The Effective Way of Responding to and Correcting Students' Writing

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Harmer (2004) states that the ways we react to students' writing will depend not only on the kind of task which the students are given, but also on what we want to achieve at any one point. There are a number of ways reacting but these generally fall within one of two broad categories: responding and correcting.

In this paper, we will examine the effective way of responding to and correcting students' writing.

Key Words：Responding, Correcting, Fostering students' improvement of writing, The roles of teachers, Peer feedback

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1．Introduction

Harmer (2004) states that the ways we react to students' writing will depend not only on the kind of task which the students are given, but also on what we want to achieve at any one point. There are a number of ways reacting but these generally fall within one of two broad categories: responding and correcting.

In this paper, we will examine the effective way of responding to and correcting students' writing.

2．The Effective Way of Responding to Students' Writing

2.1　What the Teachers Are Concerned with

According to Harmer (2004), when teachers respond to their students' writing, they are not only concerned with the accuracy of their performance but also—and this is crucial—with the content and design of their wring. The teachers might respond, for example, to the order in which the students have made their points (e.g., "Why did you start with the story about the bus that was late? You could have begun, instead, with the problem of public transport in general"). The teachers might respond by saying how much they enjoyed reading the students' writing and then recommend that they should have a look at a book or website which has more information about the same topic. When the teachers respond, they are entering into a kind of affective dialogue with the students. That is, the teachers are discussing students' writing rather than judging it.

Harmer (2004) also says that, in a process-wring sequence, where the teachers' intervention is designed to help students edit and move forward to a new draft, responding is often more appropriate than correcting. The teachers' task is not to say what is unequivocally right or wrong in the light of English grammar or lexical usage, but to ask questions, make

suggestions and indicate where improvements might be made to both the content of the writing and the manner in which it is expressed. Feedback of this kind becomes more and more appropriate as the students' ESL/EFL (i.e, English as a second/foreign language, hereafter ESL/EFL) proficiency level improves and they can take advantage of such help.

To sum up, as to students' ESL/EFL writing, the teachers should be concerned not only with its grammatical or lexical correctness but also with its content.

2.2　Responding as a Complex Process

2.2.1　Key Issues to Address

Kroll (2001) describes that responding to students' writing is a complex process which also requires the teacher to make a number of critical decisions. She (2001) says that key questions to address is as follows: 1) What are the general goals within the writing course for providing feedback to students?; 2) What are the specific goals for providing feedback on a particular piece of writing?; 3) At what stage in the writing process should feedback be offered?; 4) What form should feedback take?; 5) Who should provide feedback?; 6) What should students do with the feedback which they receive?

2.2.2　The General Goal-Setting

According to Kroll (2001), responding to students' writing has the general goal of fostering students' improvement of writing. While this may seem to be stating the obvious, teachers need to develop responding methodologies which can foster improvement of students' writing; the teachers need to know how to measure or recognize improvement when it does occur. As with so many other aspects of teaching writing, there remains no easy answer to the question of what type of response will facilitate improved students' mastery of writing. Therefore, in setting general goals, teachers should focus on implementing a variety of response types and on training students to maximize the insights of prior feedback on future writing occasions. Students need to make the best use of commentary provided to them. Without training, it is possible that students will either ignore feedback or fail to use it constructively.

2.2.3　The Specific Goal-Setting

According to Hyland (2003), teachers do not simply respond to grammar or content, but have a number of different purposes in mind. Reid (1993) distinguishes responses that are descriptive (e.g., "the main idea in this essay is X"), personal (e.g., "the part I like best is Y")

and evaluative (e.g., comments that justify a judgement). Ferris et al. (1997) identify eight broad functions of response in over 1,500 teacher comments, raging from *Asking for unknown information* (e.g., "What is your focus here?") to *Giving information on ideas* (e.g., "This is a bit off track").

