

# **Incorporating Different Forms of Feedback in Teaching Writing: An Insight into a Real Classroom**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Responding constructively to students' writing has been a challenge for the teachers. Many studies have been conducted exploring the effective ways of giving feedback. However, how those different forms can be combined, can work in real classrooms and what the effects can be have been less discussed. This paper is an attempt to project an experience of applying different forms of feedback in teaching writing. In other words, it intends to discuss the underlying role of different forms of feedback and its result in responding to students' written text. With this purpose, 30 samples of students' writings (along with provided feedback) have been collected and analyzed. The paper also tries to discuss the possible problems during applying this combined approach of providing feedback along with probable solutions. Novice teachers in similar ESL (English as a second language) or EFL (English as a foreign language) context may find the paper useful since it shows how to combine different methods of giving feedback to students written text with the aim of developing students' writing skills.

**Keywords:** Forms of feedback, students' written text, perceived difficulties, proposed solution

## **1. Introduction**

To teach writing at university level, feedback, more specifically, constructive feedback is the most important tool employed by the teachers in class. "Feedback is a fundamental element of the process approach to writing. It can be defined as input from a reader to writer with the effort of providing

information to the writer for revisions (Keh, 1990, p.294)". Feedback is meant to be incorporated in students' writing as the part of writing development process. Giving feedback can be considered as a skill also since while responding to students writing, several issues are needed to be considered carefully. The reason is, students' comprehension and reception of the feedback and their attitude toward the feedback have a greater impact in the process of teaching writing. On the other hand, the nature of giving feedback is another noteworthy issue on the part of the teachers since feedback needs to be specific, relevant and explanatory and clear enough to be understood by the students as suggested by the researchers (Karim & Ivy, 2011; Sommers, 1982; Wen 2013; Zamel, 1985) and to maintain these techniques while giving feedback, only one single technique is not sufficient. Teachers need to go beyond practicing just one form of feedback for students writing as different situations and contexts require different things.

But, unfortunately, it is seen that many teachers fail to take care of these requirements while providing feedback to their students' writing. While it should be intensive and detailed, they end up just pointing out the mistakes in the student's writing in bullet point or in vaguely written phrases which are "often confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible (Zamel, 1985, p.79)". At the worst condition, just the error parts are underlined randomly with a very general and vague statement like "be careful about grammatical mistakes" or "problem in idea organization" and so on. These kinds of feedback definitely are of no use for the students as these feedbacks do not succeed in providing the help to the students that how to overcome the mistakes in writing. These create a "misfit ...between what a teacher gives and what students would like to get (Lee, 2008 as cited in Wen 2013, p. 429)".

However, it is also seen that, while students generally expect detailed feedback for their writing, as contrary, many of

them are found not ready to accept and incorporate the feedback in their writing. Their lack of knowledge about the aim of feedback creates ego problem or false assumption against it. They view feedback as a threat to their image and thus do not feel interested about it.

In Bangladesh, where intensive writing is not well-practiced, the teachers face worse situation. The students from mainstream Bangladeshi schools and colleges are not habituated to get feedback constructively for their writing because of the existing exam-oriented education system. Rather, they are comfortable in cramming which they find to be of no help at university level. Thus, the process-oriented writing method which implies different types of feedback is perceived difficult to the students and at the same time challenging to the teachers.

In this article, I am going to share a similar experience of teaching writing combining a number of forms of feedback to the undergraduate students. In this process, the appeared difficulties from both the students and the teachers will be addressed and possible ways to deal with the difficulties will be discussed with reference to my classroom teaching experience.

## **2. Literature Review**

In literature, different types and forms of feedback are found as mentioned by many researches in their studies. Ur (2003) pointed out two types of feedback processes; one is formative which is based on instant correction and assessment of students' writing assignments. Another is summative which believes in evaluating students' writing at a certain point of time. According to him, feedback could be direct (errors to be fully or partially corrected) and indirect (errors to be indicated not corrected). He differentiated the idea of assessment from the idea of correction. The former gives general information

about learners' performance in writing as good or bad while the later provides specific information about learners' performance through illustration of the learner's strengths and weakness in writing.

The ideas of 'direct feedback' and 'indirect feedback' were also discussed by many other researchers (Ferris, 2003, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986). According to them, "direct feedback" is something which explicitly remarks which parts of the students' text should be corrected and "indirect feedback" is something which does not provide immediate correction on the students' text rather leaves it only just by underlying or pointing out the problematic sections in coded sign. Biber, Nekrasova, and Horn (2011) argued in their study that indirect feedback is practiced more than direct feedback in giving written feedback.

