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# UNVEILING THE FOCUS OF A TEACHER'S WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' COMPOSITION WRITING IN PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the focus of a teacher's written feedback on students' English composition writing in a private elementary school in Karachi. The sample included a grade VII English language teacher and a group of four students. Data were gathered from interviews with the teacher and students, samples of students' work, relevant documents and observation. It was found that a teacher's feedback comprised symbols and written comments. Surface-level errors such as grammar and spellings were identified and corrected. Some positive remarks were provided on students' compositions which helped to establish a congenial relationship between the teacher and students. Nonetheless, a teacher's written feedback did not emphasise content aspects of the language e.g. relevancy, organisation, coherence and originality. The implication of this study is that teachers need exposure to professional development opportunities in order to create a more enabling environment for developing students' writing skills through written feedback.

**Key words:** English as a second language; composition writing; written feedback; elementary level

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A teacher's written feedback that over-emphasises accuracy in English language is likely to develop an assumption among students that writing is merely a mechanical task of using appropriate grammatical structures, spellings and mechanics. This is especially pertinent in the context of Pakistan where students struggle to express themselves in English even though the subject is taught as a second language and the skill of writing is compulsory (Khan, 2011). The situation becomes more critical when students have to communicate through writing in the real world.

This scenario necessitates complementing the existing mode of written feedback with a more appropriate one. Nevertheless, to achieve this aim there is a need to uncover the existing focus of written feedback provided by teachers. This called for an in-depth empirical study to explore the emphasis of a teacher's written feedback on students' composition writing in the English language classroom.

The key terms – 'writing' and 'written feedback' – are now operationalised for the purpose of this research. Writing is a complex skill that is acquired through a combination of various basic motor skills as well as complex cognition skills (Leki, 1992). Writing is not confined to the mechanical task of mastering isolated skills in handwriting but also involves sentence and paragraph construction, spelling and punctuation, through a programme of de-contextualised exercises (Peacock, 1986). Moreover, it "does not refer to filling the blanks, copying out sentences and answering questions" (Peacock, 1986, p. 2) but goes beyond transcription and encoding to an act of communicating ideas through the medium of written words.

On the other hand, written feedback is taken to mean an interaction between students' writing and the teacher. In this process teachers read the composition and respond to it through some symbols or written comments. Thus, according to Askew and Lodge (2000) feedback is, "a one-way communication, from teacher to student, to provide information to help students learn" (p. 5).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, the term feedback is considered a response of teachers towards students' performance. However, the functions and purposes of feedback have been viewed in different ways by several authors. Sometimes feedback is associated with the sole purpose of 'judging'. For example, Askew and Lodge (2000) refer to feedback as "a judgement which implies satisfaction or criticism with the learner's performance" (p. 7). On the other hand, feedback is considered as the information learners receive regarding the appropriateness or accuracy of their writing (Mayer, 1994). Feedback can be categorised into two distinctive types; verbal and written. The former refers to a discourse between teachers and students where teachers discuss a child's performance with him/her. It may take place in or outside the classroom. The second type is the most common mode of feedback. It refers to teachers'

written responses on students' work. These responses may be expressed by underlining, circling, putting a tick/cross sign, or by using some pre-defined codes such as 'sp'; for spelling, 'ww'; for wrong word, etc. Teachers may also write comments to describe the quality of students' work. Whether a symbol or a comment, this written feedback is evident in a teacher-dominant classroom where the sole responsibility of providing feedback lies with the teacher.

The role of feedback is crucial for encouraging and consolidating learning particularly in the context of second language writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Written feedback for teachers, serves as a tool to accomplish their varied purposes and requirements of writing classrooms. In some cases, teachers provide written feedback just to fulfil school policies and requirements where they use written feedback for the purpose of evaluating the end product (Rodrigues, 2006; Khan, 2012). In other cases, teachers use written feedback to identify the strengths and weaknesses of learners in terms of writing. In the light of written feedback, teachers can design and plan more effective ways to improve students' writing skills (Reid, 1993). Thus, a teacher's written feedback not only consolidates learning but also sets goals for the writing classroom.

