



Original Research Article

LESS CAN BE MORE: THOUGHTFUL FEEDBACK TO PROMOTE STUDENT GROWTH

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Abstract

All instructors provide feedback to students on their writing, but much of that feedback is unread or unacted upon. Students often fail to make substantial revisions to papers-in-progress or transfer the feedback to future writing tasks. The following study examined the effects of three different types of feedback (corrections, criticisms, and suggestions) on student writing in a first-year developmental college writing class in a public university in America. The instructor provided feedback on essays the students submitted, and we examined the frequency of revisions that were made, if any, on the final drafts based on each instructor comment in an effort to determine feedback practices instructors should follow or avoid. Students were most likely to make changes based on surface-level corrections rather than deeper revisions indicated by criticisms or suggestions. Also, the more corrections the instructor made, the less likely students were to make revisions, suggesting that many of the instructor's comments were detrimental to improvement. This suggests that instructors should be mindful of the type of feedback they use to focus on the most important issues in a student's writing.

Keywords: feedback, revision, improvement, growth, writing achievement

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is essential in helping students improve their writing. However, it remains an area of frustration for students and instructors alike. Students often believe that any critique of their writing is a "personal attack" from the instructor (Sommers, 2006, p. 250) or may feel so frustrated or overwhelmed that they fail to enact changes (Lee, 2011). By the end of a semester, despite instructors' well-meaning efforts to provide helpful feedback, students have reported valuing feedback less than when they began the course (Sachar, 2020). Meanwhile, faculty lament over students' "limited use of" it (Winstone et al., 2016b, p. 2027); the instructors' efforts are in vain if the student is unwilling or unprepared to consider this advice on how to improve their writing.

Though much has been written about the role of feedback on student writing, it remains unclear what types and frequency of comments are effective in prompting change, as well as what

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instructional methods are most effective in teaching students to benefit from feedback. The purpose of this study is to investigate different types and amounts of feedback one instructor used in her developmental writing classes and measure the effect to influence thoughtful decision-making amongst composition instructors. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What type of feedback prompts students to make substantial revisions?
2. Are students more likely to make changes prompted from one type of feedback than from another?
3. How does the instructor output of feedback compare with student action based on it?

We have included a literature review to justify the importance of studying feedback, provide background on how previous researchers reviewed feedback, and share methods instructors can utilize to help students make use of feedback.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feedback's effect on writing achievement

It is well documented that instructor feedback can promote students' ability to improve their writing. In their analysis of effective assessment, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) argue that feedback is the most important factor in teaching, though there can be substantial differences between instructors' versus students' perceptions of its utility. The researchers state several conditions of making feedback useful: it must be detailed, timely, and frequent; if the feedback is only given at the conclusion of a course, or far after they have completed the assignment, it is unlikely to significantly affect learning, as the students have already moved on. Additionally, it is important to focus feedback on performance and learning rather than on the student; providing direction on what to improve is far better than commenting about the poor quality of their writing, and it is less likely to lead to negative feelings (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Hattie and Timperley (2007) further discuss the disconnect between instructors and their students regarding feedback, noting that instructors must orient their feedback to student goals in an effort to "reduce discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal" (p. 87). They discuss the use of three feedback questions: "Where am I going? How am I going? and Where to next?" to guide and better involve both teachers and students in the feedback process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 88).

In addition to a focus on when and how to give feedback, instructors must consider where to channel their efforts. O'Donovan et al. (2016) bring up the widespread failure of instructors in connecting evidence-based research to their feedback practice, arguing that institutions and instructors should take a social constructivist approach that includes focusing on "key messages [that] may be obscured" by too much feedback (p. 943). In the same vein, after reviewing 38 studies in a meta-analysis, Lim and Renandya (2020) caution against a hyper-focus on error correction, stating that this may lead only to "superficial, explicit knowledge" rather than significant gain (3). Additionally, focusing on error correction can stifle growth and diminish self-esteem (Lim & Renandya, 2020).

