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Student perceptions of hidden messages in teacher written feedback

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ABSTRACT

Students take away a variety of messages from teachers' responses to their writing, although not all the information conveyed is explicit or related to the work at hand. In fact, both the content of this feedback and the ways they respond can lead students to interpret their tutors' beliefs about their subject, about learning, and about the value of literacy in their disciplines. Drawing on a series of interviews with 24 first and second year students at a Hong Kong university, this paper seeks to identify what these messages are and the consequences they can have for students' attitudes to their field of study, to disciplinary writing, to learning and to teacher–student relationships.

Introduction

Teachers' written feedback is potentially a powerful influence on learning and achievement in higher education. It is typically highly valued by students and provides teachers with the opportunity to offer the kind of individualized attention that is otherwise rarely possible under classroom conditions. But while the goal of the feedback might be to provide students with information on how well they have understood the course content, not all the messages conveyed are explicit or, indeed, related to the work at hand. In fact, both the *content* of their feedback and the *ways* they respond can inform students of their tutors' beliefs about their subject, about learning, and about the value of literacy in their disciplines. This information is particularly important to second language students studying in English as they are often uncertain of their writing and the importance they need to give to it when studying their disciplines. While almost all English medium universities around the world now require students to gain credit in academic English courses which place a heavy emphasis on writing, it is unclear how far this emphasis is repeated in the ways subject tutors respond to student writing.

It is through feedback, however, that tutors are able to convey, whether deliberately or inadvertently, messages which can influence students' attitudes to their field of study, to their progress and to themselves. Because feedback is very closely linked with student achievement, retention and progression (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Yorke, 2003) the messages students take from feedback becomes an important aspect of learning. The aim of this paper is therefore to ascertain what messages a group of second language undergraduates at a Hong Kong university recover from their tutors' feedback practices. In particular, I seek to discover:

(1) What do teachers' convey to students about the importance of language and writing?
(2) What do they convey about the importance of feedback?
(3) What do they convey about the teacher–student relationship?

Teacher feedback and student perceptions

Feedback is widely believed to be central to student learning and achievement and perhaps almost as important as direct instruction and students' prior cognitive abilities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By encouraging and consolidating disciplinary understandings, intellectual development and writing improvement, the guidance of expert others provides scaffolded support for learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Feedback offers the writer an outsider's view of a text and so provides a sense of audience and what that audience values in writing, contributing to his or her acquisition of disciplinary subject matter and patterns of argument and evidence. An increasing body of evidence, however, questions its effectiveness (e.g. Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010) and student surveys in higher education show feedback to be an area of tensions between staff and students as universities grapple to provide effective teaching practices in resource-constrained environments.

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The full extent of student dissatisfaction is revealed in student surveys in the UK, Australia and Hong Kong (e.g. Carless, 2006; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). There seems little doubt of students' thirst for teacher comments on their work (Hyland, 2010), although they also report feedback to be one of the most problematic aspects of their learning experience (e.g. Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Students often, for example, say they find it difficult to understand (e.g. Weaver, 2006), lacking in specifics (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001), or hard to act on (Walker, 2009). Weaver's (2006) Business and Art & Design students, for instance, felt a lot of feedback was negative, unrelated to assessment criteria and failed to provide any sense of direction. Scott, Badge, and Cann (2009) found their second year bioscience students were dissatisfied with the utility and transferability of their feedback while Watty, Carr, De Lange, O'Connell, and Howieson's (2011) accounting students were critical of the generality and lack of timeliness of their feedback.

One positive area of learner perceptions is the explicit correction of written errors where students are using English to study in a second language. Here studies have found strong student support for corrective grammar feedback (e.g. Schulz, 2001) but the benefits of this may be limited to improvements in a subsequent draft rather than to longer term learning (Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Truscott (1996) summarizes the research conducted in such contexts as suggesting that teacher feedback has little discernible effect on writing development, while Lea and Street (2000) argue that feedback fails to convey the clear disciplinary values and preferences for organizing knowledge that tutors would wish for. Studies, in fact, have produced conflicting results, often because their experimental design removes feedback from the contexts in which it has meaning for students. It is likely, moreover, that students themselves understand their feedback in different ways depending on their backgrounds, their disciplines, their views of their teachers and their own abilities.

