



Making Written Feedback Work

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Motivating learners who take English as a compulsory subject is difficult. It is complicated by the fact that techniques that work well for some learners do not work well for others. However, I have discovered a technique that addresses a problem faced by many ESL and EFL teachers—getting students to pay attention to and apply the suggestions or advice in comments that they have written on student papers. I call my solution “written feedback only.”

No doubt you have noticed student responses when we hand back writing assignments that have both a grade and written comments. Usually the first thing they look at, and sometimes the only thing, is the score or grade, not the comments that we have so thoughtfully composed. In order to change students’ responses to my comments on their papers, I have experimented with an alternate form of giving feedback, one that is more consistent with the writing process than what I was doing before. I no longer give grades on writing assignments until my students have revised their work making use of my written comments.

This technique works especially well for students who are extrinsically motivated. They pay greater attention to my written feedback now because they must make use of it. They also appreciate the opportunity to improve their work by revising it. The grade appears only on their revised work. Here are the steps that I follow.

1. Read student papers and give written feedback only.
2. Return work with comments to students.
3. Allow time for students to read comments and ask questions.
4. Allow time for students to revise their work.
5. Give grade on revised work.

The procedure ensures that students see revision as a necessary part of the writing process. They respond well to what they perceive as an extra chance to improve their grades. Finally, the procedure also helps me consider very carefully the feedback that I give my students.

About the Author

Ruth Ming Har Wong is a teaching fellow in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She has been teaching ESL learners of different age groups since 1993. Her research interests include second language teaching and learning, language arts, and learning motivation.