Their study also found out a number of facts such as: for ensuring writing development, written feedback is more successful than oral feedback, peer feedback is more useful than teacher feedback and commenting is more effective than error location and "in general, focus on form and content seems to be more effective than an exclusive focus on form (p.1)".

Khan (2003), in her study, attempted to compile many other kinds of feedback found in the studies of different authors which the teachers around the world practice commonly. A brief description of those forms of feedback is given below.

*Error Correction* (Alwright, 1975; Norish, 1983; Hendrickson, 1984; Chaudron, 1988 cited in Khan 2003): It is a very common and traditional approach of feedback to the teachers which implies coded sign to indicate mistakes and errors in students' writing. The author alerts the reader here that since this technique can create disappointment among students because of getting so many corrections, the teacher

should be careful and correct the mistakes and errors “selectively and only those areas highlighted where students need help (p.5)”.

*Peer Feedback* (Lynch, 1988; Robinson, 1991; Arndt, 1993; Keh, 1996 cited in Khan 2003): This is comparatively a new concept in our context since it employs students to check and give feedback to each other. Though this form of peer evaluation is helpful for students to develop “analytical power” and to be autonomous yet, it could produce negative result among students. It may happen if students are not well-trained and well-guided in responding toward peer’s writing. Since students are used to get feedback from teachers so getting feedback from peer might be assumed by the students as a threat of losing face.

*Conferences* (Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Hedge, 1988; Keh, 1996; Arndt, 1993 cited in Khan 2003): It is a “face to face meeting between the teacher and the student, and can be arranged individually and or in groups (p.7)”. Both teachers and students find this new form of giving feedback very useful as they can have intensive session regarding developing students’ writing.

*Written Comments* (Rairnes, 1983; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Leki, 1990 cited in Khan 2003): Following this approach, teachers give feedback in written comments either “in the margins or between the lines or at the end (p.9)”. Here the author intends to say that while practicing this form of feedback, the written comments should be specific, clear, detailed and constructive to the students.

*Reformulation* (Cohen, 1982; Alwright, 1988 cited in Khan): Reformation focuses on global errors rather than local errors and applies rewriting strategy keeping the original idea intact.

*Text Approximation* (Holes, 1984 cited in Khan 2003): This is a process oriented feedback giving method which focuses on multiple drafts and revisions to “approximate an English text of similar type” (p. 11).

*Taped Commentary* (Hyland, 1990; Schriver, 1991; Boswood & Dwyer, 1995 cited in Khan): Following this method, teachers’ remarks are recorded on tape. In addition, to make the identifying process easy for the students, numbers are written on students’ written text along with teacher’s comment.

*Grades/Numbers* (Khan 2003): This is the most common method for giving feedback where teachers evaluate students’ writing giving different grades (A, B, C) or number (7/10, 9/10). The author mentions that this method is more applicable in examination purpose and for classroom context; she suggests a combination of other methods along with this one.

It is important to mention that in literature, there is an ongoing debate on the ground that which stage of students’ writing should be taken into consideration for giving feedback. Researchers like Keh (1996); Krashen (2003); and Truscott (1999) opine that the teachers should give feedback focusing on ‘high order concerns’ i.e. organization of contents, coherence, development of ideas etc. than ‘lower order concerns’ (i.e. grammar, sentence structure).

On the contrary, Ferris (2003) strongly claims that the teachers should provide feedback on all aspects of students’ text including content, rhetoric structure, grammar and mechanics. Even it is declined in his study that giving feedback while writing may cause de-motivation to students. But, he suggests by saying that feedback is important and effective when it is delivered at intermediate stage of the writing process.

Now, in this paper, I will discuss how feedback was given to my students' writings incorporating the error-correction, written comments, grading and conferencing methods of giving feedback. These methods were particularly followed since in our context, students are more habituated and familiar to these methods of feedback comparing with other methods. To add, these mentioned methods do not demand for any technological support which is in other way convenient for the English language teachers of public universities in Bangladesh where we have limited access to multimedia in classroom. Moreover, to deal with a large number of students in class, these selected methods are easy going and less time consuming than other methods to apply in a typical classroom situation of Bangladeshi public universities. In executing this process of giving feedback to my students' writings, my students' attitude, problems that I faced, and my attempts to solve those problems will be focused as well.

