A new look at an old problem: How teachers can liberate themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said about effective feedback in the research literature but many teachers are still ‘slaving’ (Hairston 1986) over student writing with little satisfaction. Examining the issue of feedback from ten new perspectives, this paper suggests that if teachers are to emancipate themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing, they have to problematise their current feedback approaches and challenge the pre-existing assumptions of conventional practice. To make feedback a positive experience for both teachers and students, it is also important to look beyond the issue of feedback itself to consider feedback delivery in terms of what happens before, during and after feedback. This paper offers tips to help teachers create a win–win situation so that giving feedback becomes a rewarding experience for themselves and receiving feedback becomes a beneficial experience for students.

Introduction

Maxine Hairston’s (1986) article ‘On not being a composition slave’ is probably best remembered for her use of the term slavery to describe the toil and drudgery teachers face in marking student writing. While this vivid image has resonance with most teachers, Hairston’s advice against teachers being composition slaves seems to have gone unheeded. In many teaching contexts, first language or second language (L2), teachers are still slaving over student writing, meeting deadline after deadline to provide timely feedback to student writing. While teachers burn the midnight oil to mark student writing, students who make significant progress as a result of teacher feedback may be few and far between. More often than not, teachers are very uncertain of the outcomes of their efforts, and they are hard-pressed to prove that student improvement, if any, is a result of their hard work. Nonetheless, they continue to mark student compositions laboriously, feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. As they keep plugging away at this gruelling aspect of their work, other more important tasks are often neglected. What can they do to emancipate themselves from such slavery and drudgery?

In this paper I propose that the answer to this knotty question lies in changing the way teachers think about their practices and their roles as teachers (Black et al 2003). To avoid being composition slaves, they need to change the way they look at students, student texts, written errors, purpose of writing, teaching and learning, as well their teacher roles. They also need to develop new knowledge, new understanding and new skills about feedback and writing (Walker and Cheong 1996). In the next section of this paper, I first suggest how teachers can challenge and problematise their current practices by re-examining the issue of feedback from ten new perspectives. Then I attempt to re-conceptualise feedback in terms of three stages – pre-feedback, while-feedback and post-feedback – to discover what teachers can do at different stages in the writing classroom to maximise the effectiveness of feedback.

A new look at feedback

To look at the issue of feedback from a new vantage point, it is necessary for teachers to re-examine their current approaches critically with a view to maximising the potential of feedback so that it is used effectively to promote student learning. As Yagelski (1999: 46) says, ‘good teaching is really about good learning … our students’ learning is ultimately what matters most’. Below I propose ten new perspectives to help teachers critique conventional feedback practice.
Spandel (2005) reminds us of the importance of respecting the rights of student writers, including their rights to go off-topic and to write badly. To emancipate themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing, teachers can consider student writing using a new lens, treating it as an artefact created and owned by the student writer (rather than the teacher) and showing it greater respect. Rather than labelling it as poor writing or covering it with red ink, teachers could find out what the writing tells them about students’ personal perspectives, what they are able (or not able) to do in writing, their worldviews, their idiosyncrasies and, above all, who they are as people and as writers (Murray 1985).

Rather than speaking for their students by re-writing student texts (and changing their meanings) on the assumption that they are extraordinarily devoted and hardworking teachers, they could talk to students to find out what exactly they want to say. Teachers could also avoid derogatory commentary like ‘you write badly’, which is unlikely to change a student’s ability to write. If students have every right to write in the way they do, then, in the first place, teachers have to learn to respect this very right.

As teachers respond to every single error in student writing, they are sending a message that they expect students to produce error-free writing. Errors, however, are a natural part of language learning. Even teachers’ best efforts at error correction do not produce 100 per cent accurate writing (Ferris 2008). So why should teachers act as ‘error hunters’ (Hairston 1986: 122) and impose an unattainable goal on students and themselves? More importantly, when teachers keep their attention on surface-level concerns, they lose sight of other important dimensions of writing, such as ideas, rhetorical features, style and voice. Writing is not a mere vehicle for language practice. To rid themselves of tunnel-vision, teachers have to bear in mind that there is much more to good writing than grammatical accuracy. Sometimes student writing can be accurate but unnatural because of its non-idiomatic expressions, or it does not read fluently, or it fails to meet the readers’ expectations in terms of rhetorical conventions. As teachers change their attitudes to surface-level errors, they also broaden their perspectives and let other important aspects of student writing inform their feedback.

