Feedback on Students' Essays/Assignments: An Appraisal

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to understand and evaluate the importance of feedback on students' written work and its implications for their academic progress. The article takes into account various feedback related issues and ends with a conclusion that in Pakistani universities teachers are generally not conscious of the impact of their written words on their students' progress and are quite oblivious of its psychological implications as well. The writers point out that if feedback is not carefully worded it can be counterproductive. There is also a need to consider individual factors while feeding back to learners as each individual possesses unique set of qualities and learning styles. It is also observed that an immediate need to train university teachers in particular to draft feedback in a way that it

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encourages students to be creative and prevents fossilization of mistakes by following a strategy of being 'positively critical'.

Key Terms: Second language teaching, Second language (L2), peer feedback, one to one conferences, learner centred approach, TELS (Transforming English Language Skills)

Importance of Feedback

Teacher's feedback on learners' written work has long been an area of discussion among the academics. The importance of feedback increases manifold when it is given to second language learners as studies indicate that second language learners attach great value to tutor's written feedback on their assignments/written work (Ferris, 2003, Hyland, 2002). Second language learners are in a constant need of feedback which can be oral or written. Second language learning can be a challenging task where learners can end up in a maze if timely and meaningful assistance is not provided to them by the teachers and institutions.

Elbow (1999) observed that "Writing comments is a dubious and difficult enterprise" and will not do much good to students as they do not generally make use of these comments (p. 201, cited in Ferris, 2003). The problem cited by Elbow (1999) may arise from the casual or formulaic approach teachers sometimes follow while giving feedback. If learners know that teacher would scribble formulaic or vague comments on their written work they may not take feedback seriously as feedback would appear nothing more than a mere ritual.

Many researchers of second language writing such as Krashen, (1984); Zamel, (1982, 1985, 1987) have made similar observations and raised questions about whether the students ever use the feedback in a way that would help them become better writers. However, undermining the importance of feedback on this basis may not be a right approach as assessment and feedback can be taxing for teachers as it can get quite laborious when one is dealing with large groups of students- prompting teachers not to reflect on their remarks/comments. Moreover, without

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training teachers how to draft their written feedback, it may not be easy to exploit the true potential of the written commentary on students' assignments/essays/projects etc.

In contrast to these seemingly discouraging assessments (and others that followed in the 1980s) is the empirical and practical work of the 1990s, most notably by Straub (1997, 1999; Straub & Lunsford, 1995), which suggests that students read and make use of teacher comments and that well-designed teacher comments can be instrumental in developing students as 'writers' (Straub, 1997, p. 92). These comments are a clear endorsement to the importance of teacher's feedback.

Constraints for Teachers – Treading an Uncomfortable Path

However, the researchers' suggest that tutors need to be careful while giving feedback, if not carefully worded it can be counterproductive and may de-motivate learners. Writing is very personal and students' motivation and self-confidence as writers may be damaged if they receive too much criticism (Connors & Lunsford, 1993, cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.209). Teacher commentary can de-motivate students when it is excessively controlling (Knoblauch & Brannon 1982). It is important to understand that while teaching how to write, the underlying idea is to bolster learners' confidence and respect their writing processes, while at the same time helping them spot their mistakes and facilitate the correction process.

This may not appear as easy as it sounds; teachers are often treading an uncomfortable path as they need to respect that fine line between being 'controlling' and constructively critical without doing any harm to learners' confidence. When teachers wrest control of the text away from student writers, they remove the students' investment, engagement, motivation, and interest in writing. This affective consequence is ultimately far more harmful to students' development as writers (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). Turner's study (1993) of students' reaction to feedback at Lancaster University suggests some students felt daunted by detailed comments, other were frustrated by brief ones. They complained of feedback not comprehensive enough, not legible, not timely and at times too critical. It is important for a teacher to be aware of the fact that feedback that is not clear or too critical can de-motivate learners and shake their self-belief.

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Interestingly, confidence is not a linear curve; it keeps on moving up and down and thus affects the process of writing. An analogy can be drawn with public speaking- during public speaking a friendly audience can provide a positive impetus to a speaker and his/her flow of thoughts. However, a hostile audience can even distract and de-motivate a professional speaker.

Feedback with Clarity

A clear feedback that constructively highlights the problem areas without assuming an offensive tone can facilitate the learning process without shaking their confidence- something that is not generally followed by teachers in the sub-continent and it is often noted that a general tendency among teachers in the Indian sub-continent is not to word feedback keeping in view that each word may have its impact on the learners, especially on their motivation. Feedback is widely seen in education as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning (Anderson, 1982, Brophy, 1981, Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Hyland and Hyland 2003, p.1).

A Widespread Problem

It is difficult to contest the observation about teachers in the sub-continent. However, this is not only a sub-continental phenomenon. A study conducted by Razzi Syed (2011) at University of Wales, Newport shows that even tutors in British universities sometimes make similar mistakes. Some of the student participants in the study pointed out the effects of negative feedback on their motivation.

