

Feedback on Developmental Writing Students' First Drafts

By Beth Gulley

ABSTRACT: *Many writing teachers provide feedback to their students through writing conferences; however, the existing literature indicates teachers may unintentionally harm their weaker students by using this strategy. To better understand the effect of the writing conference on developmental writing students, the researcher created a mixed design ANCOVA to answer the research question: What is the effect of oral feedback delivered via student teacher conferences on significant revisions to content, structure, grammar, and style for developmental writing students? The study found no statistically significant difference among treatment groups. Therefore, the researcher concluded that students improved their drafts regardless of the feedback method.*

Not everyone believes that the student-teacher conference has value for the student.

Developmental writing teachers often feel pressured by competing directives for the appropriate method to provide feedback to their students. Researcher Nancy Sommers (2012) asked students what they thought about faculty feedback on their writing. Students suggested that teachers' written comments on their papers demoralized them and made them feel like they don't belong in college.

Scholars such as Laurel Johnson Black (1998) and Mary P. Hiatt (1975) caution that teachers who provide feedback through conferences harm their developmental writing students because the teachers focus too much on grammar. Glasswell, Parr, and McNaughton (2003) and Nickel (2001) also caution against this. Furthermore, teachers unaware of their position of power over their students may take over the students' work and can even terrify already tentative students. Another school of thought promoted by scholars such as Linda Boynton (2003), Thomas Carnicelli (1980), and Muriel Harris (1986) suggests conferencing should become teachers preferred feedback method. These competing ideas can confuse new teachers as well as conscientious teachers who want to incorporate current scholarship on best practices for providing feedback into their teaching.

Despite the qualitative literature on writing instruction that shows conferencing can produce negative effects, it is clear that the teacher-student conference is a widely used instructional method (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000; Boyton, 2003; Carnicelli, 1980; Harris, 1986; Horning &

Becker, 2006; Sipple, 2007). Although a few studies do exist regarding this method (Newkirk, 1989; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997), almost no empirical evidence exists to show if oral feedback per the student-teacher conference is more effective than written feedback. In fact, more quantitative data is needed for writing scholars to develop a more objective picture of the effectiveness of oral feedback in place of written feedback. In addition, research is needed to fill gaps in the literature regarding any student-teacher conferences over the rough drafts of essays, and particularly regarding developmental writing.

Related Literature

Not everyone believes that the student-teacher conference has value for the student. Mary P. Hiatt (1975) argues that although the student teacher conference may have value for the students who do not really need any help, they can actually harm the struggling student. "Our own illusion that conferences are helpful keeps us from perceiving that the nature of most conferences can actually reinforce a student's defenses. In other words, for the student at bay, a conference can do more harm than good" (p. 39). These teachers focused only on grammar concerns and gave their weaker students little chance to take authority over their own papers. Yet when the same teachers had conferences with strong students the results were engaging reciprocal conversations about higher order writing concerns in addition to the students sharing their visions for their own writing.

Studies conducted regarding students' responses to feedback yield mixed results. For example, Sommers and Saltz's (2004) study on Harvard freshmen and sophomores indicated students need and value teacher feedback. A case study with an English Language Learner by Young and Miller (2004) indicated that the student was able to learn the language and expectations of revision through an extended series of conferences with his teacher. However, other studies show that students largely ignore or misunderstand the feedback they receive. McCune (2004) studied students' responses to written feedback they received from tutors, and she found

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In interviews, the students were able to describe what feedback was written on their essays, but were unable to discuss this in detail and generally gave the impression that they had not paid much attention to it. There was little in what the students said in the interviews to suggest that their conceptions had changed due to written feedback. (McCune, 2004, pg. 268)

Johnson Black (1998) also found that students who were from a different culture than the instructor sometimes misunderstood their instructor's feedback without the instructor realizing it. And Dana Heller (1989) argued that written feedback on the students' paper merely directs students to write the kind of paper the teacher would write instead of writing their own way. Lisa Delpit (1988) suggests students need clear direction from their teachers, but students may be exercising their rights to their own language by ignoring teacher comments. Although Hillocks' (1982) research shows students made more revisions with teacher feedback than without it, ambiguity still persists.

