

Chapter 9

Teacher Self–Assessment of Feedback Practices in an EFL Academic Writing Class – A Reflective Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Unlike studies of teacher feedback on student writing, research into teacher self-assessment of their own feedback practices is quite rare in the assessment literature. In this reflective case study, the researcher/teacher systematically analyzed feedback practices to clearly determine the form and kind of formative feedback being provided on student essays, and also to compare these feedback practices to recommended practice from the feedback literature. The research took place in an academic English writing course for third-year students at a Japanese university. A close examination of the teacher feedback on the first draft of 21 student essays was undertaken, and more than 800 feedback interventions were identified and coded. Results of this investigation show a number of patterns of practice in giving feedback, including; extensive use of questions in teacher commentary, very limited use of praise comments, and varying amounts of feedback provided on individual essays. Results also show that the feedback practices discovered through this investigation align well with recommended best practice. The case study positions the teacher as ‘learner’ in this feedback process, and calls for similar published research describing in detail what teachers do when providing feedback to students on their work.

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For many years I taught in universities... I marked thousands of scripts without examining what the scripts could teach me about my capacity as a teacher and examiner. (Ashby, 1984, p. v)

The teacher... is continually exerting influence on the students and the learning situation. By studying his own behavior in some systematic, objective manner, the teacher may gain further insights into his own pattern of influence. (Amidon & Flanders, 1967, p. 72)

I. INTRODUCTION

With classroom-based assessment, in all its variety and complexity, the teacher engages in a process of collecting information about what a student understands, knows and can do. Giving feedback to students on how we view that information, with the aim of helping improve their understanding, knowledge and abilities, is a fundamental part of the teaching process. This report is an account of teacher self-assessment (TSA), an examination of written feedback provided on student essays to gain insight into my role and performance as teacher and feedback provider. It is an exercise in critical appraisal; an analysis of one facet of pedagogic practice.

Teacher's feedback can have a significant impact on improving student's writing. However, "this role is complex and requires careful reflection to be used effectively" (Hyland, 2003, p. 192). A careful, systematic self-assessment of the written feedback produced and provided to students in an EFL academic writing course at a university in Japan is the focus of this investigation. In the context of that third-year academic writing course, written feedback on 21 first drafts of student essays will be described in a systematic manner. The investigation is guided by the following two research questions:

1. What is the nature and form of the feedback I give to students on the first drafts of their academic essays?
2. How do my feedback practices compare with recommended practice in the feedback literature?

The first question above may be answered by closely analyzing and classifying written feedback provided on one representative set of essay first drafts. The second question will be answered by using an external, outside lens to view the feedback practices identified in responding to question 1. As will be seen, one seminal feedback article in particular (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-2005) will provide the external measuring stick that comprises the second element of this two-track investigation.

It should be noted that how students engaged with this feedback, and how they felt about the process, are outside the scope of this particular report and intended for alternative publication.

Case Study Research

According to Yin (2009), "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context." (p. 18). The real-life context described here is an in-depth report into the contemporary phenomenon of an EFL writing teacher providing formative feedback to students on their work. The set of 21 student essay first-drafts, and the feedback I provided on them, is the 'case' examined and described here. According to Burns (2000, pp. 460-479) case studies have the following characteristics:

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