Correspondingly, the meanings teachers attach to feedback, the time they invest in it and the value they feel it has in instruction may be reflected in how they frame their comments, what they say (or do not say) and in the relational stance they choose to adopt. Like all texts, teacher feedback does not occur in a vacuum but is an expression of recognized social purposes and individual goals. In a study of Hong Kong secondary school teachers, for example, Lee (2008, p.69) suggests that:

> teachers' feedback practices are influenced by a myriad of contextual factors including teachers' beliefs, values, understandings, and knowledge, which are mediated by the cultural and institutional contexts, such as philosophies about feedback and attitude to exams, and socio-political issues pertaining to power and teacher autonomy.

In Higher Education it is similarly shaped by the teacher's pedagogic intentions, priorities and ideologies filtered through the academic and disciplinary culture within which it occurs. This is simply to say that all acts of communication are embedded in wider sociocultural beliefs and practices which selectively activate knowledge and prompt specific processes.

In sum, while much of the research on feedback given to second language writers has focused on error correction (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2006), feedback carries a heavier informational load than this, not all of which is directly pedagogic or even intentionally communicated. In fact, students receive various messages in the feedback they get on their work; messages about university values, about the role of writing in learning, about their identity as students and about their induction into disciplinary epistemologies. Some of this is accidentally communicated – information 'given off' rather than 'given' in Goffman's (1971) terms – and may not be consciously apparent to participants. Other messages, however, may be intentionally conveyed. What seems important here is what students recover from this feedback as this may have an impact on their attitudes to study and perhaps to their learning.

Context, participants and procedures

Context

The study takes place in a leading research-intensive university in Hong Kong. Hong Kong universities use English as their medium of instruction. It is a compulsory subject from kindergarten onwards and some schools teach entirely in the English medium. Competence in written English in particular is crucial at university where assignments and examinations are in English. Students, however, are unfamiliar with academic writing conventions and have almost no knowledge of disciplinary argument practices. Moreover, despite the efforts of the local education authorities to initiate changes in school teaching practices, traditional, transmission and exam dominated methods still prevail (Davison, 2007; Hu, 2005). Students are largely expected to be passive recipients of teacher-fed knowledge as they are drilled to meet the requirements of public exams. In these circumstances students are ill-prepared for the demands of university writing and the rhetorical expectations of particular fields of study. The ways particular wordings, argument patterns and forms of evaluation are marked as more or less institutionally appropriate remain mysterious to them. Nor are they socialized into an understanding that writing might be used as a mode of discovery and a means of learning and self-awareness.

As a result, all students are required to attend two, 30 hour, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at university for which they receive six credits. These courses largely address faculty-based writing practices and seek to bridge the English which students' have learnt at school and that which is required in their disciplinary studies.

Participants

The study draws on interviews conducted with twenty-four first and second year undergraduate students, six from each of four faculties (Business, Science, Engineering and Arts). The students were majoring in history, American studies, modern China studies, psychology, biology, biochemistry, chemistry, civil, mechanical and electrical Engineering, computer science, business, sociology, economics, politics, English, social administration and various combinations of these. Twenty-two were Cantonese first language speakers and two from Mainland China, with Putonghua as their first language. The students were 12 males and 12 females aged between 18 and 20 and recruited at random from registration lists. Twenty had attended Chinese-medium primary and secondary schools and four had graduated from English-medium schools, but all were competent users of English at an intermediate to advanced level (around IELTS 6.5 and above).

Procedures

To uncover students' experiences and beliefs in this context, each of the 24 students was interviewed twice. The first interview followed a semi-structured format with open-ended prompts to gather their perceptions of the literacy practices of their disciplines, their writing, and their experience of feedback, while the second involved more detailed discussion of particular pieces of writing which they had submitted for assessment. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into the qualitative software programme *NVivo* where data was coded