Hyland (2003) says that different stages of writing are also characterized by different purposes. Teachers can only judge and evaluate a finished product and hope that the writer will improve in the next assignment, for instance, while the goal of feedback on a text in progress is to respond to and influence the writing. Bates et al. (1993) suggests the following way to achieve these goals: 1) Write personalized comments—maintaining a dialogue between a reader and a writer; 2) Provide guidance where it is necessary—avoiding advice that is too directive or perspective; 3) Make text-specific comments—relating comments to the text rather than general rules; 4) Balance positive and negative comments—avoiding discouraging students with criticism.

In practice, it may be quite difficult and unhelpful to follow specific rules too strictly as different assignments and different students require different types of responding.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), the most flexible approach may be for teachers to select from the overarching functions of praise, criticism and suggestions in their comments. Some teachers believe that providing too much praise, especially at early stages of the writing cycle, can make students complacent and discourage revision. Praise, however, is widely used to encourage students, particularly in responding to ideas in a text, but is often reserved for final drafts where it can act to reward students for their efforts. There is no doubt that positive remarks can be motivating and that many L2/FL learners attach considerable importance to them. However, as Connors and Lunsford (1993) states, while students appreciate and remember positive comments, they also expect to receive constructive criticism. Nor do all the students welcome empty praise, regarding it as insincere, looking instead for comments they can act on. Teachers therefore need to use positive comments with care, but a lack of positive comments can affect both students' attitude to writing and their perception of feedback.

Hyland (2003) states that suggestion and criticism can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum raging from a focus on what is done poorly to measures for its improvement, so while criticism is a negative comment on students' writing, suggestions contain a retrievable plan of action for improvement, a do-able revision of some kind. It is important to note that it may be difficult for students to extract the implications of a criticism when it contains no explicit advice on what they should do to rectify the problem (e.g., "There is no statement of

intention in the essay—what is the purpose of your essay and how are you going to deal with it?"). If students fail to understand what is being said, they may simply ignore it or delete the passage from their revised draft. To guard against this, teachers can pair a criticism with suggestion (e.g., "This conclusion is all a bit vague. I think that it would be better to clearly state your conclusions with the brief reasons for them"). Suggestions can focus on a student's text (i.e., writing) and propose revisions to it or can refer to general principles which extend to future writing behavior.

3．Who Should Respond?

3.1　The Roles of the Teacher

3.1.1　From an Examiner to a Reader

Harmer (2004) describes that when teachers give feedback on students' written performance, they are called to play a number of different roles. At one extreme, they will be seen by the students as the examiner. Almost all the teachers will set class tests or mark practice papers for the public examinations their students are taking. The students will justifiably expect some kind of an objective evaluation of their performance. This role contrasts strongly with the teacher's potential as the reader/audience, responding to the ideas and perceptions that the students have written about. Between these two extremes, the teacher may act as an assistant (i.e., helping the students along), a resource (i.e., being available when students need information or guidance), as evaluator (i.e., saying how well things are going so far) or an editor (i.e., helping to select and rearrange pieces of writing for some kind of publication—whether in or beyond the classroom). Students are often inclined to see the teacher as an examiner more than anything else. This is hardly surprising since it is generally teachers who mark tests and make decisions about final grades. It is therefore important to show that this is not the only role which teachers can fulfil.

3.1.2　What the Teacher Should Do

Ferris (2003) points out a number of specific issues and implications for L2/FL writing instructors.