Different types of feedback

Various studies have examined different methods of providing feedback, and results are mixed. Ahmadi et al. (2012) sought to determine the most effective feedback for EFL students in advanced writing classes at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan. 60 students were evenly divided into groups that received different treatments: a control group that received no feedback on errors, a "direct-correction" group where errors were identified and corrected, and an "uncoded-feedback" group where the teacher underlined or circled an error but didn't correct it or say what type of problem occurred (Ahmadi et al., 2012, p. 2590). Results of the study indicate no significant differences in pre-tests amongst the groups but significant differences in the post-test, with the uncoded feedback group significantly outperforming the direct-correction group and control group. Ahmadi et al. believe that both types of feedback can be useful, but they recommend uncoded feedback for making the largest gains in student writing. In a study that classified the feedback in a slightly different way, direct vs. indirect, but ended with similar findings, Jamalinesari et al. (2015) examines results in an ELL Iranian classroom. In the direct feedback group, the teacher corrected the

errors, while the teacher drew lines under the errors and added comments for the indirect feedback group but did not make corrections. Both groups were asked to revise their writing, and these were scored for accuracy. Even though the teachers had corrected the errors and students were not given a final essay without feedback to check for accuracy, the indirect feedback group still outperformed the direct feedback group, and errors decreased over time (Jamalinesari et al., 2015). The results of both studies indicate that the teacher may limit student learning if they overmark a paper.

Still, there is no one method researchers can agree upon as the most effective type of feedback. Lim and Renandya's (2020) meta-analysis found little statistical difference in direct vs. indirect, with indirect yielding slightly higher results, although there were only two studies that examined indirect. Focused feedback (marking only one or a few types of errors vs. marking many types) was found to be more effective than unfocused (Lim & Renandya, 2020). Wahyuni (2017) conducted a study with even more variables to examine the correlation between different types of feedback (including direct corrective feedback, DCF, vs. indirect corrective feedback, ICF) and cognitive style on writing achievement. The researcher sought to determine if teachers should vary their approaches depending on student need to impact their growth as writers. After the students took the Group Embedded Figure Test (GEFT) and writing tests to provide information about their cognitive and writing styles, the researcher assigned them into a treatment. Wahyuni (2017) found no significant difference across learning styles or type of feedback. For example, when field dependent and field independent students received DCF, one group did not outperform the other in terms of writing quality. Also, in examining the type of feedback given regardless of learning style, students' writing quality did not significantly improve with one treatment over the other, although student essays received slightly higher mean scores following DCF. Student writing improved after each type of treatment, reinforcing that feedback enhances writing achievement (Wahyuni, 2017).

Teaching students to use feedback

One of the largest issues with feedback is that students are often not taught how to process and respond to it. In their review of previous studies, Taggart and Laughlin (2017) discuss the importance of "a positively framed teacher-student relationship" where a "feedback loop" is created as a way to mitigate this and improve student writing (p. 5). The researchers offer several suggestions, such as spending more time framing feedback and having students reflect on it, to reduce these negative feelings. Similarly, Listyani (2021) reports student dissatisfaction with feedback for a variety of reasons including feeling upset they disappointed their teacher and confused when they failed to understand the meaning of the feedback. These feelings would be mitigated with more explicit instruction on what the feedback means.

If feedback is one-sided, with the instructor providing it but not helping the students learn to use it, its utility is limited. Drawing from previous research, de Klein (2023) created a feedback literacy model to help "students in shaping their specific feedback interactions" and instruct educators on "scaffold[ing] these interactions" (p. 188). The model includes prompts to help students consider, request, and respond to teacher feedback along with ideas for independent problem solving, with an emphasis on students taking a more active responsibility with the feedback. Likewise, Sadler (2010) stresses the need for teaching students how to make use of instructors' comments to improve their writing, referring to both feedback and "feedforward" as ways to utilize the comments on current and future writing tasks (p. 538). Sadler cautions against using feedback as "one-way messages" from the teacher to student; instead, he advocates for teaching students to develop self-assessment skills that will aid them in decision-making about their writing (p. 539).

One method instructors use to help students gain these skills and see the value of feedback is through the use of guided peer review. Evans (2015) studied students' perceptions of peer feedback on their writing and found mixed results in terms of usefulness, but one positive aspect is how students have a more active role in the feedback process, which helped students' self-assessment skills. Nicol and McCallum (2021) also studied benefits of feedback gained through peer review, focusing not on what one peer provided to the other but on the "internal feedback" students gleaned by comparing their own writing and comments on their own writing to that of others (p. 425).

While the present study focuses on the instructor's feedback and the students' revisions or lack thereof, rather than teaching methods, we found it crucial to include this section to influence other writing instructors to improve their feedback practices. It should be noted that the instructor whose feedback was used in the study did not read the literature review or follow these suggested techniques.

METHODS

Participants

The study sample consisted of 39 students in eight sections' worth of a 15-week developmental college writing course taught by the same instructor during Fall 2020 (August-November) and Spring 2021 (January-May). These classes were held at a public four-year American university with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 7,000 students. Students were required to take this class as a prerequisite to a traditional first-year writing class based on holding a high school grade point average of below 87%; students whose GPA was 87% or above were not required to take this developmental class and were placed directly into the traditional first-year writing class. Thus, this sample included only first- and second-year students who were considered underprepared for college-level writing. Many of these students were members of an educational opportunity program which sought to serve students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds.