While the argument in favour of marking all written errors is the importance to inform students of the mistakes they have made, teachers have to understand that, for the majority of students, their attitude to teacher feedback is one of tell them and they will forget. This is particularly so when they have a large number of errors to attend to. There is feedback research that shows that selective error feedback is preferable to comprehensive error feedback (Ferris 2003), with the former being more focused (also referred to as focused corrective feedback; see Ellis 2009), less threatening and more manageable for L2 learners. As teachers work hard at locating, categorising and providing correct answers for students, or even writing almost the entire paragraph or the whole piece for students, they are usurping the students’ right to learn for themselves (Scrivener 1998) and depriving them of the opportunity to develop self-editing skills. Learning in the writing classroom can take place only if teachers are willing to let go of their teacher-dominated role as an editor, let students self-edit or peer-edit, and train them to do so. Tell them and they will forget – involve them, and they will understand. Teachers have to allow students to take greater control of their learning.

Currently the rule of the game is that once students have finished their writing, that is the end of their responsibility. They pass their papers to teachers and wash their hands of them. Then it is the teachers’ turn to show their efforts by responding to the papers laboriously. Teachers become key players of the game. But why is this the case? Who should be doing the error correction and editing? And who should be learning? It is the students, not the teachers. To salvage the situation, teachers need to change the rule of the game. When students finish writing, their responsibility is not over. They should be held accountable for their own writing. For example, they should be given opportunities to tell teachers what they want to get from teacher feedback; they can help each other review their writing and improve it; they can also
set themselves some short-term and long-term goals and monitor their own writing development. More importantly, they should be given opportunities to act on teacher feedback to bridge their gaps in writing. If effective learning is to take place, they have to be the key players in the game.

5 No more double standard – stop being so harsh to developing writers

Writing is a painstaking process. Whether it is first-language or second-language writing, in real life it takes time for ideas to incubate and for the writer to get started, to draft and redraft, and to polish the writing. Real-life writing is never a simple process. Teachers know it. While teachers themselves may write with full awareness of their constraints as writers, in writing classrooms they may apply a different standard to their students. They may not give students enough time to gather ideas, to let ideas develop, to draft and redraft, and to edit their writing. In addition, they may not explicitly teach students how to do these tasks. Worse still, they may put students in exam-like situations where they are given a topic and have to write within a certain time limit. If even teachers reckon that writing is a difficult process, why are they so harsh to their students, who are but developing writers? The fact that teachers have to spend so much time reading less-than-satisfactory student writing is partly because they have not given students sufficient time to develop a good piece of work.

6 More is not better

Teachers exhaust themselves through marking student writing, perhaps because they think more is better – more red ink on the page, more errors corrected, more error codes and more comments, as well as more compositions from students. In some contexts (like English as a Foreign Language school contexts), it is not uncommon in an academic year for teachers to collect from students a great number of compositions (eg ranging from 10 to 14), all treated as terminal drafts performed in an exam-like environment (ie timed and with minimal help from the teacher). Teachers may also think that the more they assess, the better teachers they are. However, more error corrections, more codes and more compositions do not necessarily make students better writers. Instead of teachers marking all student texts, isn’t it the case that some of them can be read by students for peer or self-assessment? Instead of enforcing more exam practice, can’t teachers adopt a process approach and assign fewer writing tasks but give students more time to produce a piece of work through multiple drafting? Instead of writing lots of comments on student papers, would it be possible for teachers to give fewer but more focused comments, especially those they believe students are able to act on and benefit from? As teachers start to think that more is not necessarily better, they will work smarter.

7 Feedback as well as feedforward

Feedback should also serve the purpose of feedforward (Carless et al 2006) – that is, students should use feedback information to improve their writing. Given this idea, the focus of teachers should not be on feedback per se (ie getting their job of delivering feedback done) but, more importantly, on how feedback can be utilised to help students improve their writing. A paper filled with red ink suggests that there are probably far too many things for a student to attend to, while feedback that addresses the major problems in student papers can help students focus on specific areas, which is likely to be more manageable for students. So why mark student writing so feverishly?

8 Don’t be a coroner – be a diagnostician

As teachers toil away at student writing, they tend to play the role of a judge – specifically, that of a coroner, declaring the death of student writing and commenting on it retrospectively. If feedback is to fully realise its potential as feedforward, teachers have to play the role of a diagnostician, helping students identify the most critical problems in their writing (Murray 1985). Rather than let student compositions overpower and overwhelm them, as diagnosticians teachers take control, work on student papers and tease out the most serious problems for students to act upon.
9 Teach not just test

Why do teachers think that students don’t write well? Why does student writing exhibit multiple problems? Is it because students are under-prepared? Teachers have to spend so much time marking student writing because there is a missing link between teaching and assessment. Apart from diagnosing student writing, teachers have to be coaches. They need to put a greater emphasis on teaching, and specifically teaching that informs assessment, and spend less time on testing. If teachers teach what they assess and assess what they teach, then marking student writing will be a much easier job.