They are as follows: 1) Feedback is most effective when it is delivered at intermediate stages of the writing process: most L2/FL composition instructor, researchers and theorists (e.g., Zamel, 1985; Krasheen, 1984; Leki, 1990a; Ferris, 1995) agree that teacher feedback is most effective when it is delivered at intermediate stages of writing process, when students

can respond to feedback in subsequent revisions and may thus be more motivated to attend to teacher suggestion; 2) Teachers should provide feedback on all aspects of students texts, including content, rhetorical structure, grammar and mechanics: Inflected by process approach advocates and social constructionists, writing instruction and assessment have increasingly focused on students' ideas, mastery of rhetorical strategies and forms, and awareness of audience/readers. As teachers' priorities for student writing have changed, the type of feedback which they have given students about their writing have changed as well. Though early L2/FL studies of teacher feedback (e.g., Cumming, 1985; Zamel, 1985; Kassen, 1988) reported that ESL/EFL teachers focused on almost exclusively on sentence-level errors, later investigation (e.g., Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Dessner, 1991; Lam, 1992; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris et al., 1997), including both student survey research and text analytic examinations of teacher commentary, indicated that teachers (perhaps, influenced by the process paradigm) provided feedback that responded to students' ideas and organization as well as their errors in grammar and mechanics; 3) Teacher feedback should be clear and concrete to assist students with revision. At the same time, teachers need to be careful not to appropriate students' text: Both LI and L2/FL survey studies on student reactions to teacher feedback (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Straub, 1997) have reported consistent findings that students appreciate clear, concrete, specific feedback. A text analytic study linking various types of teacher comments to the effectiveness of student revisions (e.g., Ferris, 1997, 2001) reported that teacher questions asking for specific information or giving concrete suggestions led to more-effective student revisions than feedback that was more general or abstract. In a recent case study of three student writers' revisions after receiving teacher feedback, Conrad and Goldstein (1999) found that teacher comments that challenged students' logic or argumentation were most likely to be problematic for the student writers. Such findings would indicate that ESL/EFL writing instructors should be straightforward, concrete, and fairly directive in their feedback to L2/FL writers. On the other hand, both L1 and L2/FL composition scholars (e.g., Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Elbow, 1973; Krashen, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985) have warned teachers against appropriating (taking over) students' texts by being too authoritative and direct in their feedback. When teachers cross out portions of student texts and substitute other words or ideas, make directive suggestions, or use the imperative mood, these behavior communicate to student writers that the teacher's priorities are more important than what the writer wants to say in his/her own text. Such appropriative behavior can frustrate, demotivate, and otherwise disempower student writers. To avoid appropriation, teachers have been advised and even trained to ask questions rather

than to use statements or imperatives, to avoid the use of *I* and *you* (as in " you should..."), to use hedges to soften criticism or suggestions, and to communicate that any revisions are left solely to the discretion of the text's author; 4) Teacher feedback must take individual and contextual variables: The needs, desires, and abilities of individual student writers with regard to feedback are often overlooked by researchers and theorists. Teachers, in their efforts to be nonappropriative and consistent, may forget that one size does not fit all and that different students may require different types of feedback. For example, in the United States, several authors (e.g., Leki, 1992; Reid, 1998; Ferris, 1999; Harklau, Losey & Siegal,1999) have observed that there are differences in background between international student writers and long-term U.S. residents (i.e., immigrants) that may have specific implications for teacher feedback. For instance, international students may never have experienced composing or revision in their English classes in their home countries and may fail to see the need or purpose for multiple drafting, revision, or teacher feedback (except to explain their grade and tell them what they did wrong). While immigrant students may have already experienced multiple drafting and teacher feedback as characteristics of the American composition classroom, they may be unfamiliar with technical jargon related to either rhetorical issues (e.g., "thesis", "transition") or grammatical points (e.g., "subject-verb agreement", "sentence fragment"), terms they are likely to find written by teachers on their papers. Thus, Leki (1992) and Reid (1998) state that it is important for writing instructors to assess their particular students' prior experiences, knowledge, and expectations at the beginning of a course and to explain their own responding strategies to their students. Teachers also need to be aware of student motivations. Students and instructors in foreign language classes (e.g., students studying Spanish in the United States or English in FL contexts) tend to see writing as language practice or as a way to demonstrate comprehension of literature. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) say that foreign language students may not be as motivated to revise and edit their writing as students who understand that their academic and future career success may depend to some degree on their ability to master the conventions of English writing. In sum, not all L2/FL writers are identical in their experience, knowledge, and motivations simply because they are writing in an SL/FL.