After the completion of the course, students gave permission for their data to be used in this study via an emailed consent form that was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Students were informed of the purpose, procedures, risks, and confidentiality of the study.

The sample is small for three reasons. First, though the class size allowance was 25 students, each class had shrunk to 20 or fewer by the end of the semester due to student withdrawal (heavily influenced by the pandemic, since the Spring 2021 classes of this instructor were in-person, and some students chose not to remain on campus), with one class reducing to eight students. Second, many students did not respond to the researchers' email; the pandemic influenced student retention in a negative way, so some were no longer enrolled at the university when the emails were sent and thus could not be contacted, as we only had access to their university emails. Third, though 130 students were still enrolled at the completion of the instructor's classes during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters, not all students completed the required assignments to participate in the study and were not invited to participate.

Data collection

We completed CITI training, submitted an application for this study to be reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board, and received approval as exempt.

Since this course was developmental and in preparation of a subsequent course, a large percentage of the students' grades came not from their writing achievement alone but from their sustained efforts in the writing process. This course design was intentional in providing low-stakes assignments as students developed writing fluency. As part of their coursework, students received instructor feedback and grades (based on effort and completion rather than achievement to lessen the intimidation factor for these developmental writers) on four major essays in the first two-thirds of the semester: argumentative, descriptive, memoir, and compare/contrast. Students received credit for pre-writing, a rough draft, peer review, a final draft, and a description of the revisions they had completed on each essay. Students had autonomy in choosing topics as long as they fit the genre.

Later in the semester, students were asked to choose one of the four essays and revise it based on instructor feedback and the guidelines of the specific genre's rubric. While none of the four essays required a specific word count or page length, there were requirements for each genre, such as that the memoir and descriptive essays necessitated the use of figurative language and imagery, and the argumentative essay required the use of outside sources and citations. Students received a grade based

on achievement for this revised essay that accounted for 10% of their overall grade in the course regardless of which essay they chose to revise.

For the purpose of this study, we are referring to the first essay as the “middle draft” (since it was not a first draft, which students had brought to class, received peer feedback on, revised, and submitted) and the essay submitted near the end of the semester as the “final draft.”

It should be noted that the same instructor provided feedback to all students on both drafts without any outside consultation or support. Students had access to each specific genre’s rubric to guide them in self-assessment and revision. Prior to the collection of the “final draft,” the instructor reviewed each genre’s requirements, provided class time and a framework for peer review of the revised essay, and invited students to office hours to conference about their essays.

Data analysis

Student essays were deidentified and numbered. We determined three categories into which we would code the instructor feedback:

Correction: directly pointing out and correcting an issue/error (i.e., fixing a mistake in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, verb tense, subject/verb agreement, etc.)

Criticism: pointing out a problem area that needed to be addressed but not fixing it or suggesting a specific improvement (i.e., commenting on wordiness or lack of sentence variety)

Suggestion: giving an idea about how to improve (i.e., directing the student with specific commands on where to expand or delete; asking questions so that the student could clarify their response)

These categories were determined after completing the literature review and reading through the instructors’ comments on several essays to determine patterns in her feedback methods. These are varied from studies we reviewed, which included but are not limited to direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback (Wahyuni, 2017), indirect coded feedback, indirect uncoded feedback (Rizkiani et al., 2020), focused feedback, and unfocused feedback (Lim & Renandya, 2020). However, they were most fitting for the needs of this study, since we were interested in the comments the instructor gave students as well as how the students responded to the different types of feedback. Comments that offered praise without any prompting to make a revision were not coded since there would not be an associated revision.

First, individually, we examined each instructor comment on three middle (pre-feedback) drafts and gave them codes (correction, criticism, or suggestion), and we examined the corresponding final (post-feedback) drafts to determine the changes/revisions, if any, that were made based on each comment. We determined statistics for each essay from middle draft to final with a plus if acted upon the comment or a minus if ignored. Next, we met to discuss our results. When we disagreed upon a code, we discussed our rationale and came to an agreement. We then completed a norming process with five more essays to establish interrater reliability. It should be noted that, after we completed the norming process, the undergraduate researcher completed coding the remaining essays due to time constraints of the principal investigator. This is further addressed in the limitations portion of this study.