Therefore this study examines the impact of teacher's feedback on students' revisions. This study was conceived to fill the research gap of quantitative studies of the writing conference, and to help quell concerns that writing conferences might harm students. The researcher designed this study to answer the question: What is the effect of oral feedback per student teacher conferences on significant revisions to content, structure, grammar, and style for developmental writing students?

Methodology

Participants

The sample consisted of 70 developmental writing students at a midwestern community college. The opportunity to participate in the study was offered to 100 students who placed into the developmental course; however, only 70 signed release forms, completed the treatment, and turned in both drafts of the paper. Generally, students are placed in the developmental course based on a score between 22 and 75 on the COMPASS Placement Test. The ages of members of the sample ranged from 18 to the mid 50s. The sample included 33 females and 38 males.

Students were randomly assigned to receive one of three treatment conditions. Each student was assigned a number that was coded to include the treatment condition, the course section, and a number to identify the individual subject.

Procedure

In research on composition the teacher and the researcher are often one and the same. This makes it more likely that all of the students will receive the same type of treatment.

For the purpose of this study, the treatment was the type of feedback the students receive from the instructor. The students were randomly assigned to one of three types of feedback on their rough draft (first draft) of the first assignment which was a narrative paragraph. The three treatments were: (a) only oral feedback from the instructor during a conference session, (b) only written feedback from the instructor through e-mail, and (c) both oral and written feedback during a conference with the instructor.

For written responses I used a form that included the following categories: thesis statement, content, organization, sensory details, grammar, and style. Each section had a blank area to write on, and for students in treatment group c (oral and written feedback) students received a carbon copy of the completed form. Students in treatment group b (written feedback) were emailed a completed copy of the form. I also used the form as a guide while providing the students with oral feedback. That way the students in all groups received information on

Written feedback...merely directs students to write the kind of paper the teacher would write.

all of the same topics. Examples of the form and the writing assignment are included in the Appendix. When I provided both types of feedback, I wrote on the form as well as discussed the paper with the student. All of the students received the same in-class instruction, and all of the students were expected to make changes to their papers and resubmit them.

The treatment took place in four classes over three semesters. In order to control for that, some students in each class were assigned to each condition. Furthermore, the semester and time of day the class met were recorded as another variable to control for.

Human Subjects Procedures

I obtained approval for conducting research on human subjects from both the University of Kansas and the community college where the research was conducted. Students were informed of their opportunity to participate in the study and invited to sign the informed consent. They were aware they were giving the researcher access to their COMPASS score and two drafts of their first paper. I informed the study participants that they could withdraw their consent at any time. In addition, study participants were told all participant information would be coded to keep it anonymous.

Study participants were also aware that the conferences would be tape recorded, and they gave permission to tape the sessions at the start of each session in addition to writing it on the informed consent and the printed directions students received. Almost all the students who were presented with the opportunity to participate in the study signed the informed consent, but several of them were unable to complete the treatment and draft cycle, so their information could not be included in the study. To be as fair as possible, students were also offered the opportunity to receive the alternative types of feedback on their papers and could also choose to revise their papers an additional time after the study was completed. Although several students revised their drafts, none of them requested the alternative type of feedback.

Data Source and Analysis

Both the original and revised drafts were rated by two outside evaluators who used the Kansas State Assessment scoring guide (Kansas State Department of Education, 2008). The drafts were coded so the evaluators did not know which ones were originals and which ones were revised. Each paper received a rating on five different scales, and the raters agreed within one point on either side of the scale on each item. In addition, they achieved 92% inter-rater reliability. The average of the two raters' scores for each draft was compared in a mixed design ANCOVA.

