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Responding to Feedback in Revision in Multiple-draft Writing

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Feedback to student writing is vital in revision in multiple-draft essay writing (e.g., Flower, Hayes, Carey, Schriver & Stratman, 1986; Zamel, 1983). Despite doubts on its effectiveness (Frankenberg-Garcia, 1999) and the criticism against its "short-term" effect (e.g., Muncie, 2000), there is growing empirical evidence linking feedback to revision. The interested reader may wish to read Paulus' (1999) article for an informative overview of opposing arguments on the effect of feedback on writing.

Intuitively, commentary well understood may be useful in revision and accepted by the student-writers. Conversely, vague or unintelligible commentary will not be useful in revision. Nevertheless, student-writers have reportedly (e.g., Hounsell, 1987; Sommers, 1982) deliberately chosen not to effect revisions or corrections as recommended by reviewers even when the commentary and/or suggestions were clear and well understood; or they have been found to use suggestions from peers selectively (Connor & Asenavage, 1994). At present, to the best of my knowledge, what we know about students' unresponsiveness to feedback is mostly speculative.

There may be several reasons to the deliberate indifference to or rejection of feedback, of which: mistrust of the feedback giver; doubts about the relevance of the comments or the necessity of effecting changes—if the student believes that both his/her formulation or idea and the suggested one are equally acceptable and that choosing either is only a matter of preference. Or perhaps some types of feedback formulation (e.g., Ferris, 1995), and even the modality, style or tone (e.g., Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996) may affect the student-writers' receptivity to it. As teachers of writing, especially to limited English proficient (LEP) students, we need to know why they may choose to ignore feedback, how to remedy the situation by both providing more acceptable feedback and encouraging the students to use it for their own benefits. Efforts towards knowing these aspects may contribute towards eliminating writing instructors' "uncertainty" on the best way to provide feedback to their students (Paulus, 1999). This article attempts to contribute to filling this gap. It, thus, comes as another tentative response to the call for research to identify the type of feedback most appropriate and effective (e.g., Ferris, Pezone, Tade & Tinti, 1997; Paulus, 1999; Reid, 1994).

In the present article, I shall consider some empirical evidence of (mostly teacher) feedback which has proved useful, at least in the short term, to revision. Then, I shall also show how misunderstood commentary or suggestion may be counterproductive. Thirdly, I shall identify cases of rejection of feedback and suggest reasons for the rejection. The evidence is based on students' writing (for which permission to publish was granted by the authors) from a first-year university academic writing programme described below.

The Academic Writing Programme

Writing instruction at the University of the North in South Africa is of recent date, through introduction in 1993, of a credit-bearing undergraduate course, "Academic Writing." Yet, writing skills had always been of special concern because most entrants come from disadvantaged schools. The overwhelming majority of these first-year students were quite unequal to simple writing tasks, presumably as a result of their inexperience with writing at secondary schools (see Jackson & Hart, 1995; Kasanga, 1999; Kasanga, forthcoming). Consequently, writing instruction has to start from such basic writing skills as diary and letter writing, and the writing of simple narratives in the form of free-flowing story-telling. Over time, the course has established itself on the process-writing model. Writing assignments in the second semester all follow the pre-writing, drafting, and writing steps. Students are required to: (i) identify task words and topic words in the prompt; (ii) collect ideas through brainstorming, note-taking and note-making, and summarizing; (iii) plan their essay in outline form; (iv) draft; (v) revise and edit, before writing up. The process is not a linear, but rather a recursive one in which the student-writer is encouraged to constantly look back at the previous stage(s) and make the necessary adjustments. Students are weaned of their excessive yearning for marks by keeping the awarding of a grade to a minimum and by postponing it until the later stages of the process. They, therefore, learn to revise several drafts and, in the process, gradually develop their critical thinking and writing skills.

The teacher-dominated style of instruction and examination-driven assessment system which still prevail in South African tertiary education impact on second language writing instruction and the choice of forms of reader response, too. Feedback to students' writing has consequently remained the tutor's preserve. However, peers have increasingly been encouraged to provide feedback, in addition to that given by the tutor. The use of peer feedback has, nonetheless, been occasional and haphazard. To prepare for the introduction of self-and peer-feedback and other alternative forms of assessment (portfolio assessment, group work, oral presentation) which outcomes-based education (OBE) advocates in the evaluation of student's learning, a small-scale study consisting of using peer feedback in revision was carried out in the normal classroom writing activities.

