Feedback in the writing process: a model and methods for implementation

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This paper is written for any teacher who has tried or uses the 'process approach' to writing, and for any teacher who knows of the approach in theory only, not from practice. The emphasis of the paper is on feedback in the writing process, as feedback is the drive which steers the writer through the process of writing on to the product. Specifically, three types or options for feedback are described and discussed. These are peer feedback, conferencing, and written comments.

The 'process approach'

The 'process approach' to writing is not a new approach: it has been around since the early 1970s. Many readers of this paper may have a working definition of this approach—a multiple-draft process which consists of: generating ideas (pre-writing); writing a first draft with an emphasis on content (to 'discover' meaning/author's ideas); second and third (and possibly more) drafts to revise ideas and the communication of those ideas. Reader feedback on the various drafts is what pushes the writer through the writing process on to the eventual end-product.

An awareness of the term or concept described above may, however, be as far as some teachers get with the process approach for one reason or another. For some teachers (particularly those in exam-driven systems such as are found in Asia) such an approach may be viewed as impractical or 'too time consuming' (or perhaps not 'good' preparation for the exam). In such cases, teachers may equate endless hours of marking (particularly red-pen corrections at the surface level) with working hard. This 'traditional' method has great face-validity to on-lookers (e.g. fellow teachers; headmaster). Further, red marks on students' papers may also 'prove' the teacher's superiority over students and demonstrate that the teacher is 'doing his/her job'. Another reason for not implementing the process approach is that teachers simply have not worked out (or had time to work out) just *how* to implement such an approach. Or, finally, there may be teachers who have tried the approach but have 'run dry' or run into some form of difficulty in implementation and have given up.
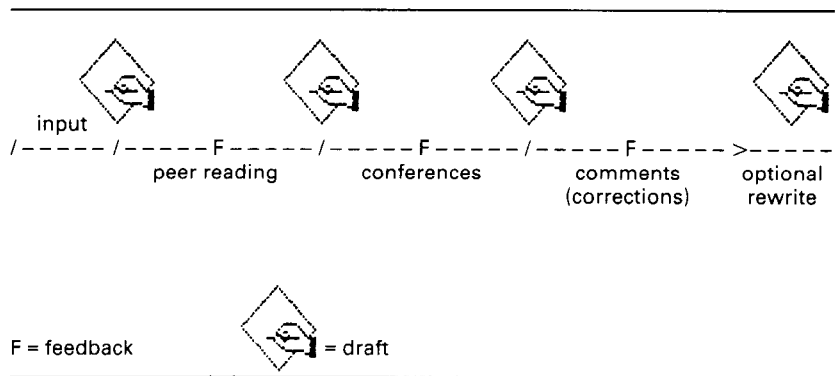
A definition of feedback

Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. It can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. In other words, it is the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives a writer to produce 'reader-based prose' (Flower, 1979) as opposed to writer-based prose.

Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or something like inappropriate word-choice or tense.

A review of the literature on writing reveals three major areas of feedback as revision. These areas are: peer feedback; conferences as feedback; and teachers' comments as feedback. (Evaluation and error correction—two other major areas of the literature—can also be considered as feedback in revision under some situations). In the course 'Practical Writing' at the Language Centre of Baptist College, (tertiary level) Hong Kong, all three types of feedback options are used for each paper that the students write. (Students write four or five papers in all for one semester; each paper taking approximately three weeks to go through the process to the final product). Figure 1 illustrates how the implementation takes place.

Figure 1:
Implementation of
feedback (for one paper)

input

/ — — — — — / — — — — — F — — — — — / — — — — F — — — — — / — — — — F — — — — > — — — —

peer reading   conferences   comments   optional
                                          (corrections)   rewrite

F = feedback   = draft

'Input' on the continuum in Figure 1 means anything which helps students get ideas for writing. This includes invention strategies such as brainstorming, fast writing, clustering, and interviewing. This may also include readings for models of good writing (for a particular type of assignment such as compare/contrast) or readings related to a particular topic. Vocabulary development (brainstorming words associated with a particular topic) may also be included here. Once students have received input for writing, they write their first draft (D1). They are made aware that D1 is only a draft—it is not a sacred process. After D1 is written, students receive their first form of feedback—from peers.

Peer feedback   In the literature on writing, peer feedback is referred to by many names, for example, peer response, peer editing, peer critiquing, and peer evaluation. Each name connotes a particular slant to the feedback, mainly in terms of where along the continuum this feedback is given, and the focus of the feedback. For example, peer response may come earlier on in the process (e.g. after D1) with a focus on content (organization of ideas, development with examples), and peer editing nearing the final stages of drafting (e.g. after D2 or D3) with a focus on grammar, punctuation, etc.

