

## **RETHINKING FEEDBACK ON WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:**

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### **TEACHER AND PEER VIEW**

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## **RETHINKING FEEDBACK ON WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS: TEACHER AND PEER VIEW**

**Abstract.** This study surveys the opinions of both teachers and students involved in the Year 1 course "University English" in the Language Centre at City University of Hong Kong. The survey involved 265 students and 37 teachers. The issues studied were: 1.) How useful is peer and teacher feedback? 2.) How effective are direct vs. indirect approaches to providing teacher feedback? The students fell into two groups: 1.) Those students required to correct their language errors based on prompts provided by teachers either by pencil-and-paper comments or through the online software program "turnitin" vs. 2.) Those students whose language errors were corrected by teachers either by pencil-and-paper comments or by using the Microsoft system "Track Changes". Major finding across the student population showed that: 1.) There was no significant difference between students favoring teacher feedback and those who considered teacher and student feedback to be equally useful; similarly, the teacher population showed null significance in their perceptions of teacher vs. peer feedback. 2.) Significantly more students preferred teacher corrections with brief explanations than students who preferred making corrections based solely on teacher prompts. The teacher population, however, favored the opposite alternative. Qualitative analysis of questionnaire responses showed the differences students and teachers encountered with direct and indirect approaches to correction.

**Keywords:** Peer feedback, Indirect feedback, Direct feedback, Writing, Error Correction

## 1. Introduction

The value of peer feedback and the effectiveness of direct/indirect feedback on students' essays have been the subjects of many research studies [e.g., 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Peer feedback is intended to allow students to benefit from mutual help, to develop critical thinking skills, and to lighten teachers' workload. Similarly, an indirect approach to correcting student's language mistakes is often advocated based on the argument that indirect feedback can help students develop self-editing strategies, and, in the long term, to provide students with an opportunity to correct their own mistakes in grammar, paragraph structure and essay structure and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Indirect feedback is also believed to be able to foster students' cognitive development, reflective thinking, and problem-solving skills [3, 7], except in situations in which the errors are too complex in nature or when the L2 learners do not possess sufficient grammatical knowledge to correct their mistakes [4, 8, 1]. Still, empirical studies investigating both peer feedback and indirect feedback have tended to be inconclusive. As far as the usefulness of peer feedback is concerned, as noted by Ferris [6], the assumptions that peer feedback "may have value in helping students to edit their work and improve the accuracy and clarity of their writing" have not been supported by empirical evidence (p.38). Similarly, the findings about the efficacy of indirect feedback vary from study to study. For example, in some studies, students receiving indirect feedback were found to perform significantly better than those who received direct feedback [11,9]. However, no significant difference was observed between two groups of students receiving direct and indirect feedback [13]. Ferris [5] found that in the short term (i.e., between drafts of a paper), direct feedback produced better revision results (88% correct versus 77% correct); yet in the long term (i.e., over a full semester), indirect feedback helped student produce substantially fewer errors than direct feedback.

The results of studies on indirect feedback and peer feedback are largely inconclusive, probably because of the complexities involved in the contexts of the studies. Such complexities seem to involve: 1.) Human factors, such as students' English proficiency and students' motivation to learn the target language; 2.) The nature of errors being investigated; 3.) The explicitness of the prompts teachers give to students to indicate the nature of errors; and 4.) The availability of other supporting forms of error feedback, for example, student-teacher conferences.

Considering these variables, this study aims to investigate whether indirect feedback is preferred by both teachers and students in a language environment where the L2 Year 1 university students who possessed a poor level of English proficiency were required to write two academic essays under the constraint of a class size as large as 25 students and a duration as short as 15 minutes for a teacher-student consultation. To be specific, this study aims to investigate both students' and teachers' views on:

- 1.) The usefulness of peer feedback and the possible barriers to the successful implementation peer feedback and
- 2.) The usefulness of direct and indirect corrective feedback and the coincident problems encountered by both students and teachers.

It is hoped that the findings from this study may shed light on a workable way for

students to benefit from peer and teacher feedback.

## **2. Methodology**

Two questionnaires were developed. The student version contained 12 questions, while the teacher version contained 13 questions. Because of the word limit for papers in this journal, the questionnaires are not appended to this truncated version of the paper; the full questionnaires can be supplied gratis upon request.