Wording of Feedback

Feedback should be carefully worded, as it could settle a learner in a negative frame of mind and can also impact their relationship with the tutor -- something that could eventually cast its shadow on the progress of a student (Razzi, 2011). Zamel (1985, p.96), in a study of teachers' feedback, concludes by advising teachers to rein in their reflex-like reactions to surface level and

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give priority to the meaning. Unhedged criticism can carry a possible threat to the 'face' or public self image of a learner, weakening their confidence and damaging their relationship of trust with teachers. L2 students need an assurance that they are on the track (Leki, 1992) and this assurance can only be given if teachers are constructively critical and do not use a harsh tone in their written or verbal feedback.

Feedback – Learner-Centred and Teacher-Centred and Peer Feedback

Timely and clear feedback prevents fossilization of mistakes and provides learners with the targets they have to achieve within given time frames. It goes without saying that feedback should highlight areas for further improvement by setting realistic targets for learners. Hyland (2003, p.1) notes that the importance of feedback emerged with the emergence of learner centred approaches to writing instructions. The concept of learner-centeredness has significant implications for the way materials are designed, lessons are planned and feedback is given. The modern theories of learner centeredness state that learners should be engaged in meaningful and interactive process of learning- and instead of teacher being at the centre-stage learners should also share responsibilities and may even take control of their learning at times.

Teachers following learner-centred approaches advocate for peer feedback (Ferris, 2003). In feedback by peers, learners present their feedback on their cohorts' performance. Research on peer feedback to date has by and large indicated that students find it beneficial and consider and utilize peers' suggestions in their revised texts.

However, in Pakistan peer feedback is not practiced at higher education and there is no study yet conducted in this area. It may turn out to be an interesting area of research to see how peer feedback works in Pakistan as most of our classrooms are teacher-centred.

Ferris (2003, p.8) suggest teachers not to overuse peer feedback especially when learners are from diverse and varied cultural; and academic backgrounds. The researchers suggest need for peer reviews sessions to be carefully structured and monitored by the instructor and to be

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mindful of the potential problems with social roles and cross-cultural dynamics within pairs or groups of peer reviewers, and to strike an appropriate balance between feedback from teachers, peers, self, and other sources. Peer feedback is practiced by almost all universities in UK. However it is generally limited to a few assignments/presentations during the entire course; hence not overused at all.

Students' Response to Teachers' Feedback

Ferris (1995) in a study conducted on students' response to teachers' feedback has shown that students sometimes find teachers' commentary confusing. Studies (Hyland, 2006, Ferris, 2003) clearly show that teachers' often take for granted that learners will contextualise and understand what teachers are feeding back. However, this may not be the case, the genre of academic writing with all its intricacies and complexities may not easily be decoded by a learner.

Studies also show that language teachers generally limit their feedback only to grammar- and thus the assessment is also grammar centred. The concept of holistic assessment often escapes teacher's minds. Though the importance of grammar cannot be downplayed, writing is not only coming up with correct structures and grammatically correct sentences. Since writing is increasingly seen as a process rather than a product; limiting feedback only to grammar may not be the right approach.

The Process Approach

The process approach incorporates brainstorming, researching, development of ideas and the gradual movement from an idea to the final draft, etc. It is not only focussing at grammar. Cohen (1987) surveyed 217 college students at a U.S. university on teachers' feedback and about student strategies for processing teacher's feedback. The student respondents claimed that their teachers' commentary focused mainly on grammar and completely ignored the other aspects such as organization, contents, ability to persuade, critical engagement and creativity. This approach of feeding back is also exercised by most language teachers in Pakistan thus negating

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the concept of writing as a process and reducing the amazing world of writing only to structure and grammar.

Uniqueness of Each Learner

Another significant point to note is that a teacher while giving feedback may have to consider the uniqueness of each learner. A generic type of feedback or a very formulaic feedback may not achieve its purpose with all learners. It is important to consider the individual factors- seeing each learner as a different individual and making use of one's knowledge of learners and their backgrounds. Conrad & Goldstein (1999) note that individual factors that each student brings to the process of writing and revision of written material, can influence how he or she uses the feedback. One may argue that this can work in small classes- in Pakistani context where sometimes even language classes are quite large with as many as 40 plus learners, it may be real challenge for teacher to consider the individual factors. Writing can be quite personal, writer's personality his/her world view, and academic background and scores of other factors impact the end product he/she comes up with.

However, it is generally observed that, in Pakistani universities, while giving feedback teachers do not take these factors into consideration and on the basis of their first impressions of students' writing they give a 'reflex feedback'. As discussed earlier this can be quite discouraging for the learner and put them into a defensive mode. We, the teachers, often build euphoria about the importance of nurturing creative abilities of our students.

Impact on Creativity

Creativity can suffer gravely at the hands of a tutor who is quick to pass negative remarks on students writing (Ferris, 2003). A writer who is in a defensive frame of mind or made over-cautious by negative teacher commentary is not in an ideal situation to write creatively. Creativity entails thinking out of box- being experimental with words, expressions and ideas- it may not be possible without encouraging feedback from the tutor. For their own sakes as well as

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their students', teachers need to take practical steps to avoid becoming "composition slaves" (Hairston, 1986).