Ferris et al. (1997) point out, teachers also need to be aware that different types of assignments may lend themselves to diverse forms of feedback. For instance, a teacher suggestion to add more detail might be very helpful if the student is working on a narrative description but counterproductive if the student is working on a persuasive text, in which extraneous detail could actually distract the reader and weaken the argument. Finally, as

teachers analyze studies of teacher feedback and consider their own response strategies, they should be aware of institutional and course constraints on the effects of feedback. For instance, student journal entries are typically designed to build students' fluency and reflective thinking abilities and are almost never revised by students; feedback or correction on these is not likely to have much effect on student writing. Similarly, extensive feedback on an in-class graded midterm, while it might help the student know how to approach such a task the next time, will not have the same immediate and observable effects as comments on an intermediate draft of an essay to be revised for a grade or to be submitted in a portfolio. Teachers, therefore, should consciously vary their feedback to match the goals of the writing task: responding as a reader to the content of journal entries, giving test-taking strategy tips in feedback on in-class essay exams, and giving specific suggestions on papers that students will revise again.

3.2 The Roles of the Students: Peer Feedback

3.2.1 The Development of Peer Feedback

According to Hyland (2003), the idea of students receiving feedback on their writing from their peers developed from LI process classes and has become an important alternative to teacher-based forms of response in ESL/EFL contexts. Peer response is said to provide a means of both improving writers' drafts and developing readers' understandings of good writing, but teachers have generally been more positive than students, who tend to prefer teacher feedback, and its benefits have been hard to confirm empirically in L2/FL situations.

3.2.2 Pros and Cons of Peer Feedback

3.2.2.1 The Pros of Peer Feedback

Hyland (2003) states that the theoretical advantages of peer response are based largely on the fact that writing and learning are social processes. Mittan (1989) shows that collaborative peer review helps learners engage in a community of equals who respond to each others' work and together create an authentic social context for interaction and learning. Mendoca and Johnson (1994) say that, in peer response, students are practically able to participate actively in learning while getting responses from real, perhaps multiple, readers in a nonthreatening situation. Moreover, as Zhang (1995) point out that students not only benefit from seeing how readers understand their ideas and what they need to improve, but also gain the skills necessary to critically analyze and revise their own writing.

Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) summarize various potential benefits claimed by advocates of

peer response: 1) Students can take active roles in their own learning; 2) Students can reconceptualize their ideas in light of their peers' reactions; 3) Students can engage in unrehearsed, low-risk, exploratory talk, which is less feasible in whole-class or teacher-student interactions; 4) Students receive reactions, questions, and responses from authentic readers (i.e., their peers); 5) Students receive feedback from multiple sources; 6) Students gain a clearer understanding of audience/readers' needs by receiving feedback on what they have done well and on what remains unclear; 7) Responding to peers' writing builds the critical skills needed to analyze and revise one's own writing; 8) Students gain confidence (or reduce apprehension) by seeing peers' strengths and weaknesses in writing.

3.2.2.2 The Cons of Peer Feedback

Hyland (2003) describes that, on the negative side, the fact that learners are rhetorically inexperienced means that they may focus heavily on sentence level problems rather than ideas and organization. Moreover, Leki (1990a) asserts that peers are not trained teachers and their comments may be vague and unhelpful, or even overly critical and sarcastic. Carson and Nelson (1996) also state that there is also some concern that students from collectivist cultures may be more concerned about the need to emphasize a positive group climate than critically appraise peers' writing, making feedback less effective.

Ferris (2003) shows that a number of scholars, researchers and teachers have also raised various concerns and objections about peer response: 1) Students misunderstand the purposes for peer feedback and are uncomfortable with it; 2) Peer feedback activities can be especially uncomfortable for students from collectivist cultures, who are more interested in group solidarity than individual achievement; 3) Students, due to their limitations as both developing writers and L2/FL learners, are simply not very good at giving one another helpful feedback, thus calling into question the time and effort needed to implement peer response.