### **3. Methodology**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach has been followed to conduct this qualitative study. Following this particular approach, this paper examines each step involved in giving feedback to students' writings along with the students' experience of gradual development of their writing and their mentality to accept and incorporate the feedback in their writing. A detailed analysis of students' writing, provided feedback and students' attitude toward the feedback and how they have incorporated these into their writing are presented and discussed with the researcher's own interpretation. In addition, this study tries to offer an insight on how a combination of different forms of feedback played a constructive role in teaching the writing course "English for Academic Purposes 2 (EAP 2)" to the undergraduate students of a public university. This is also a reflective and experimental study in nature since the study has been initiated from the

experience of teaching this course for six months (a regular semester) including class tests on writing, assignments and two examinations. Students' assignments were the major source of data for the study.

### *3.1 Participants*

The course was taught to the first year, second semester students of English Department from a very renowned public university in Bangladesh. They were thirty in number who already have done another introductory writing course EAP 1. They had submitted thirty assignments on a specific topic given by the author. Analyzing the students' writing texts, three sample copies out of thirty copies had been selected finally with the purpose of demonstrating them in the paper as examples of nature of feedback that was provided to the students' writing texts.

### *3.2 Data Collection Tool*

Since this is a reflective and experimental study, students' submitted assignments were the main tool of data collection. The students had to submit their writing assignments incorporating the feedback given by the author. Besides, the author's reflection, observation and experiences of teaching the course were also interpreted as data for the study.

### *3.3 Data Collection Method and Analysis*

The author had kept a manual record of the given feedback in a notebook. Some of the students' assignments were also photocopied to keep hard document for the study. Students' attitude and willingness to incorporate the feedback were also observed closely with manual note taking method. Descriptive analysis method has been followed to accomplish the discussion section of the paper.



## 4. Discussion of the Findings

### *4.1 First Step: Instruction for the Task*

The course EAP 2 intends to offer a detail understanding about different types of essay and report writing which demand different forms of feedback (such as, error-correction, conference, written comments, grading etc.) .

At first, I started teaching the basic principles of writing i.e. how to form a thesis statement, how to support the thesis with evidence, how to use transitional words, how to restate the thesis in conclusion etc. After performing a good number of practice sessions, I taught the students the four steps of writing i.e. pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. Next, I also taught the four bases for revising an essay which are unity, support, coherence and sentence skills. The rationale for teaching the four bases was that it would be helpful for students to understand how to revise a piece of writing instructionally and effectively. Students also practiced each base with a sample essay in the form of group work to make the class more engaging. Different classroom activities were practiced in the class such as, revising a part or a whole part of an essay, discussing the effects of changes etc. Such kinds of activity were done to remove students' anxiety in revision. Further, such activities also helped my students to get a proper idea about the feedback giving process, ways of giving specific feedback positively, and understanding any logical written comments of teacher on their drafts. After that, students started writing the first draft of a process essay titled 'Effective Techniques to Improve Writing Skills' and submitted it for assessment.

Though I had discussed and introduced the idea of feedback to my students earlier, I was worried about my students' psychological state that whether they were able to

receive the feedback positively. So, to know their attitude toward feedback, I applied ‘conference’ technique to collect students responses on the previously given feedback. I tried to know whether they comprehended the feedback or were willing to incorporate these in their writing. From that conference session, I got some valuable information regarding my written comments on their writings. I understood that the feedback which I provided was quite specific and beneficial in nature as reported by the students. Thus, my first task to set the mindset of my students was done and I initiated the next step.

#### *4.2 Second Step: How Did I Give Constructive Feedback*

Keeping in mind all the feedback techniques, I followed an eclectic approach which was a mixture of error-correction, written comments, grading and conferencing. The rationale was that it would prevent me from being biased to follow any single technique. Most importantly, the aim was to engage my students in the process approach of writing more actively and positively.

I started checking the submitted copies of the students’ assignments using imperative comments rather than negative one. For example, I commented ‘this writing needs to contain enough argument to support the thesis’ rather than ‘this paper does not contain enough arguments’. The second sentence is a general comment which will not help the student to bring the changes accordingly. But, the first one is quite specific and well-focused which will guide the students to accept the changes rationally. Besides, writing specific comments makes the feedback process more action-oriented also through which the teacher can provide specific action to be taken and the recipient can take it easily and rationally.

Then, after highlighting the specific points to improve, I tried to identify the main ideas in their writings instead of

finding error in sentences. If anybody failed to develop the main ideas in the draft, I discussed through written comments how to achieve that properly. In other words, I focused here on global errors (higher order concerns) rather than local errors (lower order concerns).

After that I returned the first drafts among the students and further advised them to read and comprehend the written feedback carefully. They were told to discuss with me after the class if they had any confusion. Thus, another conference session took place and strikingly I found out that students were very serious about the revision as they had to submit second draft of the writing by the following week. I realized that by using conference technique, I was not only able to elicit students' responses but also to perceive the suitability of my written comments on their first drafts. I took notes on different important aspects as reflected in the conferences by the students.