Feedback for L2 Learners

As already discussed, teacher's feedback has huge implications for L2 learners. For the last several decades, most of the L1 and L2 researchers have been making 'extremely negative pronouncements 'about the effects of tutors' written feedback on learners, these comments are often resented by students (Ferris, 2003, p. 19). Atwell (1998), Carnicelli (1980), Elbow, (1973) Zamel (1982) suggest replacing written feedback with 'one-to-one written conferences'. These researchers maintain that this may help in removing ambiguities, and vagueness which written comments may cause. Moreover, these conferences may afford an opportunity for clarification, and may also help learners discuss their problems and seek help in a more congenial environment. The warmth and friendliness of a one-to-one conference or tutorials can also help learners, especially l2 learners to understand their tutors' views, on the other hand written comments on assignments/essays often strike learners as being very cold and emotionless.

Razzi Syed's (2011) study conducted at University of Wales, confirm that students found one to one conferences/tutorials with their tutors and dissertation supervisors more helpful than the written feedback as these conferences help clear many ambiguities which written feedback couldn't.

Research conducted by Marzano & Arthur (1977) and Zamel (1995) suggest that teachers' feedback often emphasize on 'negative points' (cited in Cohen& Cavalcanti, 1990). The researchers also advocate for more tutorials and one to one conferences. Sommers, together with Brannon and Knoblauch, studied 35 university writing teachers. They examined comments that the teachers wrote on first and second drafts of student texts, interviewed a number of teachers and students, and asked their teacher subjects to write comments on the same set of student papers (cited in Ferris, 2003). The study also concludes on a similar note that teachers' comments are often vague, and not text specific- thus students find them not very helpful.

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Ideal Time for Giving Feedback

There is also a lack of consensus among the researchers about the ideal time for giving feedback. Results of a large-scale survey (Freedman, 1987) suggest that learners usually prefer feedback at the final stage, while teachers like to give feedback during the process of writing. This may be true with L1 learners, but in the case of second language learners, it is often observed that they like to get a regular feedback throughout the process of their writing, as observed by Ferris (2003). It may be attributed to the anxiety often associated with being a second language learner which prompts such learners to seek more support.

It is significant to note that training teachers how to draft their feedback and the principles involved is often a territory not treaded upon in Pakistan. It seldom occurs to teachers that their feedback may have a phenomenal impact on the progress of their learners. One of the reasons may be that our classrooms even at university level are still far from being interactive- we are conditioned to believe and often send such vibes to learners that they are just passive recipients of our verdicts on their work and have to take everything in their stride. We do not consciously leave room for negotiating our feedback with our students; it is just like a 'done and dusted affair'. It is also quite a concern to note that until recently there hasn't been any tangible realization about the feedback and its likely impact on learners.

A UK-Pakistan Project

In April 2012 a project named Transforming English Language Skills (TELS) was launched by the British Council and Pakistan Higher Education Commission in collaboration with The Open University UK. The purpose of the project was to develop materials for four new modules to be introduced in Pakistani universities for September 2012 intake. The authors working for writing materials along with their UK consultants also developed a module called Professional Development module, amongst other things the module covered, emphasis has been laid on training teachers how to assess learners and give feedback that is clear, meaningful and

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encouraging for learners while pointing out the areas for further improvement. This is a step in the right direction and may help teachers draft their feedback in a better and meaningful manner. It is also important to break away from the traditional approach of giving feedback.

Grades and Feedback

In Pakistani context feedback is generally limited only to grades/marks. The approach to limit feedback only to marks and grades hardly contributes to students' development as writers. A multidimensional feeding back approach is what we need as language teachers. This approach may require us to devise new ways of helping our students that may incorporate holding one-one feedback conferences where teachers may discuss in detail various aspects of students' writing and listen to the challenges students are facing in writing. The article demonstrates that such conferences may be a success and help teachers build and cement their relationship as stuents' mentors. Peer feedback as suggested in this article may be another option. Use of technology such as IT can also be exercised, for example if time and circumstances allow students may be given feedback through e mails- this will also guard against the apprehensions of such students who do not want teachers comment on their writing in public and in front of their peers. Perhaps most importantly, feeding back it is important not to be judgmental and refrain from assessing on the basis of one aspect of writing.

Revision Process and Feedback

Feedback is also directly associated with the revision process of students' drafts. It is important to see how students are interpreting and using the feedback. In this regard a strategy involving more than one draft may be practiced. This strategy entails that students may be asked to develop a rough/initial draft of their assignment/project and teacher gives his/her feedback on it. In the light of the first feedback students are asked to develop a second or final draft. This will serve as a quick litmus test whether students are making use or understanding the feedback or not. This can be an effective way to proceed with second language learners and to monitor their progress on regular basis. This approach is practiced by many institutions in UK, US, Australia and

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Canada and international students/second language learners may benefit a lot from it (Hyland, 2003). However, there are certain constraints that teachers may face while following this strategy, amongst the constraints the biggest may be time constraints. This practice involves assessing and giving feedback on many drafts within a limited time frame. Besides in large classes it may not be effectively practiced as it is difficult to assess and feedback on a large number of drafts during a semester.

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