This study involved 265 native Cantonese-speaking Year 1 students who had scored Grade E or Grade D in the Hong Kong A-Level Examination in the subject of English (an indication that their proficiency was inadequate). These L2 learners of English took the 36-hour course “University English” (hereafter “the GE course”) offered by the English Language Centre (ELC) at the City University of Hong Kong in the first semester in 2011-12. Students were required to complete two writing assignments, the first to analyze the causes/effects of a problem (700 to 900 words), and the second to convince readers of the best solution to the problem identified in the first writing task (900 to 1200 words).

There were 24 native speakers of English and 13 non-native speakers of English (12 teachers speak Cantonese as their first language and one speaks French as her first language). Among the 37 teachers, 14 were males and 18 females. The teachers have taught English at the tertiary level for an average of 12 years. Seven teachers are between 25-35 years or 36-45 years of age; thirteen teachers are between 46-55 years of age; one is between 56-65 years of age.

Copies of the student-version of the questionnaire were distributed in class for students to complete in 15 minutes on a voluntary basis towards the end of the 2011-12 second semester. A total of 14 classes participated in the study, involving 265 students, accounting for 36.5% of all GE students ( $265/727 = 36.5\%$ ). Copies of the teacher version of the questionnaire were distributed and completed on a Teacher Development Day in May 2011; 37 teachers voluntarily participated in the study.

Both student- and teacher-data were subjected to quantitative analysis using SPSS Program 19.0 and proportional t-tests; qualitative analysis was performed manually for Questions 5 and 6 based on recurring themes.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Quantitative findings**

- Both the teacher and student populations regarded peer feedback and teacher feedback to be equally important.
- Significantly more students (44.3%) believed that feedback on organization was the most important compared with that on content (29.2%) and grammar (12.9%); feedback on content received the second highest rating, though that rating was not significantly greater than the most important category at the 95% confidence level. However, no dominant pattern emerged in the teacher population - teachers were divided in their opinions, showing no significant differences in their preferences.
- Sentence fragments, word choice, modal verbs, and sentence connectors constituted the top four categories of language errors that teachers thought should receive teachers' high priority attention if teachers hope to improve students' academic literacy.

- The majority of students (87.9%) believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their classmates and could make corrections accordingly. However, less than half of the teachers (45.9%) thought that peer feedback was helpful to students in terms of correcting the errors of their essays; about 35% of teachers indicated that they did not think their students understood the comments made by their classmates and corrected accordingly.
- The majority of students (94%) believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their teachers and could correct accordingly. Nonetheless, there was no dominant pattern in the teacher population. Teachers who were confident that their students could understand their written comments suggested that supplying students with correct answers and using oral feedback consultations to explain their written comments was sufficient. Teachers who were not sure about the effectiveness of their written comments expressed two concerns: 1.) Students may misunderstand their comments/suggestions and/or do not know how to make corrections. 2) Complicated errors such as those concerning organization and content were hard to explain in written comments.
- Most teachers (91.9%) and students (74.7%) preferred a combination of oral and written feedback. While most students preferred both written and oral feedback, among those students who chose the category of “written” or “oral” feedback, significantly more students preferred written feedback (17.4%) only than did students who preferred oral feedback only (7.2%).
- The majority of students (75.8%) preferred a teacher-student consultation session consisting of one teacher with one student to take place, but teachers did not show dominant pattern. Instead, about half of the teachers preferred sessions involving one teacher with one student while about half of the teachers preferred sessions involving one teacher with two students.
- The majority of students (80.4%) held the opinion that, in a teacher-student consultation, the teacher should talk more, guiding the consultation by giving advice and comments. However, no dominant pattern appeared in the teacher population -- teachers who thought that teachers should talk more did not differ significantly from those who thought that students should talk more.
- Both teachers and students believed that students were free to decide whether or not to take their teachers’ advice.
- Most teachers (64.9%) preferred using an indirect approach when dealing with the grammatical mistakes in their students’ writing assignments on the basis of having only fifteen minutes for a teacher-student consultation; however, significantly more students (35.8%) preferred that their teacher write corrections directly in their essay with explanations (even though the explanations may be brief) than did students who preferred that their teacher underline mistakes and provide some hints (asking a question, for example) for them to think about and help them to try to correct their own mistakes (20.8%).

### 3.2 Qualitative findings

- The problems students had in acting on their classmates’ comments included communication problems, unsatisfactory peer feedback, and difficulty in reacting to peer comments. The problems students had in acting on their teachers’ comments included communication problems, difficulty in reacting to teacher comments, and

time constraint.

