

# ***Providing student writers with pre-text feedback***

***Ana Frankenberg-Garcia***

*This paper argues that the best moment for responding to student writing is before any draft is completed. It analyses ways in which this can be put into practice in the composition classroom, and reports on how a group of EFL writers reacted to the kind of pre-text feedback proposed.*

**Introduction** There have been numerous studies on the effects of writing feedback in recent years, but so far they have found very little evidence of improvement in the overall quality of student writing. While there is proof that various forms of feedback on a written composition help students to improve successive drafts, there is little indication that this kind of text-based feedback has a lasting effect on their writing skills (Leki 1990). None the less, EFL student writers generally expect to be given feedback on their written texts (Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990), and it is hard for writing instructors to abandon a technique which scores so high in terms of face validity. It would take either a very bold and innovative teacher, or a totally uninvolved one, to hand back first drafts or final compositions without any corrections or comments whatsoever.

The above dilemma raises the question of why feedback on a written text does not seem able to produce more noticeable effects on writing quality. This paper argues that there are limitations to what text-based feedback can do, and suggests that some of those limitations can be overcome by providing writers with pre-text feedback as well. This would give them help with any difficulties that emerge as they write, in addition to feedback on the drafts they hand in to the teacher. The final part of this paper describes how EFL students have reacted to the type of feedback proposed.

## **Limitations of text-based writing feedback**

Most limitations of text-based feedback stem from the assumption—underlying nearly all studies carried out so far—that providing feedback on a written text is equivalent to intervening in the writing process (Knoblauch and Brannon 1981). In making such an assumption, however, the teacher is probably asking this form of feedback for more than it can deliver. Namely, that it will have a positive effect on students' writing processes, and so help to improve the overall, long-term quality of their writing.

Since research has been unable to validate the above assumption (Leki 1990), it is perhaps wiser to consider writing feedback in the light of its more immediate function: the one undeniable fact about text-based

feedback being that it helps students to become aware of errors and other writing problems which they failed to notice or to do anything about when they handed in their drafts. In itself, of course, this may be useful, but there is much more to writing than that; new texts pose fresh problems to writers, so knowing what was wrong with one text written in the past may not help a writer overcome problems encountered while writing a new one.

Apart from 'historical' feedback on how to improve past texts, student writers also need 'real-time' feedback on the questions that emerge at the moment they are struggling to put their ideas down on paper. Unfortunately, however, information about the linguistic difficulties experienced by writers while they are creating a new text is usually lost in a normal composition classroom. This is because the first or final texts handed in to the teacher are not entirely representative of the problems the writer had to face while writing. If we compare writing to an iceberg, the draft that is handed in to the teacher is just the visible tip which floats above the surface of the water. Underneath lies a complex web of decisions made during the writing process, to which writing teachers do not normally have access.

The feedback teachers give to students is usually based on first, second, or final drafts. This means that it is based on the outcome of the students' writing decisions, and does not address the decisions themselves. There might often be a very close correspondence between the two, with good decisions leading to good end-products, and bad decisions leading to bad end-products, but this is not always the case. Writers' (good) decisions to rewrite what they perceive can be improved in their emerging texts do not always lead to them generating better final products. They may replace what was bad with something equally bad, or even worse. Teachers who see the end-product of those drafts may not be aware of their students' valiant attempts to improve what they correctly perceived had been badly written. One result of this may be that their response to the student may fail to address the underlying problem.

Similarly, when writers make (bad) decisions to reject what is appropriate in their emerging texts, it does not necessarily mean that their final products will be worse: they may be replacing appropriate parts of text with other equally appropriate ones. And again, teachers who only get to see the outcome of those changes may tell their students that the text is fine, but they have no way of knowing whether the students have been wasting their time with unnecessary revisions.

Another issue to bear in mind when discussing the limitations of feedback based on a written draft is that when they are confronted with writing difficulties they are unable to deal with by themselves, it is common for students to resort to reduction strategies. For example, when forced to choose between writing down something they are not sure is right and something they know is correct, many students tend to prefer the latter. Sometimes they may even abandon their original ideas because they are not able to express them in writing.<sup>1</sup> So they end up

handing in texts which are, to the best of their knowledge, flawless, but which do not adequately convey their writing intentions. As a result, the feedback they are given only deals with the writing problems they were unable to see for themselves. So those writing problems which they do see, and purposefully avoided, never reach the eyes of the writing teacher, who is obviously unable to help them overcome difficulties not present in the final draft.

One last issue that cannot be overlooked when discussing the limitations of text-based feedback is that it appears to be easier to overcome a problem when it emerges rather than later (Smith 1982). Students who get their drafts back with corrections or comments days or even weeks after they handed them in, are seeing their writing problems addressed at a moment when solving them is no longer such a pressing matter. If they could be given feedback as soon as their doubts emerged, it would probably help them to be in a frame of mind more conducive to successful learning.

