ELSEVIER

Feedback to writing, assessment for teaching and learning and student progress

Judy M. Parr[*], Helen S. Timperley[1]

*Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland Mail Centre,
Auckland 1142, New Zealand*

Available online 11 June 2010

Abstract

Traditionally, feedback to writing is written on drafts or given orally in roving or more formal conferences and is considered a significant part of instruction. This paper locates written response within an assessment for learning framework in the writing classroom. Within this framework, quality of response was defined in terms of providing information about: (i) where students were positioned relative to the performance desired; (ii) about key features of the desired performance, and (iii) what was needed to achieve the desired performance. A study of teachers (maximum $n = 59$) in six schools provided data regarding their ability to give quality formative written feedback to a piece of writing. This quality score related significantly to gains in their students' achievement on a nationally standardised measure of writing ($r = .685$, $p < .01$). The ability to provide written response that serves assessment for learning functions appears to be a powerful component of teacher practice that develops student writing. The paper suggests that considerable teacher pedagogical content knowledge is required to provide such feedback.
© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Formative writing assessment; Feedback; Written response; Writing achievement; Teacher knowledge

1. Introduction

Written response to writing, while considered a common form of writing instruction, has not been a central theoretical concern for research (Phelps, 2000). Although such feedback is intended to improve student learning in writing, ironically, most studies of written feedback have been conducted outside of a pedagogical context (Fife & O'Neill, 2001) or, indeed, of any

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 9 623 8899x88998.
 E-mail addresses: jm.parr@auckland.ac.nz (J.M. Parr), h.timperley@auckland.ac.nz (H.S. Timperley).
[1] Tel.: +64 9 623 8899x87401.

theoretical or communicative frame (Huot, 2002). Research has largely focussed on describing characteristics of the response and student interpretation of, and attitudes to, such response. With some exceptions, there is a lack of work that considers the interactive and contextual nature of response or work that considers response in relation to writing outcomes. This paper locates written response as an instructional act of feedback within the theory of formative assessment (often now known as assessment for learning). The study defines the dimensions of response likely to make it effective in relation to this concept of assessment and feedback for learning, and tests the idea that a teacher's ability to provide quality, written feedback for learning is an important component of teacher practice in writing by examining its relationship to student progress in writing.

1.1. Research on written response

Providing written feedback to writers is presented in the literature as a problematic practice. Comments on students' drafts are seen, in general, as not effective in improving writing (Hyland, 2000; Muncie, 2000). Generally, it seems that the nature of feedback influences impact. Certain sorts of feedback, like that focussing on personal qualities, can impede learning by shifting focus from instructional to social goals (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998), while outcomes-focussed feedback (e.g. a grade) seldom provides sufficient information to advance learning. The nature of feedback can also encourage surface versus deep learning. Feedback that focuses on the correctness of content in a domain generally contains insufficient information to affect the development of knowledge construction, whereas feedback directed at deeper learning may trigger forms of cognitive processing such as searching for relationships or developing knowledge to elaborate information (Balzer, Doherty, & O'Connor, 1989).

Studies of the nature of written response to writing have shown that college teachers' comments tend to focus on low level, technical concerns, rather than on meaning-making (e.g. Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Sommers, 1982). It has also been reported that school teachers similarly give excessive consideration to surface features, particularly with regard to revision (Hargreaves & McCallum, 1998). Teachers have been portrayed as unable to articulate deeper feature, rhetorical concerns (Schwartz, 1984). Although several of the studies documenting the nature of teachers' responses have been criticised as having methodological weaknesses (Ferris, 1997), findings regarding surface level feedback have been replicated more recently (Stern & Solomon, 2006).

However, this research has largely neglected the influence of context (Huot, 2002), treating the texts that teacher–responders create as if they stand alone, ignoring the perspective that the meaning of text will be constructed differently depending on the 'discourses' brought to bear on the text by the reader (Murphy, 2000). In particular, theoretical and cultural orientations affect interpretations (Ball, 1997); teachers also respond to extra-textual features within the context of the classroom (Wyatt-Smith, Castleton, Freebody, & Cooksey, 2003). Research adopting a more contextualised view (for example, by Weigle, Bildt, & Valsecchi, 2003) suggests that the characteristics of the writing task and of respondents, in particular the conventions and emphasis of a discourse community, play a part in influencing the criteria used to evaluate (and, presumably, to respond to) writing. Similarly, there is some evidence from research into the writing of primary students that it is amount and type of feedback that predicts the quality of final drafts (Matsumura, Patthey-Chavez, Valdes, & Garnier, 2002).

An additional consideration in evaluating the impact of feedback concerns the potential for action suggested by the feedback. This potential is compromised if students, as reported, have