

# Responding to Student Writing

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*It is a November midnight, Johnny Carson has just ended, and throughout the block the last lights flick off—all but one that is. A single orange light blooms in the darkness. It is the English teacher, weary-eyed, cramped of leg, hand, and brain, sifting listlessly, but doggedly through piles of themes, circling, marking, grading, commenting, guilt-ridden because the students were promised that the papers would be returned last week. . . . Just one more paper. And then one more. And then . . .*

(Judy 1981:208)

There is no doubt that teachers invest so much time responding to student writing, and for that alone they deserve a lot of credit. Why is it, then, that they feel it's all for nothing? We spend approximately 20–40 minutes to comment on an individual paper. Why is it that the student doesn't improve? We make short comments so that he won't feel confused and bored, and extensive suggestions so that he won't have any doubts. We underline and highlight the most striking mistakes. We make specific individual remarks as well as general global remarks. What does our student do? Very often he takes a brief look at the red marks on his paper, folds it, puts it in one of his other books, and never looks at it again. Given the fact that writing teachers spend a great deal of their time providing critical information on their students' compositions, very little attention is paid to the nature of these responses.

## The literature

Research conducted on these responses has shown that teachers respond to most writing as if it were a final product, thus reinforcing a very limited notion of writing (Zamel 1985). Despite the findings of process-oriented studies, practice lags far behind research. Some teachers tend to impose themselves as authorities and make comments reflecting the application of an *ideal* standard rather than having a set of criteria for marking. This ideal standard interferes with their ability to read and interpret texts correctly, so they end up making comments that are inaccurate, misleading, and inappropriate (Taylor 1981). It's only natural that the

teacher's inconsistency and imprecision make it difficult for the students to distinguish their major errors from the minor ones. Research has also found that teachers are mostly preoccupied with language-specific errors, accuracy and correctness resembling in this way the preoccupation of the inexperienced ESL writer (Sommers 1980, Taylor 1981, Raimes 1983).

## Implications for responding to student writing

It follows that we need to revisit our way of marking student writing and change our responding behaviour so that students can understand our comments. We must replace arbitrary comments with text-specific strategies and recommendations. Instead of keeping an ideal standard, we have to adopt a flexible standard that takes into account student level and ability. After explaining to students the importance of writing multiple drafts, we have to make them understand that texts evolve and revision is to be taken literally as "re-seeing" the text.

Assuming that we have adopted the process approach<sup>1</sup> I'd like to suggest some guidelines to follow when responding to the students' first draft:

1. Focus on the content, avoiding language errors. Since the student will be deleting, adding, and re-writing a great part of the composition, marking language mistakes would be a waste of time at this stage. On the other hand, focusing on the content separately from grammar helps us to deal with the rhetorical structure—an essential part of composing that is unfortunately neglected by English teachers most of the time (Young 1978).

2. Make specific comments avoiding cryptic language, jargon, and symbols, and respond with questions as well as statements. Just as our students should write with an audience in mind, it's our responsibility to show an awareness of the student writer as audience. We shouldn't

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1. The process approach referred to here is not seen as attending to meaning only (neglecting language structure), but as a process involving multiple drafts attending to both content and language at separate stages.

overestimate their ability to understand comments that are beyond their comprehension level, more suitably addressed to another teacher than to a student. A question like “Have you moved to another point, now?” to indicate abrupt change of topic instead of “awkward transition” is much more precise and easier to understand. As for the frequent use of statements, it would only be fair to our students to demand full and grammatically correct sentences when we ourselves model them in our responses to their writing.

3. Do not impose your own interpretation on the students’ writing. They may misunderstand that what *they* have to say is not as important as what *the teacher* wants to say. In this way the changes that follow may have nothing to do with what the student originally intended.

4. Note strengths as well as weaknesses. Do not allow the errors to distract you from commenting positively on a student’s attempt to produce something to the best of his or her potential. It’s easier to locate the weaknesses in a paper than the strengths, but we should never forget that doing justice to our students involves noting both the pros and the cons.

When responding to the second draft:

1. Do not correct errors in grammar or mechanics by providing the correct lexical or grammatical item. We should point out errors or categories of errors and let the students do the editing. Literature reveals that direct types of corrective procedures have proven ineffective (Corder 1967, Gorbet 1974). On the other hand, indirect methods under various names like the “discovery approach” or “self-correction” are more promising. In these methods the students become aware of the types of errors and make inferences about the target language instead of the teacher having to correct them (Hendrickson 1976, 1976b). We should keep in mind that they can correct their own errors with the use of a dictionary or a grammar book.

2. Teach them how to use a dictionary in the editing process.

3. Set a number of priorities and provide selective feedback for better results. Since marking all errors is overwhelming and has proven ineffective, many educators accept a wide margin of deviance from the so-called “standard” forms and structures of the language (Corder 1967, Dulay and Burt 1974). Drawing students’ attention to every error not only destroys their confidence and wastes time but it provides no guarantee that they will learn from their mistakes.