Teachers in English writing classrooms, regardless of their selected pedagogy (product or process) spend endless time and energy in responding to students' compositions (Khan, 2011). A possible explanation for this could be the low tolerance of both the teacher and students to errors in the final product (Haider, 2012). Therefore, a teacher's written response as Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue "continues to play a central role in most L2 and foreign language (FL) writing classes" (p. 84).

Williams (2003) examined some most common methods of written feedback in L2 classes. He highlighted issues in different types of written feedback. For instance, feedback on 'form' was 'inconsistent' and 'unclear' because it did not help students to recognise the errors on their own. Hence, students merely copied the teacher's error correction as rewrites. Likewise, feedback on content was 'vague', 'contradictory', 'unsystematic' and 'inconsistent' (Williams, 2003). That is to say, feedback on content did not seem to be effective in terms of helping students comprehend the errors; nor did it seem to facilitate students in their writing development. Acknowledging the needs of ESL students Williams (2003) suggested that feedback on 'form' and feedback on 'content' should be based on a 'standard set of symbols' to mark grammar errors and a 'standard set of clear and direct comments' to respond to students' content in writing.

In the context of developing countries teachers' written remarks tend to focus on the accuracy of students' compositions. Fregeau (1999) notes that, "the assessment of writing is based on language structure, spelling and punctuation [which] ... forces students to acquire mastery over language structure and conventions." (p. 8). As a result, the main purpose of writing assessment is to prevent and eliminate all errors in students' writing (Leki, 1992). The situation is no different in Pakistan. While studies have been conducted in the area of second language writing and feedback (e.g. Jehan, 1998; Khan, 2002; Rodrigues, 2006) these have not directly addressed the aspect of teacher feedback in an elementary classroom. For example, Rashidi (2002) conducted an action research to improve the assessment system of her school and to investigate the possibilities and challenges of introducing portfolios for assessing students' writing skills. The study was based on the assumption that a teacher's written feedback was not helpful in developing students' writing skills. However, neither was the type of teacher feedback investigated, nor was the implication of it on students' writing identified. Rather, the study simply sought a solution to improve the situation and examined some more progressive trends of feedback such as, self assessment, peer-feedback and conferencing to improve the assessment practices of writing. Similarly, Rodrigues (2006) explored the potential and challenges of implementing portfolio assessment in the context of primary English language writing classrooms in Pakistan. Four English Language primary school teachers received an in-service training to help them introduce portfolio assessment in their classrooms. The intervention period comprised six months. Findings revealed some benefits and challenges of portfolio as an assessment tool in the classroom. Nonetheless, written feedback was not the explicit focus of this study.

Therefore, prior to introducing alternative methods of feedback there is a need to unveil the existing focus of a teacher's written feedback so that its potential could be noted and plans for improvement made. The paucity of research in this area calls for a study to address this gap.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study was conducted in a private English medium Girls' elementary school in Karachi. I preferred to work at the elementary level because the number of writing tasks, its length and complexity increased at this stage. Moreover, I have experience of teaching at this level. Therefore, this study was pitched at the elementary level so that I could easily relate my experience with the research context and implement the learning gained in future.

The sample comprised a grade VII English language female teacher and a group of four students. Working with students would hopefully yield insights about different issues that learners' typically faced while writing and to what extent written feedback facilitated them in dealing with those issues. The students came from middle socio-income families and English was a third language for them. Data collection occurred from January to March 2008. Multiple modes to collect data – semi-structured interviews, unstructured classroom observations, field notes, and research memos – were employed. Respondent validation was attempted by requesting the participant teacher to read transcribed interview data and filled out field notes. In addition, samples of students' work and relevant documents were analysed to triangulate findings.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. I organised the data and familiarised myself with it by critical and frequent readings of students' samples, transcripts, field notes and research memos. Analyses were not based on any predetermined categories; however, the focus of the study served as a frame of reference that facilitated the identification of relevant findings.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Manahil (pseudonym) was a young graduate. She did not have any professional degree in teaching. Nonetheless, she had attended a few conferences and workshops conducted by educational organisations such as the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT). She had also completed her certificate course in 'Assessment' from a private university<sup>1</sup>.