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In spite its limitations, I do not wish to give the impression that text-based feedback should be altogether forgotten, inasmuch as it remains a useful way of dealing with writing problems that students have overlooked or deliberately chosen to ignore. However, to deal with the problems that emerge before a first or final draft is completed, it does seem necessary to provide feedback at an earlier stage of writing.

*Writing workshops*

The simplest way of helping students with the decisions they are forced to make while writing, rather than with the outcome of those decisions, is to promote writing workshops, in which students are encouraged to ask for help whenever the need arises, with the teacher acting as a facilitator.

The kind of help the teacher can give at this time will vary: students who are not used to using dictionaries may need to be encouraged to look up words they do not know or cannot spell, to promote good writing habits; other students who are worried about a given word-order sequence, for instance, may need to be told what to do as soon as the problem arises. The teacher can then note down the particular students who might benefit from supplementary word-order exercises. If the teacher had read the work some time later, he or she would only be able to see that the student either managed or did not manage to get the syntax right. If the student happened to get it right by guessing, the teacher would probably be misled into thinking that he or she had no word-order problem whatsoever, and would never be aware that the student took fifteen minutes to resolve the word-order sequence in question. If, on the other hand, the student did not get the syntax right, the teacher might be misled into thinking that the student did not notice the problem was there in the first place, in which case the feedback might even sound quite patronizing. The student may even have decided to cross out that sentence altogether because its syntax was causing too much trouble, and so would get no feedback on it at all.

Having suggested that a writing workshop is a simple way of helping students address writing difficulties which emerge as they write<sup>2</sup>, let me make it clear that the difficulties students themselves are conscious of while writing only constitute a part of their actual writing problems. Feedback restricted to the writing problems students are aware of can therefore be as deficient as feedback based on the problems which come into view in the finished draft.

**Revision feedback** One way of beginning to understand and provide feedback on writing problems that writers themselves are unaware of, and which are not usually visible in their written products, is to take a closer look at what they choose to revise. If students are asked to write and revise in such a way that the earlier versions of the emerging text can still be read, the teacher will gain access to writing problems which students fail to see by themselves, and which are not discernible in clean copies of the drafts (final or non-final) that they hand in.

Students can be told to skip lines when they write, so that they have room to insert any additions they wish to make to their emerging texts; they can also be told to cross things out with a thin line instead of covering them with a scribble or liquid eraser, and to reorder words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs, with arrows. The advantage of asking students to hand in texts which do not conceal any changes made during the process of writing is that the teacher will be able to find out which of the decisions made by the students while writing were good or bad, and use this knowledge to help them improve their future writing decisions<sup>3</sup>. This can be achieved without much learner training, since all that is required is that writers revise in a neat, legible way.

The taxonomy for qualifying revision changes in terms of readability developed in Frankenberg-Garcia (1990) can be adapted into some sort of correction key for providing students with systematic feedback on their writing decisions. The revision changes made by students during the writing process, regarding what to add, cross out, or reorder while writing a first draft, can be marked as follows:

1. positive: changes which result in more readable writing products.
2. negative: changes which result in less readable writing products.
3. unnecessary: changes which do not enhance readability because the earlier version of text has been replaced with an equally effective revision, i.e. what was good remained good.
4. ineffective: changes which do not enhance readability because the revision was unsuccessful in its attempt to improve the earlier version of text, i.e. what was bad remained bad.
5. indeterminate: changes which cannot be evaluated on the basis of readability because further information on the writer's intentions is required.

In addition to this, traditional text-based feedback can be provided by circling the parts of text that can do with further improvement and marking them:

6. necessary: parts of text which need to be revised can be circled to indicate that they require further improvement.

If teachers return the drafts to students marked in this way, they will be providing feedback on a lot more than those parts of the finished product that can do with improvement (i.e. category 6 alone). With this kind of feedback teachers can tell their students whether or not the intuitions which oriented their decisions while they were writing were well-founded. This feedback also enables writers to find out whether the outcomes of their writing decisions have been good or bad.

Admittedly, revision feedback is eventually displaced, in much the same way as conventional text-based feedback. In addition, as already described, understanding whether the decisions writers have made in one text were good or bad may not help them with the different decisions they will have to face when writing a new text. However, since revision feedback addresses questions that were at the forefront of writers' minds at the moment they were writing, it is probably more immediately relevant to writers than text-based feedback, which deals mainly with problems that writers did not even contemplate at the time. For this reason, it is probably easier for learners to understand and learn from revision feedback than to process text-based feedback, which exposes them to information about writing that they may not yet be prepared to assimilate<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Pre-text feedback in practice in the EFL composition classroom*

In the previous section I have suggested that providing immediate feedback during writing workshops, and on spontaneous changes that writers make as they write, can help writers overcome the problems they face while writing. In this section I wish to report and comment on what happened when the two pre-text feedback techniques proposed were tried out with a group of 20 undergraduate, intermediate-level Portuguese writers of English.