10 The hidden agenda of feedback

As institutions or schools set up expectations for teachers to mark student writing in certain ways, teachers have to comply because they are held accountable. Failure to do so may result in unsatisfactory evaluation by students and even negative appraisal by school administrators (see Lee 2008). But how much do teachers want, through their meticulous feedback, to show their students, parents, colleagues and superiors that they are hardworking, dedicated and competent teachers? Given such a hidden agenda of feedback, if teachers are to fully harness the potential of feedback and emancipate themselves from the drudgery of feedback, they probably need to undertake a feedback revolution, which will require them to negotiate with school administrators, talk to colleagues, students and parents, and initiate a whole-school approach to change.

Re-conceptualising feedback

How, then, should teachers go about giving feedback on student writing? The feedback literature has no shortage of useful advice (eg see Ferris 2003; Hyland and Hyland 2006). However, much of the feedback advice focuses on the act of feedback per se. It is important to explore the issue of what makes feedback effective (or not effective) by examining not only feedback itself but also how feedback relates to what happens in the classroom before feedback is given, what teachers should pay attention to while giving feedback and what should happen after feedback is provided. A new look at feedback, therefore, requires teachers to look beyond feedback itself to consider feedback delivery in terms of what happens before, during and after feedback. Below I offer some tips for facilitating effective feedback at the pre-feedback stage, the while-feedback stage and the post-feedback stage.

1 Before feedback

Share your feedback philosophy with students

It is helpful to first review your feedback practices and formulate your policy. Decide on the focus of error feedback — whether it is selective (ie focused) or comprehensive (ie unfocused) (see Ellis 2009 for a typology of feedback types) and the ways in which you can involve students actively in the assessment process (eg through peer/self-evaluation). Explain to students why you are outlining your approaches, and what you expect them to do and why. Share your philosophy with students, including the purpose of writing and the focuses of feedback, and let students have a clear understanding of the rule of the game.

Establish criteria of good writing

For each writing task you give students, teach them explicitly the characteristics of a good piece of writing for that particular task or genre. Strengthen writing instruction to make sure that students understand fully the criteria that you are going to use to mark their writing. Broad criteria like content, language and organisation are unlikely to be helpful for L2 learners. Instead, you can adopt task- or genre-specific assessment criteria and align teaching with assessment by teaching students the features that typify target genres (see Martin 1989; Paltridge 2001) (see Appendix for an example of the assessment criteria for the personal recount genre). Share your assessment criteria openly with students. Such criteria can be used to inform writing instruction, so that you teach what you assess and assess what you teach.
Provide training in peer/self-evaluation

Make peer/self-evaluation a major activity in the writing classroom, and provide training for students before the feedback stage. You can model the procedure and give students practice by using imperfect texts or, with their permission, student texts.

Let students communicate their goals

Before students submit their writing, give them a chance to tell you their goals and concerns. You can give them a cover sheet and let them write some special requests (Leki 2008). For instance, they may tell you they would like you to pay specific attention to their use of prepositions, or they may want you to comment specifically on paragraphing.

Choose good writing topics

When students are unable to relate to the writing topic, they are less likely to produce good work. I have seen teachers using totally decontextualised topics that are irrelevant to students’ lives (eg write a diary about an imaginary day out with a fictitious overseas friend visiting for the first time, or a letter of complaint about an experience students have never had). If you give students a boring, inappropriate or difficult topic, you set them up for failure. Conversely, if you give them an interesting topic, you pave the way for success. You can give students a greater variety of topics, including those that relate to a range of curriculum topics and those that address writing across different genres. Instead of assigning topics, you can negotiate with students or let them choose their own topics and explore ideas that interest them.

Let students know how you are going to assess their writing

Before students start writing, communicate clearly how you are going to assess the writing. If you use a feedback form (see Appendix), let students have the form before writing, and tell them to refer to it while they are writing. This can help students focus on areas that are pertinent to the writing task and help them understand more clearly the goals of the writing.

During feedback

Focus on the message

Don’t be fixated on language errors when you are reading student writing. Focus on the message. Treat student writing as a means to get to know your students better. Ask yourself: what clues does the writing give you about the student (personality, background, worldviews, writing style etc)? Read through the student text once without covering it with red, and suppress your desire to label it as bad writing. Let the student writing unfold itself and tell you about the author.

Be encouraging

Even though there may be problems in student writing, pick a few areas in which students did well. Praise them, and acknowledge their efforts. Be encouraging. Tell yourself that through feedback you want to encourage students to try harder next time. If you shatter students’ confidence altogether in one piece of writing, they are not going to try again. Spandel (2005: 94) rightly reminds us that ‘quality assessment is compassionate … it seeks not to find fault, but to uplift’.

