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## *Responding to our students' writing: what is good for us and for them?*

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Students spend hours working on writing assignments that we give them. And after they hand them in, we spend hours reading them and marking errors. Is this the best way to help students become better writers? Is this the most effective way for us to spend our time? This article discusses different ways of responding to student writing and gives practical suggestions for ways to improve our evaluation of this difficult, but valuable skill.

### **WHY IS WRITING IMPORTANT AT ALL LEVELS OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?**

Writing is important because it allows students to practice language. Writing also gives them a chance to express ideas. But, the problem with writing is that it frequently becomes grammar practice (see for example Searle & Dillon 1980 who studied many teachers' responses to student writing and found that the focus was almost always on form and not on content.). In order to make writing practice a way for students to truly practice language and express themselves, we need to take the grammar out of writing and focus on what composition really is: expressing ideas.

Robertson (1986) described his own experience as a writing teacher who responded to passionate student narratives only with comments about grammar. After looking at his responses objectively, he realized how silly it was not to comment on the message the students were sending him. As a result of his reflection, he recommends that the first level of responding to student essays must always be to talk about **WHAT** the students wrote. He explains any writer expects a response

to what was written, and it is a problem if teachers only respond to HOW it was written. He says "to respond to technique alone is not only bad pedagogy. It's bad manners" (1986: 89).

Grammar practice does have its place, but NOT during most writing activities. For those teachers who do grammar correction in writing assignments, the big problem is the time it takes for them to "correct" student writing. Teachers spend hours reading over student essays and marking grammatical errors. An even bigger problem, and one that most teachers do not realize, is that this type of feedback has no effect on students (Knoblauch and Brannon 1981, Marzano and Arthur 1977, Leki 1991, among others). So, if it does not have any effect, why do it? There are other ways to respond to student writing that are much more effective for both the student in terms of improvement and the teacher in terms of time management.

## **HOW CAN WE RESPOND TO OUR STUDENTS' WRITING?**

The authors cited above have shown us that it is useless to spend so much of our time making extensive corrections and written comments on our students' writing assignments. So what do we do? In order to find new ways to respond to our students' writing, the first thing to consider is whether we are going to be mentors or judges (Speck 2000). Traditionally, writing teachers have been judges. Specifically, writing teachers tend to be grammar judges. If we want to become better writing teachers (which means to produce students who write better), we need to become mentors.

The most important thing mentors do is to show students how to write. How many of us actually write the same assignments we give our students? If we do this, we are giving our students a role model to follow. We also need to become writers ourselves, creating academic papers, poetry, short stories, or whatever. By writing and sharing our work with our students, we are mentoring them in a positive way. As mentors, we also comment on content, giving positive feedback that encourages our students to write even more. A mentor also explains to the students how to become better writers by giving positive and constructive feedback, not by criticizing their grammar.

Speck (2000) points out that because teachers must ultimately give a grade to the students, they may have trouble being successful mentors of the writing process. If we are going to help our students learn to be better writers, we need to make an effort to show the students how we behave as a mentor by clearly separating our mentor-self from our judge-self.

## **ALTERNATIVES FOR RESPONDING**

The most important thing for us to do when we respond to student writing is to give them feedback on the content of what they have written. As Robertson (1986) suggests, we can do this in three general ways. We can give an emotional reaction to what has been written, "How exciting that must have been!" We can mirror the student's attitudes about the topic, "I can imagine that you must have been very worried." Or we can give an experience of our own that parallels what the student has written, "That reminds me of when I..." After doing this, then we can tell students how to organize the essay better or how to present examples in a more effective manner. Robertson has shown that giving this kind of feedback and allowing for revision helps students to improve greatly.

And if a teacher is still worried about grammar, many times the students themselves make structural corrections while they are working on revising the content. Another possibility is for the teacher to take notes of grammatical mistakes on a separate paper and look for repeated patterns that can be reinforced in class in a regular grammar activity that is separate from the writing activity.

There are other ways to respond to our students that encourage improved writing and that are not painful for the teacher. One of those is called dialogue responses (Jenkins 1987, Gay 1998). In this case, after a student writes a text, the teacher responds to the message of the text and makes comments about the organization or some other aspect that has been the focus of the writing class. The teacher may want to ask questions to help the students start thinking about how they will want to revise the text. After the students receive the teacher's comments, they respond to them, drafting a letter to the teacher that responds to

the comments and questions. In this letter, the students are invited to explain what they were trying to do with their text, and they also respond to the teacher's constructive criticism. The teacher, in turn, responds to the students' comments and explanations either in writing or orally, and the students are given an opportunity to revise their work. The teacher should refrain from giving a grade until the student has a chance to revise. Grades should be based on improvement from first draft to final draft, rather than only on the quality of the final version.