In addition, the drafts were scanned by a computer program called Editor which identified the number of errors in both the original and revised drafts. Editor data were also used to run a mixed design ANCOVA. While scanning the drafts with the Editor program, I considered that the word count for each draft might be of interest for future and exploratory research. I later took the word count numbers generated by the Editor program and conducted an exploratory analysis with them.

The null hypothesis for this experiment was that there is no significant difference between students' improvements from written feedback (A), students' improvements from oral feedback (B), or students' improvements from both oral and written feedback (C) when controlling for students' COMPASS scores (D). The alternative hypothesis was students' improvements from oral and written feedback (C) are significantly better than students' improvements from either written feedback (A) or oral feedback (B) when controlling for students' COMPASS scores (D).

Data analysis provided information to show whether there was a difference between oral feedback, written feedback, and both oral and written feedback at the .05 level. In addition pair wise comparisons were done between oral and oral + written feedback, oral and written feedback, and written

and oral + written feedback. These comparisons uncovered the aspects of student writing that were affected by teacher feedback.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

These are the descriptive statistics for the raters' scores. The two within-subjects factors are the prescore the raters gave for the first draft students wrote and the postscore which is the score the raters gave the revised draft students wrote after they received the treatment (feedback). Twenty-two students assigned to the oral feedback condition completed the study, whereas twenty-four students assigned to the written feedback condition completed the study, and twenty-four students assigned to the written and oral feedback condition completed the study (see Table 1).

After analyzing the raters' scores, the computer generated scores were compared. The Editor program scanned each prefeedback draft and flagged a specific number of errors, and the same program was used to scan the postfeedback drafts. The number of participants in each treatment condition did

not change, but the dependent variable changed to pre-Editor and post-Editor (see Table 2).

The mean score for the pretreatment draft for students who received only oral feedback was 21.0455. For the pretreatment draft for the students who received only written feedback the mean score equaled 23.4167. The treatment group oral and written feedback had a mean score of 18.4583. On average the Editor program found more mistakes in the second (post) draft than the first (pre) draft. This is true across feedback groups (see Table 2).

Data Analysis

A mixed design ANCOVA was conducted to assess the effect of feedback methods on revisions to developmental writing students' papers using an average of two raters' scores. In the first analysis, the first within subjects factor was the raters' score for the prefeedback draft and the second within subjects factor was the raters' score for the postfeedback draft. The between subjects factor "Condition" had three levels: (a) oral feedback, (b) written feedback, and (c) oral and written feedback. (The third level is a separate group from levels one and two, not a combination of levels one and two.) Students'

COMPASS scores were included to control for ability. Main effects for pre- and postscores, raters' scores and COMPASS score, and raters' scores and treatment condition were calculated. In addition, pair-wise comparisons across treatment groups were assessed. Alpha was set at the .05 level.

A second mixed design ANCOVA was conducted to assess the effect of feedback methods on revisions to developmental writing students' papers using the number of errors identified by the grammar analysis software Editor. The first within subjects factor was Editor's score for the prefeedback draft and the second within subjects factor was the Editor's score for the post feedback draft. The between subjects factor "Condition" had three levels: (a) oral feedback, (b) written feedback, and (c) oral and written feedback. (The third level is a separate group from levels one and two, not a combination of levels one and two.) Students' COMPASS scores were included to control for ability. Main effects for pre- and post scores, Editor's scores and COMPASS score, and Editor's scores and treatment condition were calculated. In addition, pair-wise comparisons across treatment groups were assessed. Alpha was set at the .05 level.

Results for the ANCOVA

The within subjects comparison for preraters' scores and postraters' scores indicated statistically significant results with $F = 10.922, p < .002$. This comparison had a large effect size of .903. However, the within subjects comparisons for rater's scores and the COMPASS score was not statistically significant, $F = .980, p < .326$. Nor was the within subjects test for the raters' scores and the treatment conditions statistically significant, $F = .983, p < .380$. The grand mean was 18.296 and the standard error was .510. The 95% confidence interval was 17.278 - 19.313.