Feedback in Revision

Teacher feedback had, until the emergence of process-writing, been the sole source of reader response to student writing. At tertiary level in South Africa, writing instruction has, in most cases, seldom been part of the curriculum. Students' essays are generally submitted to the tutor's "red pen." The tutor plays more the roles of "expert reader," "sole audience," and "sole evaluator" or "consultant" than that of "collaborator." The view that the tutor is "the role model, the source of knowledge, and the director of learning" (Johns, 1997, p. 4), overrides all other roles s/he might play in writing instruction, as the results of a survey (Kasanga, 1996) confirm. Student-writers tend to adopt an uncritical stance towards their tutor's feedback.

Writing instructors have resisted using peer review feedback on the grounds that it may be unproductive and may have disastrous results, besides the fact that it is difficult to implement. On the other hand, student-writers may resent receiving feedback from their peers because of the fear of ridicule. Yet, there is growing empirical evidence of the effectiveness and social benefits of peer feedback in the writing class. It is presumably on the strength of this evidence that in South Africa, outcomes-orientated educators, taking a cue from pedagogical practices globally, advocate the use of self- and peer-feedback to evaluate students' learning in general, and writing in particular.

The Study: Response to Feedback

In a fuller description of a quasi-experimental study (see Kasanga, forthcoming) of the practical implications, in writing instruction, of the use of peer feedback in addition to teacher feedback, perceptions of the student-writers concerning the effectiveness of the use of peer feedback in comparison to teacher feedback were analysed. In this article, the focus is on a sampling of (mostly teacher) feedback on a free-writing task in a normal writing class and the student-writer's receptivity and response to it, viz.: (i) successful revision prompted by feedback; (ii) no feedback/successful revision, (iii) feedback/unsuccessful revision, (iv) feedback/miscorrection; and (v) feedback/no revision.

Feedback/Successful Revision

This section describes and analyses cases of successful use of feedback, at various degrees of complexity, in which the suggested correction was either prompted by a conventional marking symbol to indicate various mistakes and errors, an elaborate set of feedback, sometimes a more explicit and direct correction, or a comment in or at the end of the essay.

One prominent case of successful use of teacher feedback is illustrated in Appendix A. In a portion of the student essay, the article *the* was circled in red and a question mark (?) placed next to it. In revising the essay, the student not only replaced the definite article *the* with the indefinite article *a*, but also added the epithet *Masarwa* to the noun phrase. Although the student seems to have understood because s/he reformulated the phrase quite successfully, it is doubtful whether the tutor's feedback would be universally understood.

More explicit however, were other cases of teacher feedback through the use of conventional symbols, short comments or questions, or both, as exemplified by excerpts in Appendices B to H. In the first case, the tutor indicates incorrect "tense" (*t*). In the next three examples, a mixture of surface errors (grammatical mistakes such as: incorrect use of tense, pronoun, or omission of preposition) and meaning-level errors, in the forms of questions and remarks, are pointed out to the student-writers. In all these cases, the student-writers coped well with the revision. In the case of the infelicitous use of relative pronouns *he* and *him* (Appendix C), the student-writer skillfully re-wrote the sentence by disambiguating the referents of the two pronouns. Likewise, the two paragraphs in Appendix D were revised in the following way: firstly, the first sentence of the second paragraph in the first draft was moved to the last sentence of the previous paragraph as suggested by the tutor and turned into a clause of the last sentence of the first paragraph. Secondly, the first sentence of the second paragraph was rephrased in a much clearer and unambiguous way.

A more complex case is represented by the two paragraphs in Appendix E. The tutor's feedback included: indications of misuse of tense, explicit corrections, and a remark that a sentence was incomplete. After the revision, both paragraphs were improved considerably. The meaning-level feedback by the tutor was also dealt with fairly successfully by the student-writers in instances illustrated in (Appendices F to H). In Appendix F, the student-writer understood the tutor's comment and revised by replacing the paragraph which was said to be a mere story re-telling which contained a message or moral lesson. In another instance (Appendix G), the student-writer's revision was quite elaborate—removing the paragraph judged to be "unintelligible" by the tutor with two additional and more intelligible ones. Finally, the tutor's comment-cum-advice (Appendix H) prompts a reformulated statement which carries a message of some sort.