Feedback: a model and methods   295

There are several advantages given for using peer feedback in whatever form it may take. It is said to save teachers time on certain tasks, freeing them for more helpful instruction. Feedback is considered to be more at the learner's own level of development. Learners can gain a greater sense of audience with several readers (i.e. readers other than the teacher). The reader learns more about writing through critically reading others' papers.

Results from a questionnaire given to my own students about peer feedback as well as end-of-course discussions support and augment some of the advantages mentioned above. Students felt the peer feedback was useful in gaining a conscious awareness that they were writing for more than just the teacher. That affected how and what they wrote. Now students write with a greater goal than just writing down as much as possible to cover the topic. They write with a more specific focus because they know that their peers will also be reading their paper. Students also found peer feedback useful for obtaining immediate feedback and 'detecting problems in others' papers'. Here are two comments from students:

> During peer reading, I know how readers feel and how they react.

> Peer evaluation are helpful for these can raise the analytical power of the student. [sic] When they read the essays of their classmates, they can find out their mistakes and at the same time, this helps to remind them to avoid and correct such mistakes.

Lower and higher order concerns

The first step in implementing peer feedback is to train students for the task. Research shows that students have a tendency to read for surface, mechanical errors, usually referred to as 'lower order concerns' (LOCs). Students tend not to read for 'higher order concerns' (HOCs) such as the development of ideas, organization, and the overall focus of what they are writing.[1]

A comment from one of my students confirms her peers' focus on lower order concerns:

> Peer reading is rarely given a comment of 'good'. Usually, the readers keep an eye on finding grammar mistakes or choice of words.

The distinction between the teacher's management of LOCs and HOCs is crucial to the feedback process. But training students to read for more than lower order concerns is not easy, and, as the student's comment above suggests, not always successful. But the rewards—that is, getting student-readers to read with a writer in mind—are worth the problems or unsuccessful sessions.

Early in the course, I begin to instruct students to read critically in preparation for the peer feedback. I begin by showing examples of their first samples of writing, either on an overhead projector or by giving copies to the class. I focus on higher order concerns connected with lesson objectives. As the example below shows, if the lesson objective is on the logical

Claudia L. Keh

presentation of ideas and use of appropriate transition words, then that is what the instruction includes:

> *Assignment:* to develop a given topic sentence; either inductive or deductive organization.
> *Place in syllabus:* first writing sample (pre-essay; first week).
> *Focus:* transitions; elements of coherence.

Before many major examinations, like HKCEE, ACCA,

etc., we can see many students studying in the

library. Consultations with lecturers are especially

more frequent during this time. Moreover, it is

hard to find any student participating in any extra-

curricular activity. ▼ *Transition* It is not uncommon to find

students getting ill in this period. Therefore, ▼ *add a phrase which shows a connection between the key*

students are very nervous before examinations. *points and the generalization*

The goal of such instruction is to give students' an example of how to look for HOCs as well as the vocabulary and means to carry out such a focus on HOCs. Through this kind of instruction, students also become accustomed to the type of language (vocabulary such as cohesion, logic, restatement) later used in conferences and comments, making the teacher's work easier.

I also use group paragraph writing, followed by analysis, revision, and evaluation done by groups. For example, I assigned a group paragraph on defining an element of Chinese culture to a Westerner who had little or no experience with an Asian culture. Once paragraphs were completed, they were photocopied and compiled into a small booklet. The last page of the booklet included criteria for evaluation, suggestions for revision (HOCs), and finally instructions for identification of surface errors (LOCs).

For the peer feedback sessions (held during class time in pairs or groups), students are given guide-lines. These guide-lines begin as very structured check-lists, and progress to being less structured; finally, there are no guide-lines, reflecting the place in the syllabus and students' growing competence in peer reading.[2] All guide-lines used are based on lesson objectives and use vocabulary from readings and discussions. (See Figure 2 for an example.)

At the end of the course, I move to a 'no-guide-line' method suggested by Chandrasegaran (1989). In this method, students write questions about their own drafts specifically to a reader in the wide ruled margins of their draft.

Once students have received feedback from their peers, they revise their

Type: check-list/structured
Objective/focus:
    TS: definition/function
    logical connectors
    support with examples
    restatement sentence

1 *What is the author's purpose in writing?*
    —to show the importance of something;
    —to convince the reader to do something;
    —to explain how something is done.