The benefit of this type of dialogue response is that the students have an opportunity to explain their point of view. With traditional grading, students simply accept the grade that the teacher gives them without having a chance to defend themselves or to explain the true purpose of their text or even point out where the teacher misunderstood them (Zamel, 1985).

Other authors speak of using personal interviews or conferences as an effective way to respond to and evaluate student papers (for example, Lynch and Klemans, 1978). Lynch and Klemans point out that there has been a lot of research which shows that error correction is basically useless except when it is done in person. Instead of taking hours and hours at home reading and "correcting" student essays, the teacher sets aside time in class or during office hours to discuss student writing individually with each student. The teacher should read the texts before meeting with the students. However, the teacher should NOT make written comments on the text itself. This is done orally as the teacher and student read the text together during the conference. The teacher explains the good and not so good aspects of the text, and the student has the chance to respond and defend his or her position. It is recommended that the student take notes (or use a tape recorder) in order to later recall what was said about the piece of writing when it is time to revise. This type of interview feedback takes much less time than taking writing assignments home and responding to them in writing and more importantly is much more effective for improving student writing (Lynch and Klemans, 1978).

Another type of feedback that allows students to participate in their evaluation is the use of checklists (Raimes, 1983). The following is a simple example of a checklist that can be used either by the students or by the teacher.

	Essay 1	Essay 2	Essay 3	Essay 4	Essay 5
Topic sentence					
Supporting ideas					
Conclusion					
Verb tense					
Verb form					
Plural forms					
Subject-verb agreement					

It is a good idea to include more than one essay or writing assignment in the checklist so that both the student and teacher can see progress and problem areas.

### **WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT STRUCTURAL FEEDBACK (EDITING VS. REVISION)?**

Structural feedback and editing are at a different level than content feedback. Editing and revising are two very different things. Revising is what is done when a writer focuses on changing the content or the message of the text. Only after the message is clearly organized and developed should the students start thinking of editing. Editing includes changing surface-level features. Why edit something that will be changed later through revision? It is a waste of time. Because of this, editing should be the final step of a writing project.

Should we grade on grammar in a writing assignment? Only if we tell the students before they turn it in. We should always focus on the content and organization of the writing exercise until the student has produced a final version. It is important to always keep in mind that the goal of writing is to express an idea. If the structural problems do not interfere with the message, they do not need to be addressed. At some point the teacher may decide that a writing assignment will become a grammar assignment, but it is definitely NOT necessary to mark grammar errors in every assignment. If the teacher is going to mark grammar, this needs to be clearly explained to the students.

Also it is extremely important to be consistent with feedback. Language teachers are notoriously inconsistent when marking errors, which causes a lot of confusion for students (Bates, Lane and Lange 1993, Leki, 1991). As an alternative to the teacher marking grammar errors, Leki (1991) points out that self-correction and peer correction are helpful to students in terms of getting them to focus their attention of their own errors and overcome them.

To summarize, let's look at some bad ways to give response to student writing. Negative, excessive, or cryptic responses are all types of bad response. Also, response that is only focused on grammar is bad. Response that only identifies weaknesses is also considered to be bad response. Reed and Burton (1985) explain that it is not helpful to simply identify errors because this does not explain why it is an error. Students want explanations. Similarly, praise like "good" is equally bad because it does not explain why something is good. Students consider praise without explanation to be useless because it does not tell them what they did right. Giving a clear explanation with praise helps students to see what is successful about their writing so that they can repeat these strategies (Burkland and Grimm 1986, Straub, 1997).

To give good responses to our students, we must first read the writing sample without using a pen. We need this moment to enjoy the message of what was written. As we read the second time with pen in hand, we should look for strengths and comment on them. After we do this, we can help students see what to do next by pointing out aspects of organization, logical order, etc., to show them their weaknesses. We can also encourage peer evaluations and even conduct personal conferences. If a teacher decides that she/he has to check grammar,

that teacher must tell the students that grammar will be an issue. Then the teacher must be consistent with error correction.

The main problem with an anti-grammar stance towards writing feedback is that we have to defend ourselves to both students and colleagues. There is substantial evidence that says that correcting grammar errors in a writing assignment does not improve student control of either grammar or writing. However, the history of teaching writing has focused on grammar correction, and going against this very long tradition is hard for teachers, especially when our students say that they "want" every error corrected. (They only want it because this is the only way they have studied writing, and they think that this is the only way to do it.) Those of us who believe that this focus on grammar correction is "debilitating for students and pointlessly time consuming for teachers" (Leki, 1991: 210) must explain to others the research behind this approach to teaching writing so that we can make writing classes much more stimulating and effective for both students and teachers.

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