No (Explicit) Feedback/Revision

There were also instances, rare though, in which a student-writer revised some portions of his/her first draft, as illustrated in the excerpt in Appendix I, without explicit and local feedback in the text. The tutor had only made the comment *Not good enough!*

at the bottom of the draft. Such a global commentary alone, it must be pointed out, is unhelpful to most student-writers, especially novice writers who need more than a sibylline evaluation at the end of the draft. Nonetheless, in the specific instance being discussed here, the student-writer tried to revise by reformulating some sentences without much change to the content of the essay. It can be surmised that the revision would have been much improved had more specific and localised feedback been given.

Feedback/No Revision

In yet other cases, student-writers failed to change their first draft significantly, in spite of the tutor's feedback. This is illustrated in Appendix J. The student-writer stuck to the original script and made only insignificant changes, such as the addition of inverted commas to indicate the title of the short story (which the tutor had explicitly suggested). Clearly, in this and other similar cases, the students either did not understand or were unable to effect the changes suggested because these were beyond their language abilities.

Sometimes, however, even if the student-writers have the necessary language abilities to make changes, they may choose not to do so (e.g., Sommers, 1982). One of the reasons for declining to effect changes is presumably doubts about the necessity of effecting changes, if the students believe that both their formulation or idea and that suggested by the tutor or peers are equally acceptable and that choosing either is only a matter of preference. Even in a student population such as the one in the study reported in this article, for whom the tutor is considered as the authority to correct, advise, and guide in the writing process (Kasanga, 1996), some students would still disagree with (at least some of) the tutor's suggestions. Canvassed on their level of agreement (see Kasanga, forthcoming), six out of 26 students (23%) unexpectedly disagreed with the tutor's comments.

The disagreement and reluctance to accept feedback are even greater in the case of peer feedback. Student-writers may be even more reluctant to effect changes on the basis of their peer's feedback (e.g., Connor & Asenavage, 1994) if they have doubts about their peers' ability to give positive and useful input. Connor and Asenavage's (1994) study showed that only 5% of the changes made in revision were influenced by peer feedback. The perception that peers are less likely to provide feedback worthy of consideration is borne out by a survey (Kasanga, forthcoming) in which the students overwhelmingly stated that they mistrusted their peers' feedback (see also Mendonça & Johnson, 1994), because, as one student put it, "Many student feel embarrass when their essays see by student than tutor" [*Many students feel embarrassed when their essays are seen by students instead of the tutor*]. This mistrust is further explained in the following student comment:

> I think because we as students we know each other very well, it will not be right to mark each others [*other's*] work because we do [*commit]* the same mistakes.

This feeling contrasts with that expressed by some of the respondents and the enthusiasm by the overwhelming majority (78% of the students polled) for peer review activities. Some students believe that their peers whom they consider to be at a higher level of language competence than themselves can be of great use. Hence, a respondent wrote the following:

> I am not good in writing and spelling words and my English is not good so if I know [*knew]* you I could come to you and ask some help from you. Keep on doing your good work.

Another reason for resenting and eventually rejecting peer feedback may be the tone used and the formulation of the feedback. Research has shown that form, modality, and style or tone of commentary affect the student-writer's receptivity to it (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996). When asked to react to a harsh comment by a peer, the author of a draft clearly resented the tone and stated that she found it both unfair and unhelpful. She complained that it did not provide the kind of supportive corrective feedback which a weak draft would need. Negative feedback may, thus, negate one of the reported benefits of peer feedback (e.g., Zhang, 1995) claimed by educators, namely "social support from peers."

Feedback/Unsuccessful Revision

Even where feedback was fairly clear or even understood, however, student-writers were unsuccessful in their revision, as illustrated by three excerpts (Appendices K to M). In the first two of these cases, the replacement tense forms (<u>has gone</u> and <u>are doing</u>) are not the appropriate ones. In the other case, almost all the attempts by the student-writer (Appendix M) to correct several cases of misuse of tense (<u>suffers</u>, <u>have</u>, <u>are walking</u>, <u>must have</u>, <u>has had</u>) or vocabulary (<u>after a few moment</u>) were unsuccessful. In all the cases analysed, the failure to usefully utilise the feedback provided was accounted for by the students' limited language abilities.