The within subjects comparison for pre-Editor scores and post-Editor scores indicated statistically significant results with $F = 4.207, p < .044$. This comparison had a moderate effect size of .524. However, the within subjects comparisons for Editor scores and the COMPASS score was not statistically significant, $F = .172, p < .679$. Nor was the within subjects test for the Editor scores and the treatment conditions statistically significant, $F = 1.014, p < .368$. The grand mean was 22.780 and the standard error was 1.423. The 95% confidence interval was 19.940 - 25.621.

Results for the Pair-Wise Comparisons

To answer the question "What is the effect of oral feedback per student teacher conferences on significant revisions to content, structure, grammar, and style for developmental writing students?" the researcher used a mixed design ANCOVA with pair-wise comparisons to see if statistically significant differences emerged across feedback groups.

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Table 1

Mean Raters' Score for Pre- and Postdrafts, Standard Deviation, and Confidence Intervals for Three Treatment Conditions

Treatment Condition	Predraft			Postdraft		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI
Oral Feedback	22	16.807 (4.634)	[15.289,18.939]	22	18.329 (4.933)	[16.578, 20.532]
Written Feedback	24	18.187 (4.331)	[16.205,19.682]	24	20.500 (4.349)	[18.437, 22.205]
Oral & Written Feedback	24	16.969 (3.965)	[15.210,18.625]	24	18.938 (4.528)	[17.045, 20.775]

Note. CI= Confidence Interval.

Table 2

Mean Editor Score for Pre- and Postdrafts, Standard Deviation, and Confidence Intervals for Three Treatment Conditions

Treatment Condition	Predraft			Postdraft		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI
Oral Feedback	22	21.046 (10.172)	[16.159,25.976]	22	24.182 (11.434)	[18.456,29.768]
Written Feedback	24	23.417 (15.330)	[18.722,28.077]	24	26.125 (16.682)	[20.790,31.571]
Oral & Written Feedback	24	18.458 (6.379)	[13.826,23.086]	24	23.458 (9.699)	[18.131,28.802]

Note. CI= Confidence Interval.

When scores for the three feedback groups derived from a scoring rubric designed to analyze drafts for content, structure, grammar, and style were compared they were not statistically significant at the .05 alpha level. This supports the null hypothesis.

Furthermore, when scores for the three feedback groups derived from the Editor program, designed to look at grammar and style, were compared, they were also not significant at the .05 level, indicating no interaction among groups.

Additional Results: Word Count

The word count for each first draft and each revised draft was derived from the Editor program. A mixed design ANCOVA like the previous two was run with the word count numbers. Descriptive statistics for the Editor-generated word count scores are outlined in Table 3. The number of participants in each treatment condition did not change, but the dependent variable changed to preword count (the number of words in the first draft) and postword count (the number of words in the revised draft). The average word count for the second draft (post-score) was higher across all groups (see Table 3).

A mixed design ANCOVA was conducted to assess the effect of feedback methods on revisions to developmental writing students' papers measured by the number of words in each draft. In the first analysis, the first within subjects factor was the number of words in the prefeedback draft and the second within subjects factor was the number of words in the postfeedback draft. The between subjects factor "Condition" had three levels: (a) oral feedback, (b) written feedback, and (c) oral and written feedback. (The third level is a separate group from levels one and two, not a combination of levels one and two.) Students' COMPASS scores were included to control for ability. Main effects for pre- and postscores, raters' scores and COMPASS score, and raters' scores and treatment condition were calculated. In addition,

pair-wise comparisons across treatment groups were assessed. Alpha was set at the .05 level.