3.2.3 The Results of Research

According to Hyland (2003), research on the effectiveness of peer response in ESL/EFL contexts has found that writers do make some use of peers' comments in their revisions, although L2/FL proficiency, prior experience, and group dynamics are likely to influence the extent of this.

According to Ferris (2003), in general, researchers (e.g., Leki, 1990b; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994) have found that peer response is well received by student writers

and that they enjoy the process. On the other hand, students sometimes question the efficacy of peer feedback, express concern about either their peers' competency to evaluate their work or their ability to give critical feedback constructively and not hurt-fully, and clearly prefer teacher feedback over peer feedback when asked to choose. To this point, the available evidence does not suggest that ESL/EFL student writers have strongly negative feelings toward peer feedback or feel that it is harmful to them.

3.3　Teacher Feedback and Peer Feedback

Ferris (2003) states that the scarcity of research on some aspects of response to student writing and the lack of comparability of studies that do exist make it difficult, and perhaps even inappropriate, to draw hard-and-fast conclusions about how teachers should approach their own commentary and peer response activities. Still, several generalizations do emerge: 1) Students appear to appreciate and value both teacher and peer feedback and to feel that feedback helps them to improve their writing: 2) Teachers and peers, in providing commentary, take a wide variety of stances and cover a range of issues about student texts. Though it may have been accurate in the past to claim that teachers and peers respond only to sentence-level issues, this no longer appears to be true; 3) There is considerable variation across teachers and peers giving feedback and student writers processing it as to the nature of feedback given and the ways in which the commentary is utilized by writers. This variation occurs across text types, students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and their L2/FL proficiency and writing ability; 4) Students, at least under some circumstances, consider and utilize teacher and peer feedback in constructing revisions of their texts. These revisions occur on both global and surfacwe levels. These generalizations lend themselves to several practical conclusions for responding to student writing. First, teachers should not abandon either providing feedback themselves or facilitating peer response. Though there are some caveats to this—for instance, students at lower levels of language and writing proficiency are probably less capable of processing copious teacher feedback or engaging in peer response—there is enough positive evidence that both sources of feedback are valuable to (and valued by) students to continue these practices until such time as there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Second, teachers should examine their own responding practices to see whether their feedback is clear and responsive to the needs of individual students and/or texts. They should also be diligent in preparing students for peer feedback, particularly in modeling the types of feedback that are most helpful and appropriate. Finally, teachers should be intentional in helping students to revise, seeing that they understand and can utilize feedback

they have received, and creating accountability mechanisms to make sure that students are taking the response-and-revision process seriously.

4．Corrections

4.1　What Are Corrections?

Harmer (2004) says that correcting is the stage at which teachers indicate when something is not right. Teachers correct mistakes in the students' written performance on issues such as syntax (i.e., word order), concord (i.e., grammatical agreement between subjects and verbs), collocation (e.g., words which live together), or word choice. Correcting students' work only become useful if the students can do something with teachers' corrections. Thus, when teachers return corrected work to their students, they should ensure that the students do not immediately put it to one side, with only a cursory glance at the grade and some of the mistakes. Good correction methods include ensuring that the students understand what the mistakes are and how they can be corrected—if possible, there and then. Moreover, as teachers, it is our task to make sure students derive as much benefit as possible from our reactions to their writing. However, we need to bear in mind that not all students—indeed not all writers—are as good at editing as others. Not all students are good at letting their mistakes work for them. In the end, it is, to an extent, up to them to decide how much they want to (or can) take from what teachers suggest.