Manahil's written feedback, in general, included comments and symbols. Students' errors in a composition were always identified by underlining and subsequently corrected. Incorrect spellings were indicated by placing the symbol 'sp' above the word and furnishing the correct answer. Furthermore, Manahil believed that positive feedback was important for students: "I do make an effort to first begin with a positive remark [and] then come to [the] real issue." (Tr. Interview, Jan. 31). Examples of Manahil's feedback on students' writing are provided:

*You have the ability to improve the language skills and also develop your vocabulary skills. Reading appropriate books will help you.*

*Very nice imagination. Keep up the effort. Please avoid using short forms.*

*Need to practice continuous tenses.*

*Nice imagination and good effort on your part. Please improve your writing.*

*Hard work is evident but you need to improve your language skills, especially tenses.*

*Develop your vocabulary skills. (SoSW)<sup>2</sup>*

To explain the focus of her written feedback the teacher said, "We are always having criteria. We have that in our mind; we don't always assess for their grammar skills. Sometimes we just go for ideas, for organisation, for sequence of thought" (Tr. Interview, Jan. 31). Thus, it seemed that the criterion of written feedback varied with the nature of the task. However, the unavailability of set criteria in written form made it difficult to analyse the intent of the teacher's written feedback, and how it distinguished one composition from the other. The students indicated that their teacher informed them about what she would be looking for in a task. In addition, the focus of the teacher's written feedback was gauged by analysing samples of students' work. Some examples of the teacher's feedback on a range of writing tasks are presented next.

##### 4.1 Written feedback on 'paragraph writing'

A student wrote about her experience of shopping at a mall. "... There was a rush and everybody seemed to be very happy and they were enjoying their shopping and some of them were enjoying window shopping" (SoSW). The example taken from the paragraph of student 'A' highlighted issues of organisation and coherence. However, none of the teacher's written responses looked into content-related aspects such as relevancy of ideas with the selected topic, organisation, coherence and originality of the content. This is because paragraph writing was meant to evaluate the students' use of the past tense. Therefore, in her written feedback Manahil commented on only the use of the past tense: '*Need to practice continuous tense*'; '*Practice your tenses. Reading appropriate books will help you.*' (SoSW)

##### 4.2 Written feedback on a 'fantasy story'

As far as paragraph writing was concerned, the teacher's claim of focusing upon one aspect of a text (i.e. tenses) in her written feedback seemed to be valid. A slightly different picture emerged when samples of students' fantasy stories – which focused mainly on students' imaginative skills – were analysed. The teacher's written feedback in the fantasy story dealt more with the language aspects of the story. For example, student 'C' received a

<sup>1</sup> The course content introduced participants to the concept of formative assessment and some tools of classroom assessment.

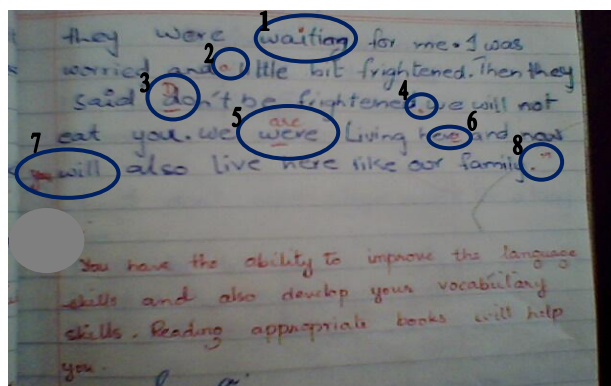
<sup>2</sup> Sample of Students' Work.

comment, "Good imagination and good effort on your part. Please improve you[r] writing" (SoSW). Besides this comment, fourteen errors were also identified and corrected by the teacher in the same story. Examples from the fantasy story of student 'C' are provided in table 1.