Table 1 provides examples of the coded feedback categories, student writing on the middle (pre-feedback) drafts, the instructor comments, and the revisions students made on the final (post-feedback) drafts. We have chosen not to include examples of corrections since they were surface-level, largely grammatical errors that did not require actual revision; however, due to the large number of corrections the instructor made on most students’ middle drafts, we were interested in how students reacted to the corrections—whether they made the changes on their final drafts or not, and how this correlated, if at all, with their actions in the other categories of feedback.

Table 1. Initial Student Writing, Instructor Feedback, and Student Revision

Category of Feedback	Initial Student Writing	Instructor Feedback	Student Revision
Suggestion	Student wrote in her memoir that she wanted to attend Delaware State.	“Why there in particular?”	Added “Even though this was an out of state college, I saw it as a way to move far from home and learn how to really live on my own.”
Suggestion	Student stopped short.	“Resolution needed—how has it affected you since?”	Added “This injury affected me a lot in my future...”
Criticism	Student wrote the term “tech fall win”	“Help your reader out with what this means” [in response to a wrestling term non-wrestlers might not know]	Added “...tech fall win, which is when you beat someone by 15 points...”
Criticism	Student wrote a paragraph describing what was not relevant to the subject of their descriptive language essay	“Stick to your subject”	Student added paragraph that stayed on topic and moved off-topic paragraph to the end, where it was more fitting

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, instructors are quick to mark student errors in writing. Similar to the findings of other studies (Singh & Tan, 2016; Winstone et al., 2016a), many students in this study made changes based on the instructors’ corrections, but these could only elicit surface-level changes rather than true revision. Since the instructor in this study continued to mark the same error rather than marking and commenting on it once and prompting the student to find and correct other similar errors on their own, it is unknown if students learned from the correction, unlike how Ahmadi et al.’s (2012) study found that students whose errors were underlined or circled but not actually corrected made significant gains in the post-test.

The feedback types provided by the instructor in this study, while falling into at least two of the three categories on every paper, are severely imbalanced. As shown by the summary statistics in Table 2, criticisms and suggestions were less frequently marked on student papers than simple corrections, and they were ignored by students more often when it came to action. Suggestions were fewest in number, with 15 of the 39 essays receiving zero comments coded in that category. It is unsurprising that corrections—which may refer to a single word or element, such as a mark of punctuation or case of a letter—outnumbered criticisms and suggestions, which were broader in scope and may refer to an entire sentence, passage, or idea. Still, it remains troubling how many of the instructors’ efforts focused on correcting mistakes rather than prompting students to reconsider their writing in a thoughtful way.

Table 2. Summary Statistics of Feedback and Revision per Essay

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Range	Min.	Max
Corrections							
Marked	15.38	13	10	9.8	42	1	43
Addressed	9.44	8.5	9	7.59	29	0	29
Criticisms							
Marked	5.97	6	6	2.8	11	2	13
Addressed	3.14	3	2	2.52	12	0	12
Suggestions							
Marked	1.21	1	0	1.38	4	0	4
Addressed	.65	0	0	.92	3	0	3

Note: N=39

Criticisms and suggestions, while prompting more substantial, global revision, required students to undergo more than the quick adjustment of an error correction. For example, the instructor suggestion “You might want to add a little more on this” encouraged the student to elaborate and reflect more on their freshman year “dumpster fire” (as the student put it) experience, leading to self-reflection and more detail if acted upon, which is significantly more work than fixing, for example, a run-on sentence that the instructor had already corrected.

The more correctional feedback given, the less likely students were to act upon criticisms or suggestions. In one essay, #15, there were 43 corrections including when to capitalize letters, begin new paragraphs, add commas, and add skipped words such as “and” and “in.” In this case, *none* of the corrections were completed by the student, not even after the same error was corrected several times. The student additionally ignored 11 criticisms and 4 suggestions. #6, which also received a great deal of commentary, had comparable results: out of 33 corrections, 5 criticisms, and 2 suggestions from the instructor, the student addressed 4 corrections and did not attempt more substantial revision. Without student interviews or reflections to explain why students made these choices, we can only speculate on the reasons, but we note that the instructor’s efforts to help these students improve their papers yielded poor returns.