Unlike the previous two ANCOVAs, all three of the multivariate tests were significant at the .05 level. The within subjects comparison for first draft word count and revised draft word count indicated statistically significant results with $F = 23.776, p < .000$. This comparison had a large effect size of .998. Additionally, the within subjects comparison for word count and the COMPASS score were statistically significant, $F = 9.883, p < .003$. Furthermore, the within subjects test for the word count and the treatment conditions was statistically significant, $F = 4.139, p < .02$. The grand mean was 3.24 and the standard error was 13.166. The 95% confidence interval was 297.98 - 350.56.

Discussion

In this study oral feedback did not have a negative or positive effect on developmental writing students' revisions to content, structure, grammar, or style when compared with the effect of written feedback on developmental writing students' revisions to content, structure, grammar, and style. Written feedback is currently the default method for writing teachers to respond to their students' writing, so it was used as the control measure instead of no feedback. Furthermore, when oral feedback was compared with a combination of written and oral feedback, it was not statistically different than oral or written feedback alone. Therefore, in this study the feedback delivery method did not make a difference in the revisions developmental writing students made.

This study also found that developmental writing students did make revisions to their drafts after receiving teacher feedback. In both the Editor ANCOVA and the raters' scores ANCOVA this study found that the first and second drafts were statistically different from each other. The raters' scores looked at all of the elements of the research question: content, structure, grammar, and style.

The Editor program only measured grammar and style, but its internal consistency provided an advantage over the raters. The raters had an advantage over the Editor program because they could apply critical thinking to what they were reading. They could also make judgments about content and structure.

The raters found the study participants improved their second drafts across all feedback groups. This finding indicates students will improve their writing after any type of feedback from their instructor. However, the Editor results paint a slightly different picture. Although the results for the Editor ANCOVA showed that the drafts were statistically different from each other, the second drafts had more errors in grammar and style than the first drafts. One way to interpret this result is that the second drafts were noticeably different from the first drafts; therefore, the study participants made changes after the treatment even if those changes were not counted as improvements by the Editor program. It is possible for writers to make improvements to the content and the structure of their papers without improving the grammar and style. The results from the exploratory study for word count suggest other areas that should be researched. The ANCOVA for word count indicated the second drafts were significantly longer than the first drafts. Again this indicates that the drafts were physically different from each other. It is also possible that students' ability played a role in how much they were able to add to their papers. Of course, making a paper longer does not necessarily make it better. In the future, word count is a nonsubjective measure that researchers should include.

Limitations

There are limitations to what this study shows. First, this study did not look at what students would do if they received no feedback. Because the participants in this study knew they were being observed, it is possible that they changed their behavior. Yet any study of this nature requires human subjects to provide informed consent.

Unlike earlier qualitative studies, this study does not measure the type of language the teacher used with individual students: It does not attempt to differentiate between positive and negative teacher comments. Instead, this study measures the effect the comments had on the students' end products. This study also does not break down the students' score by individual feedback category. However, because the multivariate F test was not significant, breaking the scores down by category was unnecessary. In addition, the elements of the paper are not separate from each other. This study may also be limited by the use of computer software for evaluation: Editor may have counted things as errors that were not errors.

Table 3

Mean Word Count for Pre- and Postdrafts, Standard Deviation, and Confidence Intervals for Three Treatment Conditions

Treatment Condition	Predraft			Postdraft		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	95%CI
Oral Feedback	22	302.318 (92.809)	[259.66,348.85]	22	337.818 (100.476)	[276.30,386.25]
Written Feedback	24	322.625 (122.511)	[278.59,363.59]	24	355.375 (135.261)	[308.19,412.96]
Oral & Written Feedback	24	272.042 (88.322)	[229.74,313.87]	24	355.833 (142.288)	[304.78,408.48]

Note. CI= Confidence Interval.

Implications for the Teaching of Developmental Writing

This research shows that the developmental writing students in the study made statistically significant changes to their papers after receiving feedback from their teacher, and the type of feedback did not make any significant difference in the quality of revisions students made. Therefore teachers might consider providing developmental writing students with the type of feedback that suits the needs and personality of the teacher and the learning style of the student.