After the submission of the second draft, I arranged group activity in class and asked each group to exchange their copy with another group. They were instructed to make comment on the writings as readers and to give grades to the concerned essays. The idea of putting grades injected excitement and enthusiasm in the students in doing the task. Students incorporated the feedback received from other group and revised finally to submit the final draft of the assignment.

#### *4.3 Third Step: Analysis of Students' Sample*

Here is the analysis of some of the samples of students' writing and the responses I provided:

#### 4.3.1. Sample of students' writing 1

There are many ways to improve writing skill. Effective techniques are many important to make good writing. Brainstorming, effective word choice, accurate use of grammar, writing coherent sentence structure are more important effective techniques to improve writing skill.

#### Teacher response (Written Comment):

It is a very well focused introductory paragraph. Your thesis sentence is also clear. Your sentence structure is simple and expressive. But, I think you need to be more cautious regarding subject- verb agreement, use of appropriate word( second sentence) and use of unnecessary and extra words (last sentence).

I also rewrote it for the students to show an example how the text could be corrected:

There are many ways to improve writing skill. Some effective techniques may make our writing accurate and meaningful. Brainstorming, appropriate word choice, accurate use of grammar, writing coherent sentence structure are some of these effective techniques which can be followed in writing to improve our writing skill.

Students' response on the given feedback (collected from the conference session which was followed by the class where written comment was given):

As this was my first assignment at University so I was quite nervous. However, I understand my mistakes and will try to correct my grammar following the feedback. Thank you to say nice words for my introduction. Really, it gives me confidence to write the whole assignment.

It can be noted here that how specific and logical comments help the students to understand their mistakes in writing. Besides, students did not feel threatened and thus positive attitude toward feedback and motivation to writing practice can be fostered among them.

#### 4.3.2 Sample of students' writing 2

The best way to improve one's writing skill one must have to find a good writing partner. If one has a writing partner, he/ she must read your writing and must find out mistakes that one have done. And then, he/she would inform that person about the mistakes and thus one can give up wrong/mistaken writing forever.

#### Teacher response (Written Comment):

Your idea is very innovative. However, you need to be careful of proper use of sentence structure and subject- verb agreement rule as such care will help you to produce accurate sentence in your writing. I have rephrased your writing to give you a clear idea about the use of accurate sentence structure and selection of appropriate form of words. Here is an example how you can rewrite it:

An efficient study partner can possibly act as an important contributor to any student who is looking forward to improving his writing skill. In other words, if one has a writing partner, he can share his writing confidently with the partner and elicit responses from him too. Most importantly, the student can request the partner to read his writing carefully and find out mistake that the piece of writing carries. And then, the partner can inform him about the mistakes and thus he can be aware of his mistakes in writing and continue to write correctly.

#### Students' response on the given feedback (collected from the conference session which was followed by the class where written comment was given):

While I was submitting this assignment, I had fear in my mind that you would not accept the idea of having writing partner. But, amazingly, when I first read your written comment, I felt very happy because you supported my creative idea of keeping a partner. However, I feel sorry for my poor sentence structure. But, I can assure you that I have not copied from any source. Now, I have learnt seeing your sample writing that how to construct my sentence by selecting proper words, using transitional words to express the meaning clearly.

#### 4.3.3 Sample of students' writing 3

Everyone expects a good writing about any topic. But all the persons don't afford to have a good writing. To improve writing skill one must follow some techniques. There are so many suggestions by the famous writer to improve in writing. Now, I am writing some techniques to improve one's writing skill in the below.

#### Teacher response (Written Comment):

I appreciate your opening paragraph. Almost all of your sentences are correct. However, you need to take care of your sentence structure, word choice and the meaning of the sentences. Now, I am rewriting your paragraph in order to give you a hint that how to construct meaningful sentences. Here is an example how you can rewrite it-

Everyone expects to write in an organized way on a given topic. But, sometimes this cannot be possible as one may not know the ways to write appropriately and accurately. To improve one's writing skill, one must follow some techniques. Experts have pointed out some important techniques which contribute to the improvement of the writing skill. In this essay, I will discuss some effective techniques which are necessary to improve one's writing skill.

Students' response on the given feedback (collected from the conference session which was followed by the class where written comment was given):

I always fear to write anything because I cannot make meaningful sentences. Though, I read a lot but I don't feel any interest to write. But, after joining this writing class, I feel motivated to think and write, in other words, I want to express my feeling through writing. I understand your rewriting clearly and will try to form meaningful sentences in the next draft.