2 Underline the author's topic sentence
    Does the topic sentence tell you, the reader, what to
    expect in the remainder of the paper?   yes   no

3 Are the author's points clearly presented to the reader?
    Put a triangle △ around every logical connector.
    Can you suggest any other connectors?

4 Does the author give enough examples to support his/her point?
    Put a question mark ? beside anything not clearly explained.
    Put an exclamation mark ! beside a good example.

5 Does the author provide a good conclusion?
    As the reader, do you feel satisfied with the ending?
    Underline the author's restatement sentence.

papers and write a second draft. After the second draft, feedback is given in the form of conferences.

Conferences   As with peer feedback, there are several advantages of conferences between the student-writer and teacher-reader.[3] One advantage mentioned is the interaction between the teacher and student. The teacher-reader is a 'live' audience, and thus is able to ask for clarification, check the comprehensibility of oral comments made, help the writer sort through problems, and assist the student in decision-making. Thus, the teacher's role can be perceived as a participant in the writing process rather than as a grade-giver. And compared to writing comments, conferences also allow more feedback and more accurate feedback to be given per minute.

Once again, results from my students' questionnaires and end-of-course discussions provided evidence to support these points. In answer to the question 'What has been the most helpful aspect of the conference sessions?', the majority of students said: feedback from teacher; interaction with teacher and fellow students; different ideas from teacher and students' points of view; and improved logic in writing. Students also wrote:

> Students can ask questions; can have a chance to talk more in English.

> Improving my writing technique by saying where my problems are and getting immediate feedback.

> Questions or problems from the essay are solved more effectively and more information can be gained.

Another item on the questionnaire asked 'What has been the most significant thing you've learnt from the conferences?' The majority of students responded that word-choice, organization, grammar, and reader

awareness were areas of significance. Students also added the following comments:

> My speaking technique in English and writing technique has improved such as content organization.

> Reader awareness—that means to have a better way to arouse readers' interest.

I found too that students valued the conferences not only for their beneficial effect on writing, but also because they helped to build up the students' confidence in oral work.

In implementing conferences with students, I have experienced with individual conferences which last 10–15 minutes and group conferences (2–3 students per group) which last 20–30 minutes. In both cases, I cancel class and have students sign up for appointments. Students not attending a conference on a particular conference day will instead go to class for group work. This group work usually consists of inductive, problem-solving grammar activities, assessed as problematic from students' own papers.

When individual conferences are used, students are given focus questions to prepare beforehand. The questions are designed to get students to focus first on content (HOCs), as more of the surface-type problems (LOCs) seem 'easier' for students to identify and discuss. The questions may include: What is the main point of your essay? How have you organized your points? Who are you writing to? Who is your audience? What do you hope to achieve? What specific area do you want the teacher to look at? Are there any words, phrases, etc. that you feel insecure about?

When group conferences are used, students are given sole responsibility in deciding the agenda for the conferences and how the conferences will be run. These agendas may include an outline of who will speak first, what questions will be asked and how they will be asked. Some groups read aloud portions of their own papers for feedback, others read aloud their peer's paper with a comment about where they feel the paper sounds 'wrong', and make suggestions for improvements.

A non-directive approach
For whichever type of conference, I use what Duke (1975) calls a non-directive approach. This approach to conferencing is based on counselling techniques in which the teacher asks for more information, shows appreciation for what the student says, uses acceptance and approval words (such as 'I see' and 'I understand') and tells the students that their ideas are not strange. This helps build students self-esteem, reassures them and gives them further confidence to write. I believe this approach to conferencing is particularly important with my Chinese students. From discussions with my Chinese colleagues, I have learnt that the Hong Kong Chinese do not separate one's work from one's self (as is the case in Western/American thinking). Thus, criticism of one's writing may be taken as criticism of oneself. In addition, my students are not accustomed to speaking with a Westerner on a personal level.

Some recent research (Schwertman, 1987; Walker and Elias, 1987) suggests that conferences fail when they are *not* non-directive (as described above). Conferences fail when teachers assume an authoritarian role, when they lead the conversation and ignore questions that do not fit into their preconceived 'ideal' agenda, rather than focusing on the concerns of the student as they emerge in dialogue.