In the classroom, teachers can provide oral feedback during some stages of the writing process and written feedback at other stages of the writing process. On subsequent assignments, after exposing students to multiple types of feedback, teachers could offer students the type of feedback they prefer. Or, teachers could offer the type of feedback they feel best suits a particular assignment.

Developmental writing teachers may also find it helpful to use a response sheet to help guide their feedback (see Appendix). It is easy to focus on what students have done wrong, and to make suggestions for them to fix it. A response guide reminds teachers to comment on all of the assignment goals, many of which the students have succeeded in meeting. This leads to more frequent praise. According to a study on recorded feedback by Sipple (2007),

Even when an essay was particularly problematic, as many of them were in first draft form, students said that the audio comments, much more than written ones, increased their confidence as writers specifically because of the perception that they provided more genuine and frequent praise. In turn, they said the praise made them work harder on their revisions, in part because they wanted more praise and were willing to work hard in order to get it (p. 26).

This study shows that a response guide reminds teachers of developmental writers to praise areas where they have done well.

In the future, studies should be conducted to see if students revise their papers without receiving feedback from their teachers. Furthermore, studies on student and faculty personality types should be conducted to see if a particular type of feedback has a greater impact on revisions based on the particular students' personalities and if faculty do a better job of providing one sort of feedback over another based on their own personalities. Similar studies were done on professional writers and how they revise (Horning & Becker, 2006). In addition, studies that expose students to all three types of feedback and then survey their preferences might be useful. Researchers should also ask students how they felt about the type of treatment they received.

Conclusion

Feedback has long held an important place in writing instruction (Hillocks, 1982; Horning & Becker, 2006; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Struab & Lunsford, 1995). In addition, studies on professional writers' revision process show that professionals value feedback on content, organization, and readability even more than students do (Horning & Becker, 2006). However, studies show that students sometimes ignore written feedback (Murphy, 2000; Sommers, 2012), and teachers sometimes misinterpret the students' intent in their papers (Haite, 1975; Murphy, 2000). For developmental writing teachers, these mixed messages about feedback can cause confusion. This study provides some quantitative evidence that, despite the miscommunication that can happen during the feedback process, developmental writing students will make positive improvements to the content and organization of their papers as a result of feedback from their teachers.

The students in this study improved their papers regardless of the type of feedback they received. It is likely that the teacher's expectation that students revise their writing along with specific directions for what to revise play a larger role than the feedback delivery method.

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Appendix

Response Sheet for the Narrative Paragraph Rough Draft

Name: _____

Title: _____

Topic sentence: _____

Content: _____

Organization: _____

Details: _____

Active verbs: _____

Significance: _____

Grammar: _____

Style: _____

Narrative Paragraph Assignment

Write a twelve to fifteen sentence paragraph about something interesting that has happened to you. Include a topic sentence that catches the reader's attention. Tell the story in chronological order, and include active verbs to keep the story moving. Use effective description, but focus more on what happens and why it is important. Even mundane events can become great stories when the story teller emphasizes the right details. Conclude with a sentence that makes the reader reflect more deeply on the point of your story. Chapter six of *A Writer's Workshop* provides additional information on writing narrative paragraphs. All drafts of this paragraph must be typed. This paragraph is worth 75 points.


8/24 The rough draft of paragraph 1 is due. Because of my research study, some of you will attend conferences, and some of you will submit drafts for written feedback. Regardless of the way you submit your rough draft, it is worth 20 points. I would appreciate it if everyone would e-mail me a copy of this draft. My e-mail is bgulley@jccc.edu.

8/31 Final draft of paragraph 1 are due (75 points). I would also like you to e-mail me a copy of this draft.


removing developmental education from four-year institutions raises many questions. Will other states join and do the same? How are students and institutions faring under new policies? Is the case for the need of developmental education being heard?

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