Diagnose rather than judge

Put on the hat of a diagnostician and ask yourself the major problem(s) the student papers exhibit. Depending on the students’ abilities, focus on a few major areas that need to be addressed. Don’t forget the criteria of good writing that have been established at the pre-feedback stage. Use those criteria to inform your feedback. You can use a feedback form that details those criteria and mark accordingly. In the commentary, you can highlight the most serious problem(s) that you want your students to address.
Don’t over-exert yourself

Tell yourself not to mark every single error and not to rewrite any part of the text extensively for students. Nor should you take on the role of an editor by providing corrections for every single error. It is important to create opportunities for students to learn for themselves. Decide on a few error types that you want to focus on – for instance, those that have been highlighted in the instructional stage as language features central to the writing task or genre. Look out for error patterns and respond to these. Do not over-exert yourself.

Involve students

Involve students in the feedback process by giving them opportunities for peer- and/or self-evaluation. Such regular practice enables students to develop a sense of audience, increase their ability to critique their own writing and develop a better understanding of what good writing is.

3  Post-feedback

Talk to students

Very often students do not fully understand teacher feedback. So provide opportunities for students to talk to you, ask questions and make comments through conferences. Let them clarify their ideas and set goals for their next assignments.

Let students act on the feedback received

Whether it is teacher feedback or peer feedback, it is important that students act on the feedback. If the feedback is on interim drafts, let students use the feedback to improve their next drafts. If feedback is on the final draft, let students reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement, and how they may shape their next pieces of work to improve their writing.

Encourage greater autonomy

Even when the final feedback is received (ie no more redrafting is required), feedback can be used as feedforward. Students can be proactive – they can self-reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement, they can document their own progress and they can set goals for their future development. They can keep a reflective log and write reflective notes on questions like ‘Where do I go from here?’ and ‘What can I do to bridge the gaps in my writing?’ They can keep an error chart about their pervasive errors and/or a portfolio to keep track of their writing development.

Use feedback to inform teaching

You can also use information gathered from feedback as feedforward for yourself by asking what you are going to teach next, and how best you can adapt your writing syllabus to facilitate student learning. Apart from developing individual profiles to help students document their writing development, you can adjust your teaching plan based on the information gathered from feedback. If it is found that students have trouble getting articles right, you may want to design an additional grammar lesson on the use of articles. If students have difficulty writing an ending to a story, you may want to devote another lesson to story writing, focusing specifically on writing story endings.

Conclusion

To conclude, feedback is a useful means for teachers to establish an interpersonal relationship with students, to find out how well they have taught and how much students have learned, to develop students’ interest, confidence and independence in writing, and to improve teaching and learning. It is important that teachers create a win–win situation so that responding to writing is a rewarding experience for themselves and receiving feedback is a beneficial experience for students. While it is important to raise teachers’ awareness of the need to change conventional feedback practices, change is an intricate issue and is difficult to implement without taking into consideration the cultural and political systems (Kennedy...
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1988), as feedback practices are mediated by the institutions and cultures in which teachers operate (Hyland and Hyland 2006). To make possible a feedback revolution, investment has to be made not only in providing training for teachers, but also in initiating professional dialogue with school leaders, changing students’ perceptions and providing parent education (Lee forthcoming). School-based research is necessary to document the process of change, report on the outcome of change and disseminate good practices. Without concerted efforts by teachers, and without involving the entire school or institution, it is often difficult to implement and achieve change. Therefore, teachers should not toil in isolation and desolation. Instead, they should talk to colleagues, garner support, and adopt a bottom-up and holistic approach to change. To stop being composition slaves, it is important that teachers think creatively and look at their own feedback practices more critically. Indeed, teachers have been working too hard on student writing. It is high time they liberated themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing!

References


Appendix

Personal recount

4: Excellent
3: A good try
2: Acceptable
1: Needs improvement

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<th>Evaluation criteria</th>
<th>4</th>
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<th>Comments</th>
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<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
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<td>Fulfils the purpose of recording past events in chronological order</td>
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<td><strong>Structure and content</strong></td>
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<td>Begins with a clear orientation (who, where and what)</td>
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<td>Contains a series of relevant events</td>
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<td>Relates the sequence of events in chronological order</td>
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<td>Ends appropriately</td>
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<td><strong>Language features</strong></td>
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<td>Uses pronouns appropriately</td>
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<td>Describes people and setting effectively</td>
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<td>Uses the past tense accurately</td>
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<td>Uses a range of appropriate action verbs to describe the events</td>
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<td>Uses time words appropriately</td>
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<td><strong>Overall accuracy</strong></td>
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<td>Uses grammar accurately</td>
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<td>Uses vocabulary appropriately</td>
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<td>Contains accurate spelling</td>
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<td>Uses punctuation appropriately</td>
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