The remedy for, or precaution against, such unsuccessful conferences is to give students time to formulate questions and give answers, simply listening to them. Following these recommendations is difficult particularly at the beginning of the course when students may not yet have learned to separate HOCs from LOCs. I have had groups come in for conferences with an agenda full of mainly grammatical questions, when I know that more pressing and fundamental problems still exist at the content level. In such cases, I listen as students go through their agendas and respond. Once all their questions have been asked, I ask my own questions about the content of the paper, the main point or focus, or how the paper is introduced, concluded, or organized. I make a conscious effort to ask open-ended questions to avoid getting the answers I want to hear. In this way, I have respected students' own concerns (concerns not on my agenda), but have also been able to give some individual instruction on HOCs needing attention.

I have found that the group conferences have been more successful than the individual conferences. Students seem more comfortable speaking in a group than one-to-one with the teacher. More discussion takes place in a group, as questions can be directed not only to the writer, but to the readers as well, taking some pressure off the non-native speaker. In discussions with students, they too prefer group conferences because they 'enjoy classmates' ideas' and 'learn from others' problems'. However, I have also found that towards the end of the course, students are more willing to come on an individual basis to discuss papers in-process as well as 'finished' products that they want to rewrite. I follow the advice given by Harris (1986). The student and I decide together on the goals for the conference—we may discuss reasons for an overall mark given, or questions the student may have, or comments I have written. Finally, we look at the main problems of the paper. From there, I decide on a teaching strategy to help solve the major problems, for example, directing the student to exercises for practice in specific areas of grammar.

After students receive feedback from the (in-process) conferences, they write their third draft—their product.[4] Before handing in their final draft for evaluation, students are told to edit their own work for LOCs—surface and mechanical problems. They refer to various grammatical input given throughout the course in the form of short, 5–10-minute grammar 'lessons', group problem-solving activities, or actual grammar lessons. In all cases, the grammar point focused on is one which has been identified as problematic in students' own writing, making it relevant. Also, such 'lessons' are meaning-focused rather than 'rules'-focused (see Keh, 1989).

Claudia L. Keh

Written
comments Most teachers of writing will agree that making comments on students' papers causes the most frustration and usually takes the most time. Teachers worry whether the comments will be understood, produce the desired results, or even be read. Such worries are justified if we believe the research.[5]

To avoid writing ineffective or inefficient comments, the first step is for the teacher to respond as a concerned reader to a writer—as a person, not a grammarian or grade-giver. Kehl, for example, urges the teacher to communicate '. . . in a distinctly human voice, with sincere respect for the writer as a person and a sincere interest in his improvement as a writer' (1970: 976). Another recommendation is to limit comments according to fundamental problems, keeping in mind that students cannot pay attention to everything at once. This again requires teachers to distinguish clearly between 'higher order' and 'lower order' concerns, not only when commenting on final drafts, but also when giving written comments as part of the writing process. The rationale here is that LOCs may disappear in a later draft as the writer changes content. For example, the writer may eliminate paragraphs or rewrite sentences where surface problems may have existed.

Three roles I have observed that I tend to write comments from three different roles or points of view. Firstly, I write as a reader interacting with a writer—that is, responding to the content with comments such as 'good point' or 'I agree'. The next role is that of a writing teacher concerned with points of confusion and breaks in logic, but still maintaining the role of a reader. The types of comments written here refer to the specific point of confusion—the effect the confusion has on a reader (actually using the words, 'I as your reader am confused by . . . '. They also refer to strategies for revision—choices of problem solving, options, or a possible example. The final role I play is that of a grammarian. These comments are written with reference to a grammar, giving a reason why a particular grammatical form is not appropriate (as with tense choice).

It is difficult to separate these roles when reading a student's paper. Therefore, I refer to an HOC list to help maintain a focus on overall problems, or to point out what a student has done well. I also remind myself of lesson objectives, so that I do not overwhelm students with marks and comments. Making these distinctions may also require reading through a paper twice. After writing comments in the margins of the draft, I write a summative comment at the end of the paper pointing out overall strengths and weaknesses and a suggested goal for the next paper.

What students think In my desire to improve my comment-writing and get feedback on how well I am communicating via comments, I asked students how useful they found each category of comment including one-word comments, phrasal comments, sentence-level comments, paragraph comments, and questions (as comments). The results were that students find one-word comments less helpful than comments with the most information (at least in terms of length).

Feedback: a model and methods

Students further described helpful comments as those that point out specific problems and provide suggestions, examples, or guide-lines for revision, and those that give overall strengths and weaknesses of the paper. Students told me, in discussions at the end of the course, that they tend to read these summative comments first and that it is very important to offer praise first followed by the problem areas.

