

# **Patterns of Corrective Feedback in ESL Academic Writing**

*By Bede McCormack*

## **Introduction**

This paper reports on a pilot investigation into the type of written feedback teachers on a college ESL academic writing program give their students. Three questions motivate this study:

1. What types of feedback do teachers say they give to their students?
2. Do teachers tend to coincide or diverge in their approaches to and beliefs about giving feedback?
3. What departmental support do teachers want to aid in giving feedback?

The ESL program under consideration includes a diverse range of instructors who are tasked to move their students through the various levels of ESL academic writing classes, and ultimately lead them to succeed on their high stakes exit exam (the CATW).

## **Theoretical Background and Rationale**

Research on the treatment of writing errors in second language student academic writing has given rise to a debate in the field as to the efficacy of such corrective feedback. Some, such as Truscott (1996), cast doubt on the value of teachers correcting L2 students' errors. Others such as Ferris (2002), Bitchener, (2008), and Van Beuningen, de Jong, & Kuiken, (2012) counter with work which supports the efficacy of error correction in process-writing pieces over time.

In framing the current study, I have assumed that providing learners at all levels with some form of written corrective feedback can benefit their writing.

## **Data collection and method**

Data for this study were collected anonymously over summer semester, 2013 through SurveyMonkey (CUNY IRB Exempt Protocol 478672). Seven ESL instructors in the Department of Education and Language Acquisition (ELA) at LaGuardia Community College participated in the pilot. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were included in order to create a general description of writing feedback practices across the program.

Quantitative survey question addressed

Focus of feedback (organization, grammar, etc.)

Qualitative survey questions addressed:

How feedback changes by prompt type and over time

Beliefs about providing feedback

Teacher suggestions for department-wide support in giving feedback.

## **Results**

### **Focus of Feedback**

Ranked from greatest to least, Table 1 reflects the degree to which teachers gave feedback on various linguistic features:

Table 1: Feedback Focuses

• Paragraph Structure	90%	• Negation	50%
• Syntax	90%	• Transition Structure	40%
• Word Choice	80%	• Preposition Usage	40%
• Essay Organization	70%	• Transition Words/Phrases	30%
• Tense/Aspect	60%	• Collocations	30%
• Pronoun Usage	60%	• Genre-specific Language	20%
• Student Progress	50%	• Article Usage	20%
• Morphology	50%	• Personal Reaction	10%
• Question Formation	50%	• Accuracy of Fact	10%

Of the 18 focuses, most teachers gave feedback on paragraph structure, syntax, and word choice. Tense and aspect issues and pronoun usage were also robustly addressed, though to a lesser degree. Least addressed are personal reaction and accuracy of fact. Oddly, although 90% of teachers claimed to give feedback on students' paragraph structure, transition structure as well as transition words and phrases apparently receive considerably less attention (40% and 30%). These two focuses would seem important to good inter-paragraph organization, so the findings are a little puzzling. Word choice and collocations also seem to be mismatched- 80% and 30%, respectively. Perhaps teachers understood word choice to be limited to phrasal verbs, or were unsure of what collocations are.

### **Changes in Feedback**

Two trends emerged from the qualitative data. One is that most teachers reported feedback tapers off as the semester progresses, the general feeling being that by the end of the semester students have received enough feedback to be able to self-edit their work with minimal teacher feedback. This approach is supported by Ferris' (2002) suggestion that, over time, learners do learn from feedback on earlier mistakes. Another trend observed in the discursive data is that teachers tend to focus on "bigger picture" issues earlier in the semester (argument structure and organization), and more mechanical issues later on (grammar, word choice, etc.).

### **Philosophy of Feedback**

This survey question elicited a range of responses from teachers. Most teachers reported they try not to overwhelm students with too much feedback. Comments such as "less is more," "guide but not overwhelm," were common. Several teachers also reported that they try to develop students' meta-cognitive skills so they can become more independent writers. A minority of teachers (two) reported they try to address all errors throughout the semester, one teacher claiming to "leave no error unturned."

### **Suggestions**

Finally, the survey asked teachers what support they would like from the department to aid them in giving feedback to students. Although survey respondents seemed

unanimous in not wanting to be told what to give feedback on, a common request was for some degree of standardization so that as students progress from class to class, the type of feedback they receive is familiar to them.. Another request was for feedback meetings at which teachers discuss how they give feedback, what they feel works and what doesn't work.

## **Conclusion**

This short description of the pilot survey study suggests ESL writing teachers approach the feedback process with some level of agreement on what language focuses they address. Teachers also tend to agree on the need to focus and limit the scope of feedback on a given assignment, an approach supported in the literature. A common need expressed among teachers is for guidance that coordinates teachers' feedback across the program. At a more general level, the study appears to have generated a conversation among teachers in the program about the giving of feedback. This alone is certainly a positive outcome, and is a first move in shedding light on the often hidden, almost secret business of giving feedback.

## **References**

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