- The problems that teachers have in providing *written* feedback to their students included uncertainty about the effectiveness of both indirect and direct approaches to giving feedback, and pressure from meeting students' expectations. The problems that teachers had in providing *oral* feedback to their students included time constraints and communication problems.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

While the limitations of this study restrict the generalizability of the findings obtained regarding the divergence between students' and teachers' perceptions, there has been sufficient demonstration of overlaps with other research presented in the literature review to call attention to some implications of this research in the following contexts:

##### **4.1 Setting priorities**

Significantly more students in this study believed that feedback on organization and content was most important than did students who believed that grammar was most important. This finding is in agreement with the conclusion in other studies that students valued feedback of all types, not just on language errors [3, 10, 12]. However, teachers were divided in their opinions without showing a dominant pattern for organization. In view of students' strong preference for feedback on organization, teachers might consider focusing their marking on organization and content (the second highest percentage of students' preference) rather than on grammatical errors.

The following four grammatical categories, indicated by the teachers in this study to be the most important four grammatical structures for improving students' academic literacy, might deserve a teacher's high priority attention: sentence fragments, modal verbs, sentence connectors, and word choice. The four categories chosen by the teachers in this study can be classified as *global errors*, though the classification could not be undisputable. According to Burt and Kiparsky [2], *global errors* interfere with the comprehensibility of a text, whereas *local errors* do not impede understanding.

##### **4.2 Whether or not to incorporate peer feedback in the writing process**

The majority of students in this study believed that they could understand the suggestions made by their classmates and make corrections accordingly. However, 35.1% of teachers in this study did not think that their students could understand the comments given by their classmates and make corrections accordingly, and less than half of the teachers (45.9%) believed that peer feedback was useful to students. While the lack of confidence on the part of teachers on the usefulness of feedback is in agreement with the general argument that activities on peer feedback are like "the blind leading the blind" [6, p.147], the difference in perceptions between students and teachers poses interesting pedagogical questions. From the students' point of view, learning has taken place, but classroom teacher do not believe that students benefit from peer feedback. Is it possible that, because students only provided oral feedback without putting their comments in writing, written comments being the major source for teachers' evaluation of the usefulness of a student's feedback on his/her classmate's essay? Is it possible that contemporary students prefer talking to writing when giving peer feedback? Future research could investigate the modes of communication preferred by students when give feedback to their peers.

#### 4.3 Is there a need to accommodate the preferences of L2 students in the feedback process?

While most teachers preferred using an indirect approach when dealing with the grammatical errors in their students' writing assignments on the basis of having only fifteen minutes for a teacher-student consultation, significantly more students preferred their teachers to write corrections directly in their essays with explanations (even though the explanations may be brief) than did students who preferred their teachers to underline the errors mistakes and provide some hints (asking a question, for example) for them to think about and help them to try to correct their own mistakes. Prompting students to correct their own mistakes may give students opportunities to think about their mistakes, but the success of this process would seem to depend to a great extent on the time available to discuss with students the appropriateness of their corrections and to guide them to use correct expressions. Nearly 40% of the teachers in this study were uncertain whether students could understand the written comments they provided. This percentage is not insignificant compared with the percentage of teachers who believed that their students understand the suggestions made by teachers and make corrections according (51.4%). The teachers who were not sure about the effectiveness of their written comments expressed such concerns as students' language ability, motivation to learn English and time available to explain the nature of some complicated errors (e.g., those involving sentence structures or coherence). Ignoring students' preferences and expectations might lead to student anxiety and frustrations and the loss of confidence in their teachers [6, p.42].

While an indirect approach may not benefit those students who have a poor proficiency level in English, the direct approach (in which teachers supply the correct answers) is not without its problems. Some students indicated that they did not know why the expressions they wrote in their essays were regarded as wrong by their teachers and that they did not understand the reasons for the corrections provided by their teachers. Their coping strategies include directly copying the teacher's correction without understanding. As some students indicated in the questionnaire, teachers were the ones giving the marks.

In view of the inadequacies of both approaches to marking students' errors, one viable approach might consist of setting priorities concerning which errors to focus on, using a combination of both direct and indirect approaches, depending on the nature of errors, students' relative language proficiency and the time available for teacher-students consultations.

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