Feedback/Miscorrection

In a number of instances, students ended up introducing more mistakes into the revised draft, mainly given their limited proficiency in English, which either hampered their comprehension of the commentary or made it difficult for them to correct the mistakes or improve their draft. For example, to the tutor's suggestion of a misuse of

tense (for *put*), a student changed it into **putted* (Appendix M). A similar miscorrection occurred in another draft in which *gived* was used by a student in the revised draft as the past tense of *give* (Appendix N). In both these cases, the tutor could not have been more explicit. The miscorrection is rather due to the student's limited English. In yet another case, however, the student mistook a comment for a suggested addition which s/he, unfortunately, incorporated into a sentence (Appendix O).

Conclusion

Generally, the feedback provided by the teacher is still highly valued by the student-writers because of his/her traditional role as "evaluator." Consequently, students responded well and some showed uncharacteristic creativity by going beyond the points suggested. This is illustrated in, among others, the example of Appendix A in which the feedback might be too sibylline to be understood by and useful to many student-writers. Tutors sometimes only give cryptic feedback presumably because they cannot give detailed feedback to the huge volume of student writing they have to respond to on a regular basis.

In contrast, peer feedback may be fraught with problems, such as those discussed above. The fear expressed in the literature, although sometimes exaggerated, is real. Despite the high level of enthusiasm and satisfaction, it seems that few were prepared to use the feedback from their peers wholeheartedly. They remain very ambivalent about and mistrustful of it. Besides, negative and harsh comments may have had an inhibiting effect.

One of the reasons for the continued dominance of teacher feedback is, I suggest, the ability of the teacher (at least the discerning and experienced one) to adapt the style or tone, modality, and form of his/her feedback to the genres, levels of language ability of the students, and writing requirements.

However, it appears that some students may still be reluctant or unable to utilise tutor's feedback in the revision process. Indeed, sibylline commentary, unclear and/or confusing remarks, inconsistent conventional signs or symbols, and perhaps overly negative comments may be unproductive, counterproductive, and even inhibiting. There seems to be a need for further research both quantitative—along the lines of that by Ferris, Pezone, Tade and Tinti (1997)—and ethnographic, to respectively identify all the types of written teacher feedback and written and oral peer feedback that work and those which do not, and to identify, by asking the student-writers to reflect on, the reasons why the feedback was not helpful.

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Appendices

Note: Circling in the first draft is represented in the appendices by <u>double underlining</u>. ¶ stands for recommended "new paragraph" and any sign or symbol (such as an arrow) used by the tutor to suggest the end or the move of a portion of a paragraph to the preceding or next paragraph. [t] next to an underlined verb phrase or part thereof indicates misuse of tense. Cryptic questions were indicated in the drafts by a question mark [?]. Explicit corrections and comments in or at the end of the text by the tutor are highlighted in the draft by the use of a special font.

Appendix A

First draft

The woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village died during the night but the child was still alive.

Revised

A Masarwa woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village died during the night but the child was still alive.

Appendix B

First draft

Gideon has worked [*t*] for Mrs Farquars for several years.

Revised

Gideon had worked for Mrs Farquars for several years.

Appendix C

First draft

One day, Philemon arrived at the bus stop and he thought he will [*t*] find Mr Maphikela unfortunately he [*who?*] was in a bush ahead of him [*whom?*]. When he was still confused the old Maphikela shouted back at him, saying that he would wait for him at the terminus in town.

Revised

One day, Philemon arrived at the bus stop, unfortunately he found that Mr Maphikela has gone by bus ahead of him. When he was still confused the old Maphikela shouted back at him, saying that he would wait for him at the terminus in town.

Appendix D

First Draft

The child was also taken *in* by the missionaries.

[She was raised by them.] [¶] Margaret Cadmore was the <u>wife</u> and his husband was George.

Revised

The child was also taken in by the missionaries and raised by the missionaries.

Margaret Cadmore was George's wife.

Appendix E

First draft

After all people have*d* given their gifts to the couple and certain a girl who was sitting with other people calling herself ~~by the name of~~ meisie.[*... incomplete sentence!*] This girl was one of the kid's girlfriends who had a child with kid and Kid had refuse*d* to accept that he was the father of the child.

Meisie stands [*t*] up and walk*ed* to the minister of ceremony and dumped the child and walk up by saying kid play boy's the pop of the child.

