"I just want to do it right, but it's so hard": A novice teacher's written feedback beliefs and practices

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Abstract

This case study investigated teacher feedback beliefs and practices of a pre-service L2 writing teacher over one academic semester. Kim, the focal participant, was a second year MA TESOL student and taught an English composition course to ESL students at the university level. Data sources included four sets of commented-on students' essays, a reflective journal, two semi-structured interviews, and member checking with the teacher. Students' essays were coded for four types of written corrective feedback (WCF) (direct, direct with explanation, indirect, indirect with explanation) and compared to Kim's beliefs, as discussed in her journals and interviews. The analyses show, among other findings, that Kim believed in providing feedback on global concerns and, to a lesser extent, on local issues and in offering explanations to WCF instances. However, a detailed analysis of her actual practices revealed some mismatches, such that local WCF (83.9%) significantly outnumbered global WCF (16.1%). Other beliefs included the following themes: Feedback needs to be contextualized, is time-consuming, is a process that requires practice, and can lead to better writing. Relevant pedagogical implications for L2 teacher education and recommended reflective tools to support teachers as they develop feedback practices are discussed in the paper.
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Introduction

The field of second language (L2) writing has evolved considerably in the past few decades, and the following areas of inquiry have received increasing attention among L2 writing researchers: contrastive rhetoric, the product-process debate, the fluency-accuracy dilemma, and error correction (Casanave, 2004). Among these, error correction is one of the most complex and controversial topics. Writing teachers are well aware of the complexities involved in responding to student writing, and these challenges become even greater for L2[1] writing teachers who are concerned with fostering improvement in students' writing abilities as well as promoting global development in language proficiency (Casanave, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

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[1] The term L2 is used for both "second" and "foreign" language throughout the paper.

To date, although extensive, research[2] on the benefits of written corrective feedback (WCF) and teacher response in improving learners' L2 development and accuracy is still controversial, and findings remain inconclusive (see Ferris, 1999, 2004, 2010; Truscott, 1996, 1999). Nonetheless, studies have consistently shown that learners are interested in and appreciative of teacher correction (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Diab, 2005a, 2005b; Ferris, 1995). Despite the fact that providing WCF is a daunting task for L2 writing teachers and that learners expect and desire it, research in the field has not extensively investigated teachers' responses to student writing along with the pedagogical choices that inform their practices (Guénette & Lyster, 2013; Lee, 2009). Several studies have focused on teachers' WCF practices in various pedagogical contexts (e.g., Ferris, 2006; Guénette & Lyster, 2013; Jodaie & Farrokhi, 2012; Lee, 2010; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). However, research on L2 writing teachers' beliefs regarding responding to student writing is limited as are explorations of the alignment of teachers' beliefs and actual practices (Ferris, 2014; Furneaux, Paran, & Fairfax, 2007; Jodaie & Farrokhi, 2012; Lee, 2008, 2009). As Montgomery and Baker (2007) maintain, ''most research on self-assessment has focused on students' self-assessment to improve their writing performance instead of on teachers' self-assessment to improve their feedback performance'' (p. 84).

In language pedagogy research, it has been shown that teachers' practices are greatly influenced by personal theories and beliefs (Borg, 2003). Yet, the relationship between beliefs and practices of pre-service L2 writing teachers as they learn how to respond to the writing of non-native speakers of English is an area that remains under-investigated and that we believe deserves more attention. As Bazerman (1994) argues, ''it is within students, of course, that the learning occurs, but it is within the teacher, who sits at the juncture of forces above, below and sideways that the learning situations are framed'' (p. 29). Accordingly, the present semester-long case study aims at helping advance our knowledge of WCF beliefs and practices in less seasoned teachers and seeks to offer practical pedagogical recommendations for L2 teacher educators as they guide pre-service teachers in the development of informed theories of response to student writing.

The goals of the present study were thus threefold: (1) to examine a novice teacher's beliefs about general WCF as well as her own practices in responding to student writing, (2) to explore her beliefs in light of her actual WCF practices, and (3) to uncover what informs these beliefs and practices. Although case studies hardly allow for generalizations, we hope that this contextualized case study will help shed some light on the beliefs and experiences of a pre-service teacher, and we conclude the paper by offering ideas for L2 writing pedagogy. By providing a detailed account of the participant's first semester navigating the challenges of responding to student writing, it is our hope that researchers, teacher educators, and other L2 writing teachers may gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors that shape a novice teacher's beliefs and practices. As Duff (2008) explains, ''the assumption is that a thorough exploration of a phenomenon [e.g., a novice teacher responding to L2 student writing] [. . .] will be of interest to others who may conduct research of a similar nature elsewhere. Other readers may simply seek the vicarious experience and insights gleaned from gaining access to individuals and sites they might not otherwise have access to'' (p. 51).

Before introducing the study and discussing the main findings, we first review pertinent literature on teacher feedback as well as research on teacher cognition in L2 writing instruction.

Literature review

In the field of L2 writing, there is an extensive body of research on the effectiveness of error correction in L2 writing classes; nevertheless, the ultimate success of error feedback on the improvement of L2 writing remains inconclusive (for a review of these issues see especially the ongoing debates between Ferris, 1999, 2004, and Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2007 and Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Keeping in line with the goals of the present study, namely exploring the beliefs and practices of an L2 writing teacher, the following sections do not highlight research on the benefits, or lack thereof, of CF on writing and language development; rather, we primarily emphasize studies that have examined L2 writing teachers' practices regarding teacher feedback and their cognitions.

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[2] The present paper focuses on written corrective feedback, and although the literature on oral corrective feedback is quite prolific, it is beyond the scope of our study and is not discussed here.