**Table 1:** Teacher's written feedback on a fantasy story

Students' actual work	Written feedback
&	& and
Pleasure	Pleasure <sub>ant</sub>
Walked	was Walked <sub>ing</sub>
boath of	Boat <del>th</del> <del>of</del>
Site	Site <sub>Side,</sub>
Distent	Distent <sub>ance</sub>

A further sample (figure 1) is taken from the concluding lines of a fantasy story. In these five lines the teacher underlined and corrected eight surface level errors. Errors labelled 1 and 6 were related to incorrect spellings. Mechanics (capital letters, full stops and inverted commas) were highlighted in 3, 4 and 8. Errors 5 and 7 referred to issues of tenses. Error 2 indicated the missing indefinite article 'a'. The teacher's written feedback commented on language aspects and provided suggestions to work on vocabulary (figure 1). The content aspects of this story were not addressed. Thus, Manahil's written feedback seemed to devote complete attention to surface features of the text at the expense of developing students' imaginative skills.



**Fig.1.** Sample of a student's work

#### 4.3 Written feedback on 'recipe writing'

Similarly, students received written feedback (symbols) on the surface-level errors of recipe writing. None of them received any comments. Examples of the teacher's feedback on students' errors in recipe writing are provided in table 2.

**Table 2:** Teacher's written feedback on recipe writing

Students	Students' errors	Feedback by the teacher
Student 'A'	1. mixer	1. <u>mixer</u> <sup>mixture</sup>
Student 'B'	1. a 2. took	1. <u>a</u> <sup>the</sup> 2. <u>took</u> <sup>will take</sup>
Student 'C'	1. From 2. grbbles	1. <u>from</u> <sup>form</sup> 2. <u>grbbles</u> <sup>sp</sup>
Student 'D'	1. became 2. tomorrow	1. <u>became</u> <sup>s</sup> the next day 2. <u>tomorrow</u>

The teacher stated that her students welcomed her comments and acknowledged the importance of positive remarks. This positive impact of the teacher's comments was also confirmed by the students. "Her [the teacher's] main work is to improve the child not just checking and going on checking" (FG<sup>3</sup>, Jan. 31). Thus, Manahil's written feedback was a source of connection between the students and the teacher. She herself was aware of this aspect:

... that is bringing them very near me, very close to me and I want my students to be close and they are [sic] they are very comfortable with me. If they have any problem they approach me and they tell me that what is the problem. (Tr. Interview, Jan. 31)

Students appreciated their teacher. "If we ask her, she answers ... she never hesitates"; "we feel like a friend only"; "she is a nice person" (FG, Jan. 31). Learners did not express any negative feelings such as hesitation, frustration or fear towards the teacher's written feedback.

Manahil claimed that the formative assessment course at a private university had had a great impact on her beliefs about assessment. She compared her past and present practices of assessment and feedback. In the beginning she "was correcting for each and everything; the grammar, the language, the vocabulary ... there were so many red marks ..." but did not find improvement in students' writing. Later, she realised that students' progress was a gradual process – "is not a one night change" – so the assessment process needed to be slow and look at students' progression rather than instant results (Tr. Interview, Jan. 31).

The teacher affirmed that the details of students' progress were recorded in her 'assessment file'. Nevertheless, an analysis of the document showed that it was catering for all types of classroom activities. That is to say, the file was being used for recording and evaluating various tasks (not only writing but other tasks such as reading comprehension and listening activities). Thus the assessment file did not match the teacher's stated purposes of 'look[ing] at students' progression' (Tr. Interview, Jan. 31).

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on illustrative examples from different writing tasks (writing a recipe, a paragraph and a fantasy story) it is evident that the teacher's written feedback focused mainly on the form of students' compositions. Errors such as the incorrect verbs, spellings, articles, capital letters, full stops and commas were identified and corrected. The teacher's comments were positive and of two categories: the first looked at students' content but were judgemental and did not lead the pupils to improve further e.g. '*Nice imagination and good effort on your part. Please improve your writing*'; '*Hard work is evident but you need to improve language skills, especially tenses*'. In the second category of written remarks students' needs that were specific to form only were highlighted. For example, '*Need to practice continuous tenses*'; '*Develop your vocabulary skills*'. Hence, the generally positive comments by the teacher only served to make students happy which was definitely not the ultimate goal of a writing class. That is to say, Manahil's written comments did not contribute much towards students' development in the skill of writing in terms of both form and content.