Revised

<u>Many people came with</u> their gifts to give to the couple. <u>Amongst all these people there was</u> <u>a</u> girl called Meisie whom according to me it seems if she was one of Kid's girlfriends who became pregnant and Kid refused to accept that he is the one who made the girl to be pregnant.

After all people had given their gifts to the couple, Meisie stood up and walked to the table were the couple was sitted. When she arrived there, Meisie dumped the child and walked up saying that Kid had fathered the child.

Appendix F

First draft

The Farquars were good people and they believed in God. They know how to treat their servants. They didn't treat their servants as servant but as human beings and they trusted their servant. Gideon was also a good servant. He loved children.

[*This is a summary of the summary, <u>not a message</u>!*]

Revised

As you are rich you must not undermine the poor. You must take their advices into consideration because their advice will one day help you to escape from a bid trouble.

Appendix G

First draft

The main reason to admire to write with her is that she was not afraid to tell them that she is Masarwa. [*unintelligible!*]

Revised *(added paragraphs)*

One of the thing which Margaret had been encouraged to do was to be honest and it was that honesty which not allow her to admit that she was a coloured. Margaret was a person of considerable moral strength. It would be easy for het to burst into tears whenever she was upset, that is all she allows people to see. She was convinced that a child educated correctly would be able to make her away in the world no matter what her heritage.

The net result was a period of unhappiness followed by the happiness that she gained through her painting which she has learned from her adopted mother.

Appendix H

Tutor's comment

You ought to either explain the point of view/message in the short story (question a) or show similarities or differences with your own life/history (question b). I hope you do this in the final essay to be handed in for marking!

Revised

According to my point of view the teacher he didn't look...

Appendix I

First draft

Initially, the writer is trying to show us how people view others in the case where there is danger to their life.

Revised

Firstly, the writer tries to teach us that people should think before they judge how others in the face of danger.

Appendix J

First draft

The story (...) is Music of the Violin by Njabulo Ndebele. The story is about Vukan which is the main character. That is doing sometimes he is writing [*t*] (...) and he plays [*t*] the violin which is a most wonderful instrument.

Revised

The story (...) is "music of the Violin by Njabulo Ndebele. The story is about Vukan which is the main character. That is doing his work in the bedroom when the voice (...) filtered into (...) he writes homework and he plays the violin which is a most wonderful instrument.

Appendix K

First draft

He wanted to tell him about a man who visited his wife after he is [*t*] gone to work.

Revised

He wanted to tell him about a man who visited his wife after he has gone to work.

Appendix L

First draft

He said the suit will eat every meal with them and share everything they do [*t*] and all they have [*t*].

Revised

He said the suit will eat every meal with them and share everything they are doing and all they had.

Appendix M

First draft

Matilda have suffered [*t*] a lot because of the suit. One day, they have [*t*] to go for a walk and Philemon told Matilda to hold the suit with her when they are [*t*] ~~busy~~ walking. When they eat [*t*] Matilda must [*t*] put it on the chair and serve it. One day Matilda made a party for her friends, when they are [*t*] busy eating. Philemon reminded her about the suit. She take [*t*] it and put it on a table and served it. It was a joke for the visitors but for Matilda it was painful. Suddenly Philemon found her on the bed dead.

Revised

Matilda suffers a lot because of the suit. One day, they have to go for a walk and Philemon told Matilda to hold the suit with her when they are busy walking. When they were eating Matilda must have put it on the chair and serve it. One day Matilda has had a party for her friends, when they were busy eating, she took it and putted it on a table and serve it. It was a joke for the visitors but for Matilda it was painful. After a few moment, Philemon found her on the bed dead.

Appendix N

First draft

There was a ~~certain~~ boy call Ikemefuna [?] and that boy was given to Okonkwo. Ikemefuna is a (...)

Revised

The was a boy called Ikemefuna and that boy was gived to Okonkwo. Ikemefuna is a (...)

Appendix O

First draft

Maru [*who is he in the story?*] is quite a young man, he is the paramount chief elect, for his father the chief has died and he is expected to take over [the] leadership of the village.

This is good, but please in your first sentence, say who Maru is in the story.

Revised

Maru who is he in the story, he is the paramount chief-elect, for his father the chief has died and he is expected to take over [*the*] leadership of the village.