. 153]. Besides the universality of teachers' vague feedback, imprecision is

illustrated as well by teachers' abstract comments such as "unclear" and "confusing" [12, p. 63]. Hence, such general and telegraphic feedback may seldom really assist students in re-examining their essays [12].

3.4. Partial and incomplete

Last but not least, teachers' marginal and end comments may be partial and incomplete, which means that their feedback is not content oriented, but form oriented. Teachers may only point out students' mechanical errors and leave the meaning-related errors unnoticed [10]. Although this does not imply that teachers do think local errors are more significant than global errors, students are conveyed the wrong message that form appears to be more important than content [13]. Consequently, they may attach greater importance to grammar rather than to ideas. Therefore, teachers' partial and incomplete feedback seems misleading.

3.5. Affective Factors

It is argued that six variables affect the feedback process: age, being native or not, attitudes, expectations, "teacher anxiety," and stylistic concerns [10, p. 82]. These six affective factors decide teachers' responses to student writing and shape the impact of feedback on students.

The age of teachers has been regarded as a crucial factor in evaluating writing. Younger teachers seem to be less tolerant than older teachers. This is probably because older teachers are more practical in the desire of their students' achievements, so they exhibit more tolerance [10]. Non-native teachers are found to be more rigid than native teachers. Perhaps because they have achieved mastery of English with great effort, they may treat errors more strictly than their native counterparts [14].

Teachers' attitudes, expectations and anxiety affect the feedback impact as well [10]. The same essay satisfies one teacher, yet may annoy the other, caused by teachers' different attitudes [15]. Different expectations may also generate different treatments for student writing. Furthermore, "teacher anxiety" about teachers' own writing capabilities may also influence teachers' reactions to students' essays [10, p. 82].

Stylistic concerns also have an effect on teachers' evaluation [16]. Different teachers may have completely different criteria and even conflicting standards [15]. Some may prefer short sentences, whereas others prefer long sentences. Some teachers favour "nominal" way of writing, while others favour a "verbal style" (17, p. 336). Hence, teachers' personal prejudices and the degree of severity cause variations [17].

4. Problems of students' reactions to feedback

As compared with the research into teachers' responses to students' essays, there are fewer studies on students' responses to the feedback. Brannon and Knoblauch [11] have touched on this point, by suggesting that students write their own comments about their purposes in margins. However, there is evidence that students pay no attention to their teachers' comments. They either disregard the feedback or display poor techniques in processing the feedback, by simply bearing it in mind without taking it down, let alone rewriting their essays [12]. However, it has been found that feedback may only be useful when it is followed by subsequent revisions [18]. Students' failure to carry out revision means that they continue to repeat errors and make no improvement in their writing competence [19]. Sometimes, there may be negative and intense emotional reactions to the teachers' feedback. Students may glance at their marks first, and if they are dissatisfied, they are discouraged and depressed, followed by irritation and hatred if the teacher's feedback only aims at their errors [20].

5. Conclusion

Taken together, this paper has investigated three problems of feedback on L2 writing associated with feedback environments (including cultural and interactional problems), teacher feedback, and student reactions. Teachers may strive to become earnest readers not as cold judges, to listen, to talk, to negotiate; Teachers should not react to "student writing, but to student writers" [10, p. 97]. Teachers need to be aware of contrastive rhetorics principles and improve their culturally responsive pedagogical skills to better understand their students' cultures and writing norms, to tackle global errors over local errors, to focus more on content than the form, to empower students to project their authentic voices, and to ensure that the teacher feedback is not in vain.

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