Chapter 2
The Ethics of Teacher Responses to Translingual Student Writing:
Helping Students Navigate the Academic Conversation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss the history of instructor comments in first-year writing and consider the differences in commenting for translingual students, native English-speaking students, as well as students from various language backgrounds and experiences. The goal is to consider ways beyond simply pointing out errors in students' writing and consider the rhetorical appropriateness of the students' texts and how instructors can provide comments to students to maintain the integrity of students' language backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

In the call for change in how writing faculty view teaching writing in a translingual way, one change that needs consideration is how teachers respond to student writing. To assist students with their writing progress, teachers frequently leave marginal notes, but many make assumptions through the process. As Horner et al. (2011) mention, "deviations from dominant expectations need not be errors; that conformity need

not be automatically advisable; and that writers' purposes and readers' conventional expectations are neither fixed nor unified" (p. 304). Furthermore, as instructors comment on student work, their practices need to evolve along with the students' writing process.

In the first-year composition classroom, teachers will find students in their classes with various language backgrounds. These students may include native speakers of standard English, native speakers of a dialect of English such as African-American Vernacular English or Spanglish, international non-native speakers, as well as immigrant or native multilingual speakers (resident students who speak a language other than English at home). With this variety of students in the classroom, writing teachers need to understand how to respond to their students' writing effectively. With process-oriented teaching prominent in composition programs, "teacher commentary has become a much more vital and significant aspect of writing instruction" (Ferris, 1999, p.143). Teachers frequently respond to students' writing during the process instead of after, which "provides an opportunity for instruction to be tailored to the needs of individual students" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 185). Considering the needs of students is a crucial aspect because it allows students to improve their texts before a formal evaluation. It also allows instructors to have insight into the students' writing as well to help them develop their skills as writers. As a part of the response process, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) assert that teachers need to learn how to "make comments that are clear and constructive without conveying messages that are too discouraging or directive" (p. 185). While the authors' suggestions focus on non-native speakers of English, many of their recommendations can apply to native English speakers as well.

Providing a response that is supportive and respectful to students, Silva (1997) argues that the "notion of respect" needs to be addressed by writing programs. He defines these as the "need to be (a) understood, (b) placed in suitable learning contexts, (c) provided with appropriate instruction, and (d) evaluated fairly" (p. 359). Within the effort to provide appropriate instruction and fair evaluation is the need for appropriate teacher responses to students' writing. When evaluating, teachers need to recognize that translingual students will write in distinct ways from native speakers, including the students' understanding of grammar and their rhetorical choices (Silva, 1997, p. 360). He reminds the reader that these differences are not from "cognitive or educational deficiencies" (Silva, 1997, p. 362) and that instructors should engage with students with this understanding in mind. While Silva does not overtly address the issue of teacher responses, his assertions on the ethical treatment of students are ones that teachers should remember when developing a philosophy on their method to respond to students' work.

One factor to consider when responding to student writing is that teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate how to participate in multiple dialogues, with the goal

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