All these words said by the students justify the effectiveness of giving clear and comprehensive feedback in terms of using a mixture of different forms of feedback. It also shows that, in teaching writing, feedback does not only help students to develop their writing skill but also to build a rapport

between the teacher and students which are very important for any classroom situation.

#### *4.4 Fourth Step: Experienced Difficulties*

While giving feedback to students regarding their assignments, I have faced some challenging situations. These are pointed out below:

- a. Firstly, I had a large number of students in my class (30 students were in the class which is a very common scenario in any public university in Bangladesh). Giving detailed and intensive feedback to every student was very difficult and time consuming.
- b. Next, for lack of multimedia support it was difficult to demonstrate some lesson-concerned examples before students. Sometimes I faced hard time to hold up students' concentration without having audio-visual support.
- c. When the students were asked to submit their assignment using MS Office programme, many of them informed that they did not know how to operate MS office programme. The most striking fact was that, many students were found who did not have access to computer (this is another common scenario for the students of public universities here). This situation was complex enough to go ahead with writing task.
- d. Motivating introvert and shy students into group and pair work was a big challenge in the class.
- e. Another important issue was dealing with plagiarism in students' writing. Though I had taught them previously how to refer somebody's work properly, but lack of their sincerity or consciousness made it difficult to avoid plagiarism in writing.
- f. The most important problem as faced by me was students' misunderstanding about the given feedback on their draft. Students of poor proficiency failed to understand the written comments sometimes. Moreover, some students

were unwilling to accept and incorporate the feedback showing the tendency of being overconfident in writing since, they have the highest grade (A+) in English in their S.S.C and H.S.C.

- g. Some of the students, instead of incorporating the feedback, they changed their whole writing and submitted a new writing in the second draft either for not comprehending the feedback or for being frustrated.

#### *4.5 Fifth Step: Applied Techniques to Overcome the Perceived Problems*

- a. In order to manage the class properly, I made 10 groups and each group was consisting of 3 students. As I wanted to reach every student, I organized the conference session especially for the low proficiency learners who need extra time and care from teacher.
- b. To ensure students' computerized assignment submission, I assigned one student to every group who has access to computer and can help the other. Besides, I suggested them to go to any nearby cyber café for typing.
- c. While selecting group members, I formed mixed ability students' group i.e. mixing up good and struggling students in each group.
- d. Since the tendency of copying from another source cannot be removed from their writing overnight, I kept emphasizing the importance of original writing in conferences. I also warned them mentioning how plagiarism may affect their higher study.
- e. I used black pen instead of red pen to keep up students' positive attitude toward their writing task and to minimize the fear of getting feedback on their writing.
- f. I always arranged conferences immediately after giving written feedback to the students to ensure their proper comprehension of the feedback and keep them motivated and confident toward the writing task. It helped to remove



misunderstanding between me and the students regarding the feedback on their writing.

## **5. Implications**

Applying different forms of feedback helped the lower proficiency students particularly since they were in need of intensive feedback than the others. So, this process oriented method was very useful for them in their different steps of writing. Moreover, the students reported me that it helped them to realize the fact that it is more important to focus on the writing process rather than the final product in the phase of developing writing skills. They have got the message that feedback is not something to undermine them rather to scaffold to reach their target level of competency in writing.

On the other hand, since the paper shows an example of how different feedback techniques could be implied in teaching writing, the young and novice teachers who are concerned with teaching writing to undergraduate students may find it useful to get an insight of this practical implication of different forms of feedback. Though these process and feedback oriented system of teaching writing may seem less exciting, yet the effective changes in students' writing could be the appropriate reward to carry out the process.

## **6. Limitations**

While giving specific and detailed feedback is a challenge for the teachers, here combination of different forms of feedback may create more pressure on the part of the teacher which could be a big challenge to carry out the process. Moreover, to ensure the effectiveness of the given feedback, the teacher needs to take enough preparation thus it demands the teachers' hardworking ability and energy. There is another limitation of the process which I have observed in my class. I had to put

extra effort to keep my students motivated and engaged in the process as many of them were feeling pressurized because of the amount of writing and feedback they had to undergo. Teacher's friendly behavior in this case can help to minimize the problem.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper reflects the author's personal experience and observation of conducting a writing class using different forms of feedback (error-correction, written comments, grading and conferencing). The outcome shows that a mixture of different methods of giving feedback is beneficial for the students since it is successful to give detailed, specific, clear and finally constructive feedback to the student which is the expected nature of the feedback for teaching writing. Though combining different forms of feedback may seem new and complex, but the teachers who are passionate and interested to implement new and different approaches in teaching writing may find the paper useful and instigative.

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