4. Decide carefully about which errors to correct. Hendrickson (1980) proposes three types: (a) those that impair communication (major/global), (b) those that have highly stigmatising effects on the reader, and (c) those that occur frequently.

5. Diagnose some general problems along with the individual errors and work on them in class. We can develop, for example, supporting sentences from the students’ own writing to deal with general trouble spots in grammar and mechanics.

6. Above all, make a comment, preferably an end comment, that is positive—something we usually tend to forget.

### Workshops

Moving from how errors should be corrected, let us consider *who* should correct them. Some teachers might hasten to say “But the teacher of course!” While few language educators would deny the teacher an active role in correcting errors, it has been suggested that he/she should not dominate the correction procedure. Peer correction would help students recognize both grammatical and lexical errors as well as problems with content, organisation, development of ideas, and clarity of writing. Research supports the fact that self-correction is probably more effective with grammatical rather than lexical errors (Wingfield 1975). A workshop approach where students are broken into groups of three or four and exchange drafts for comments and suggestions from their peer editors is quite promising. For one thing, each student receives feedback from the teacher and three or four other people on his ideas and his use of language when he submits his first draft and prepares his second. It’s all part

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of working on a team in a collaborative workshop setting. In 15–20 minutes each group has ample time to discuss the weaknesses as well as the strengths of their drafts and make recommendations both orally or in the form of written comments prepared at home and later discussed in class.

Still, some teachers might wonder whether the students are capable of addressing the appropriate questions and locating problem areas, producing correct responses to their peers' drafts and pinpointing strengths along with the errors. For students who are unfamiliar with workshops of this type, the teacher can hand out a question sheet for them to answer in response to the draft they are revising or editing.

For example, while evaluating a draft on an argumentative topic they can answer questions like:

- Does the introduction draw your attention? If yes, how? If no, why?
- Has your classmate stated his thesis? If yes, what is it?
- What are the topic sentences of each paragraph?
- Is each topic sentence supported by clear and specific examples? If yes, in what way? (Through examples, statistics, quotations, etc.)
- Are there smooth transitions between paragraphs? If yes, list some.
- Are there any irrelevant points/sentences in this essay? If yes, list them below.
- What do you think the best feature of your classmate's essay is? Be specific.

While looking at the second draft for language errors, the students, having underlined the error, can make marginal comments indicating the type of mistake made, e.g., syntax, word choice, tense, spelling, sentence structure, etc. At the end they should summarise the types of global errors committed in the form of a general final comment together with a positive recommendation. If the students fail to understand what to look for in a draft, we can highlight some general grammatical categories and ask them to

locate and list some of the errors or strengths. For example:

- verb tense errors
- verb form errors
- word order
- sentence combination
- unclear wording
- wrong word choice
- prepositions
- articles
- other common errors
- grammatical areas well dealt with

Teachers can also practice questions in class like:

- Is the vocabulary specific, advanced, or too simplistic? Give examples.
- Is there sentence combination?
- Can you see any sentence fragments or run-ons?

The amount of help that the teacher should give his students as editors is dependent upon their comprehension of the revising and editing tasks, their readiness to approach them, their familiarity with them, and the effectiveness with which these tasks are carried out. If the students are unfamiliar with the evaluation process, the teacher can model it in class or go through an example essay with all the student editors contributing comments. The students can do their first evaluation collaboratively in groups during class time while the teacher moves around answering questions and giving assistance. In this way he gives the students the chance to do the work on their own, thereby facilitating their learning rather than spoonfeeding them.

## Conferencing

Another way for the teacher to give advice on student compositions—this time focusing his attention on each student individually—is through conferencing. Carnicelli (1980) defines the conference method as a combination of “conferences, a process approach, and a reasonable set of priorities.” He suggests that individual conferences should take up the entire class time and his rationale is very convincing. He addresses some important points like the promotion of self-

learning, the superiority and effectiveness of oral responses over written comments as well as of individualised instruction over group instruction. I wouldn't go as far as he does to omit class instruction altogether, but I do share many of his ideas, in particular his support of oral responses. Apart from the demerits of the red-ink approach, which is universally detested by students, written comments have serious disadvantages when compared to oral criticism. They are more impersonal and may be confusing to the students. Most importantly they are strictly a one-way communication. The student has no immediate chance to question or disagree. The time I would allocate for a one-to-one conversation with my students would range from one meeting per paper in the middle of the writing process to one meeting per draft. Once again the teacher adopts the same role of a guide who gives directions and makes recommendations, but leaves the choices for the students to make.

## Conclusion

We should abandon our preconceptions of traditional writing classes and respond to our *students*, not simply to their *writing*. We should adopt the role of genuinely interested readers rather than that of evaluators. We can all learn and teach from this reciprocal, dialectical process. As Murray (1982:144) puts it, "we can learn to teach at the level where the student is, not where the teacher wishes the student was."

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