#### *Writing workshops in practice*

When the writing workshop described in the previous section was first put into practice, it did not seem to work very well. The number of questions the students asked was disappointingly low, and some did not request any assistance at all. In addition, most questions posed by those who did seek help had to do with lower-level concerns of writing such as spelling, e.g. 'How do you spell \_\_\_?', vocabulary, e.g. 'How do you say \_\_\_ in English?', and word choice, e.g. 'Do you think this word sounds right?' These queries suggested that the students felt all they needed to become successful writers of English was a bilingual dictionary and a spelling checker. Being unaware of where their real writing problems lay, they were unable to extract much more from the workshop.

A second workshop was carried out with the same students a few weeks later, after showing them that the main writing problems in the

compositions they had written in the first workshop were not to do with spelling and vocabulary; they were also prompted to ask questions on other, less superficial aspects of their writing. This workshop proved to be much more rewarding: more students asked for assistance, and more often, and their queries were not limited to spelling and lexis, but included questions on the use of articles, prepositions, verb tenses, collocation, sentence structure, and the order of the ideas presented. Further writing sessions with this and other groups of students then confirmed that to take full advantage of the type of workshop proposed, they have to be trained to ask more and better questions about their own writing. As they begin to do so, it also becomes possible to identify specific writing difficulties not revealed in their finished drafts, and to prepare separate, grammar-oriented exercises to help them overcome those difficulties autonomously.

### *Revision feedback in practice*

Marking compositions according to the revision categories proposed is straightforward, and intuitive; it also takes considerably less time than providing corrective feedback or using conventional correction keys<sup>5</sup>. What was more problematic, in my experience of providing students with revision feedback, was the follow-up to the marking. Because the categories used did not spell out why the revisions were positive, negative, ineffective, unnecessary, or indeterminate, and the students came back with so many queries in response to them that it was impossible to cope with them all. They wanted to know how the changes marked 'ineffective' could be made more effective. They wanted to know how the changes marked 'negative' could be changed back to what was there before, to double-check why some of their changes had been 'unnecessary', to discuss the changes marked 'indeterminate' in the light of their writing intentions; they also wanted to know how to improve the parts of text that I had circled and marked as 'necessary'. For practical reasons, I have subsequently encouraged students to discuss their revisions with their peers as well as with the writing teacher, but even then, these revision sessions only seem to work when we have very small groups of students, or more than one writing instructor per group.

Despite the drawback of having to work with a very restricted number of students during the sessions in order to comment on revision feedback, my overall impression is that responding to students' spontaneous pre-text revisions in this way constitutes a very concentrated and directed form of helping them to overcome writing problems which are at the forefront of their minds. One student commented that this kind of feedback had forced him to rethink his former writing decisions, and realize that some of those decisions had not been very good. Another student said that this kind of feedback had helped her to understand whether she was on the 'right track', and that this had improved her confidence as a writer. Not all students were able to express themselves as clearly, but their willingness to ask questions about their writing decisions is surely a sign that revision feedback is a welcome addition to conventional feedback.

**Conclusion** Bearing in mind that the ideas contained in this article need to be exposed to further discussion, I hope to encourage those who work with writing instruction to look beyond the problems that surface in their students' written drafts. Writing workshops can help writers deal with difficulties that are at the forefront of their minds while they write, and revision feedback can help them reassess choices made during the writing process.

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### Notes

- 1 Reduction strategies are apparently typical of low proficiency/low writing skill students (Raimes 1985).
- 2 So far as I am aware, the only other way of accessing the linguistic difficulties experienced by writers while they are actually writing known to me is the 'self-monitoring' technique proposed by Charles (1990), according to which writers annotate their texts with any doubts they have during the writing process, so that at a later date the teacher can give feedback not only on the finished draft, but also on the queries which emerged during the writing process. As Charles herself points out, however, this method requires a certain amount of learner training, since students have to learn to express their difficulties in writing (which may constitute an additional burden upon the writing process). Also, there is a time lag between the moment learners are 'engaged' in solving a given writing problem, and the moment they get their texts back with a 'demonstration' of how that problem can be overcome. In a writing workshop, the learner would obtain the same answer more readily, and without having to write down the query. I must emphasize, however, that I am not in any way rejecting the 'self-monitoring' technique developed by Charles. It could be that students learn and retain more when striving to annotate their texts with doubts than in a writing workshop, where query and feedback are more ephemeral. Self-monitoring is also an obvious alternative when there are too many students in a class for a successful writing workshop.
- 3 It must be noted, however, that not all the decisions writers make during the process of writing are visible in their revisions. Many decisions are simply rehearsed in the writer's mind, without ever being put down on paper.
- 4 According to Corder (1981), it is necessary to distinguish between, input (the language students are exposed to) and intake (the part of the input that the learner is capable of processing).

5 In Frankenberg-Garcia (1990), these categories were shown to be very reliable, with an 87% rate of agreement between two different coders.

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### The author

Ana Frankenberg-Garcia is a lecturer in the Department of Translation at the Instituto Superior de Linguas e Administração, Lisbon. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Edinburgh University. Her main interests are the teaching of writing and translation, and Portuguese-English crosslinguistic influence.  
E-mail: <garcia@publico.pt>