Providing feedback in a second language is integral to develop students' writing skills (Herrera, 2011). Overall, the teacher's written feedback seemed to be geared towards diligently rectifying the 'form' aspects (e.g. grammar, structure and spelling) of students' compositions instead of responding to what learners had written and asking them to develop it further (Khan, 2011). However, this is likely to develop ambiguity in students' 'creative instincts in writing' as the purpose of assessment and feedback needs to 'assist a child with assessing his/her own

<sup>3</sup> Focus Group.

progress or understanding' (Vazir & Ismail, 2009, p. 308). Furthermore, a common 'side effect' of grammar correction is that it consumes considerable time and energy in the writing class (Truscott, 1996).

Analyses of students' work samples revealed that a majority of the learners were aware of the use of different grammatical structures and were using those appropriately. For instance, all students used the present simple tense and some simple connectors to describe the process of preparing 'a magic potion'. In addition, students used the simple past and continuous tenses in their paragraphs and fantasy story. This showed that students' language proficiency (specifically in terms of accuracy) seemed to improve when grammar errors were identified and corrected (Fathman & Whalley, 1990).

The teacher's friendly attitude encouraged students to approach her in case of any queries. Thus, students appreciated the teacher's inviting approach and her written comments provided on their compositions. 'If our English teacher would not write any feedback so how do we know [sic] our writing is improved' and "we will not know our mistakes" (FG, Jan. 31). That is to say, the teacher took it upon herself to fulfil students' expectations of her in terms of providing comments on their written work – a finding that resonates well with research (e.g. Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2004). Thus, students seemed to greatly value error-free work (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Nevertheless, teachers need to ponder carefully before providing feedback which needs to be 'reflective' rather than 'reflexive' so that students may make the most of it for language development (Hyland, 2010). Furthermore, it is preferable that errors are identified selectively as providing feedback on each and every error may be cumbersome for teachers and daunting for students (Ferris, 2002; Herrera, 2011).

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are provided:

- ◆ A more specific and consistent method of written feedback which takes into account the limitations of the prevalent written feedback methods may lead to progress in students' writing skills.
- ◆ It is imperative for English language teachers to be exposed to in-service professional development opportunities to learn more about the purposes of assessing the skill of writing and the repertoire of strategies available for providing feedback on students' writing. Ultimately, the type of feedback provided by teachers will depend on a number of idiosyncratic factors such as the 'context, time and situation' (Herrera, 2011).
- ◆ A systematic follow-up procedure is essential to ensure the effectiveness of written feedback. Manahil's 'assessment file' was found to be a very helpful tool for follow-up purposes. It could be more effectively used to maintain a record of students' progression in writing as well as to identify and address their writing needs.
- ◆ Once the students are able to identify and analyse their errors they need to be involved in self-correction, peer-correction and self-editing exercises. This places a responsibility on teachers to help equip learners in effectively incorporating feedback so that students can more ably develop their writing skills.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Written feedback with one specified objective seemed to be more effective and may gradually improve students' grammar accuracy. On the other hand, underlining all the errors but not giving input on the types of errors and suggestions to improve is more likely to impede students' writing skills. However, regardless of the type of written feedback and its limitations students still expect it.

The use of positive comments on students' writing was a great source of motivation for students. However, most of the teacher's comments appreciated students' efforts in general and gave suggestions to improve the 'form' rather than drawing attention towards coherence and organisation of the text. Consequently, the teacher's written comments did not lead to a significant improvement in students' content features i.e. organisation, coherence, relevancy and originality. Replacement of a teacher's generic and vague comments with more content-oriented remarks (e.g. specific 'directions', 'guidelines' and, 'recommendations'), might be more fruitful to improve the content aspects of students' write-ups (Zamel, 1985).

A teacher's positive written feedback may establish a less threatening environment in the class where students are motivated when the strengths of their compositions are acknowledged by the teacher. Consequently, learners would not fear being scolded and are likely to approach the teacher to discuss the feedback in more detail for greater clarity.

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