While some students seemed to heed much of their instructor’s advice, they were more likely to copy the corrections the instructor made rather than attempt more difficult tasks. In #1, the student addressed 13 of 15 corrections but only 1 of 5 criticisms and 1 of 4 suggestions. While other student essays, such as #17 and #19, attempted more higher-level revision (#17: 27 of 33 corrections, 7 of 9 criticisms, and 1 of 1 suggestions; #19: 29 of 33 corrections, 3 of 6 criticisms, and 3 of 4 suggestions), these examples were scarcer and showed efforts to change/revise based on all three types of feedback.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Several factors impeded the validity and reliability of this study. Out of the 130 students who completed the class, only 39 of those who were eligible (due to completing the required assignments) and able to be contacted (due to remaining enrolled at the university) granted permission for their data to be used. This rendered the sample smaller than desired and conclusions more difficult to generalize for students as a population. Also, since students were allowed by the instructor to choose which of the four main essays they would revise and resubmit, this introduced variables to the sample of student work. If all students were required to revise and resubmit the same assignment, there would be more consistency in paper length and structure. The instructor wanted students to have autonomy in this assignment, as it was 10% of the students’ overall grade, but this may have influenced students in choosing the essay that required the least number of revisions, limiting the scope of what can be gleaned from this data.

Another issue with the data is that both researchers did not code the instructors' feedback on all 39 essays; although the principal investigator trained the undergraduate researcher in coding and made herself available for questions and concerns, interrater reliability was compromised without both researchers completing the process.

Furthermore, without the use of a control group in this study, conclusions are limited. If groups of students received different treatments, more could be learned about the best types of feedback for eliciting substantial revision in writing.

Perhaps the largest area of neglect in this study is the lack of attention to student insight. Examining the results of the study, we realized how valuable a student interview, reflection, or survey could have been to our understanding of why students acted upon or ignored the feedback of their instructor. Students may have had valid reasons for failing to respond to criticisms and suggestions, such as that they disagreed with the instructor's comments, but we can only speculate on these. We do not know how the students perceived the instructor's feedback; we only know whether they responded to each comment. We could have additionally ascertained students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the instructor in teaching them how to use feedback to draw conclusions about the efficacy of instruction, as the prevalence of corrections suggests that her approach did not best serve student needs. Our hope is that the results of this study will help instructors consider a more balanced approach to feedback than this instructor used.

Finally, if the instructor's approach to giving feedback had been better aligned with evidence-based practices detailed in the literature review, results may have differed. A future research study could provide instructors with research-based best practices prior to the start of the semester so that they could implement those in their approaches.

CONCLUSION

Though there were many faults of both the instructor and the researchers in this study, there are implications for instruction. From the data found in this research study, as well as the results of other studies (Abdel Latif, 2015; Molloy et al., 2013; Ackerman et al., 2017), it is clear that teachers should be mindful over what kind of feedback they give students as well as how they can best prepare their students for making the most of this feedback. No single type of feedback provides students with everything they need to improve their writing, and too much of one feedback type can shortchange students of becoming better writers. Too much feedback *in general* could provoke an emotional response from students (Sommers, 2006; Lee, 2011), as well, which could lead to fewer revisions. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) list several reasons students may not act upon feedback, including that the feedback is too late, disconnected from future learning, unspecific, beyond what they know what to do, too discouraging, or without incentive to follow up. While the current study did not investigate students' individual reasons for making changes or not to their essays, previous studies have addressed negative feelings associated with excessive correction.

Instructors of writing should push self-reflection over correction (Torres & Ferry 2019). In the present study, the category that potentially offered the most helpful type of feedback, suggestion, was not included in every essay, while the category that prompted very superficial change, correction, was overrepresented. Despite the best intentions of the instructor to help her students improve, much of her feedback was ignored, leaving some unanswered questions as to how she could have better supported them. While this study was inconclusive in determining best practices, the data presented shows the disconnect between the instructor's efforts and her students' responses.

It is critically important that students are both open to feedback and that they are made to understand the transferability of this feedback to future writing contexts. When students are given feedback that pushes them to consider not just the current writing tasks but future ones, as well, students may value the feedback more (Winstone et al., 2016a). Sommers (2006) argues that constructive criticism rather than praise was useful for student growth in writing, as it showed the

instructor cared about the student's growth and challenged them to adapt their thinking. While praise is also essential for struggling writers, it will fail to elicit the desired growth without the critique—it doesn't give students a reason to want to improve, and they neglect to make changes in or develop their writing. Sommers instead suggests treating students as apprentice scholars or colleagues, creating an "intellectual partnership" where the teacher acts as listener questioning the writer's choices and offering suggestions (p. 252). Though the instructor in this study attempted to give different types of feedback to promote change, more students may have attempted revisions had she followed these guidelines.

For feedback to be useful, instructors need to consider the methods in which they provide feedback and instruct their students in using it to enhance their writing. By breaking down barriers, students will better understand the value of feedback and increase their writing achievement. When instructors take the time to understand the benefits and detriments of the different types and amounts of feedback they provide, and when they provide a framework for students on how to best use the feedback to advance their writing, it is more likely that growth will follow.

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