> I think sentence comments and questions are most helpful. The reasons are the former can let me know about what is wrong with my sentence structure such as grammar, logical order, and ideas of the sentence. The latter can help me think about the reader and therefore help me write my essay more clearly.

> Paragraphs plus question comments are actually ideas because the questions make me think about the possible solutions to the problems.

Questionnaires revealed that students actually read most if not all comments written on their papers. I was surprised by this, but found that the same applied to all their courses.

When I asked the students why they read the comments, some responded that they wanted to know what they did well, and how they could improve the paper. This was particularly true for students who chose to rewrite the same paper for a higher mark (provided improvement was made). What requires further investigation, however, is whether students actually apply the information and suggestions they read from comments to subsequent papers.

In discussions with students at the end of the course, one student reported that question comments were most useful, because they forced her to think about the answers. Another student reported that the most confusing type of comments I have written on their papers are one-word comments. I was not surprised by that comment. But what did surprise me were the examples given and the reasons for the lack of usefulness or confusion.

Comments such as 'good' or 'good point' were problematic. Reflecting back, I know that when I write comments such as 'good', I feel confident that they are clear and offer encouragement. However, my student pointed out that it was not clear if 'good' was meant to compliment the content, writing style, or grammar. My one-word questions, for example, 'Why?', were also problematic because they did not provide enough information to complete the question successfully leaving the student no way of providing an appropriate answer. From my point of view, 'Why?' is written to indicate the need for further development.

It would seem, therefore, that my roles mentioned above had become enmeshed. When I was responding as a reader to a writer at the content level, a one-word comment (even the 'encouraging' ones) was in the end ineffectual because it didn't provide enough specific information. To help myself write more effective comments, I am now developing a list of

Claudia L. Keh

recommendations (based on input from my students) for reference while I am writing comments. Six of these are:

1 connect comments to lesson objectives (vocabulary, etc.);
2 note improvements: 'good', plus reasons why;
3 refer to a specific problem, plus strategy for revision;
4 write questions with enough information for students to answer;
5 write summative comment of strengths and weaknesses;
6 ask 'honest' questions as a reader to a writer rather than statements which assume too much about the writer's intention/meaning.

Conclusion   All three types of feedback discussed in this paper focus on 'higher order concerns' before 'lower order concerns'. All three can also be characterized as being 'student-centred' rather than 'teacher-centred'. Finally, all three types of feedback are consciously connected with lesson objectives.

I have found that each type of feedback has its own uses and advantages. Peer feedback is versatile, with regard to focus and implementation along the 'process writing' continuum. Overall, students felt peer feedback was valuable in gaining a wider sense of audience. Conferences may be used at the pre-writing stage, in-process stage, evaluation stage, or post-product stage and were felt by students to have a beneficial effect on both written and oral work. Finally, comments are useful for pointing out specific problems, for explaining the reasons for them, and for making suggestions. Here are some final remarks from my students:

> Peer learning is good for us. Through the discussion, we can discover our mistakes. I think if secondary school can provide such learning method to students it will be useful.

> The student–teacher conferencing is very helpful. If the student–teacher conferencing is used in secondary schools, it would be more helpful to the students, because only the written comments are not enough.

> I think this kind of conferencing/writing comments is helpful to secondary-school students. It would help students to know more clearly what is wrong with their writing: especially F5 and F7 students—they can discuss with their teacher about the skills in writing in public exams.

> When I was in secondary school, there were no conferences between student and teacher. I found it hard to finish the work that was assigned to me without a channel of inquiry. Moreover, I found it boring sometimes as teachers usually taught us by reading notes from a textbook.

These remarks reveal very clearly that, at least in the opinion of these students, the feedback processes described in this paper could be—and should be—taking place long before our students are adults.[6]

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Notes

1 The need to train students in peer feedback is documented by, for example, Danis (1982), Flynn (1982), and Ziv (1983). For discussions of 'high order concerns', see Krest (1988) and McDonald (1978).

2 This progression follows the suggestion of, for example, Beaven (1977), Hafernik (1984), and Ellman (1980).

3 See, for example, Duke (1975), Fassler (1978), Judy and Judy (1981), and Harris (1986).

4 For discussions about other conference options (e.g. at the pre-writing or product stage) see, for example, Harris (1986), Fassler (1978), Duke (1975).

5 See, for example, Hillocks (1986), Kehl (1970), Sommers (1982), Ziv (1982).

6 See Stewart (1989) for an example of a process approach to writing for secondary-school students.

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