4.2　How Should Teachers Correct?

Harmer (2004) states that perhaps the most common way of correcting students' work has been to return it to students with a great deal of underlining, crossings-out, question marks and the occasional tick. There may be a place for such correction, especially in test marking for example, but this kind of intensive correction can be counter-productive. There are a number of more effective ways of making correction a positive and useful experience. A way of avoiding the proliferation of red ink all over a student's work is through selective correction. In other words, teachers do not have to correct everything. Teachers could correct only verb tenses or only punctuation or focus instead exclusively on word order. They might only correct paragraph organization or the use of appropriate levels of formality. They might only correct two of the paragraphs in a composition or only highlight mistakes in the layout of a letter.

If teachers are going to employ a selective approach as we have mentioned above,

students need to know about it. When teachers tell the students that this time teachers are only going to be looking at punctuation, they will then concentrate on that aspect of writing especially, something that otherwise they might not do. Selective correction is a good learning tool, in other words. A way of making selective correction really effective is to discuss with students what the teacher should be looking out for. If the students are part of the decision-making process, they are likely to approach the task with more commitment and enthusiasm than usual, and they will pay a great deal of attention to the area earmarked for the teacher's correction.

According to Harmer (2004), many teachers use a range of different marking scales when correcting written work and written tests. This means that though students may fall down on, say, grammar, they can still perhaps do well in the way they answer a task or in their use of vocabulary. Teachers may want to give marks out of 10 for each category they have chosen for students (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, coherence or cohesion). Together with indications of mistakes (where they occur), such marking scales will help students to focus on the particular areas they need to work at.

Harmer (2004) describes that reformulation is a way of showing students how they could write something more correctly. Instead of asking them to find the mistake and correct it, the teacher shows how he/she would write the incorrect sentence. The student then learns by comparing correct and incorrect versions. Reformulation is extremely useful during drafting and re-drafting. Moreover, sometimes teachers indicate that a mistake has been made and then tell students to go and look the problem up in a dictionary or a grammar book. If, for example, the students write *I am not interested about sailing*, the teacher can say "Have a look at *interested* in your dictionary". In the same way, the teacher can suggest that students consult a grammar book if they are having tense, grammar, or word order problems. The advantage of referring students to books in this way is that it encourages them to look at the information with a purpose in mind. They will learn as they correct.

According to Ferris (1999), error correction is indeed a useful way to incorporate attention to language into L2/FL writing courses, especially when it is done selectively and strategically. Frodesen and Holten (2003) say that, thanks to considerable research on this aspect of L2/FL writing instruction (e.g., Bates, Lane & Lange, 1993; Byrd & Reid, 1998; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Shih, 1998), ESL/EFL teachers now have excellent resources to guide them in creating error correction feedback methods that will best meet the specific needs of their students and the constraints of their teaching contexts as well as full descriptions of course curricula in this area (e.g., Camhi, 2000; Shih, 2001). In general, these

discussions advocate the following: 1) Limiting error correction feedback to certain types of errors, based on considerations such as attention to global—or more serious—errors, error frequency, or errors that may stigmatize writers (e.g., nonstandard forms of English considered to be uneducated); 2) Providing indirect rather than direct corrections through such methods as underlining, checking or coding errors; 3) Considering individual writers' learning styles, metalinguistic knowledge and overall proficiency level in deciding when and how to provide feedback. In sum, these generalizations direct teachers to focus on aspects of grammar that can be explained, understood and generalized to students' particular writing needs. Two issues remain to the widespread use of error correction feedback. One is that some teachers of L2/FL writers lack sufficient knowledge of English structure and pedagogical grammar to accurately, consistently and appropriately deal with learner errors. This is a significant concern, since responding to students' errors, especially at advanced levels, is a complicated task, even for experienced and knowledgeable instructors. Clearly, effective error correction feedback requires that teachers possess thorough knowledge of English structure and pedagogical grammar. Another and somewhat broader issue concerns the reality that many teachers have come to rely on error correction as the way to address the grammar needs of second language writers. Assigning grammar instruction such a restricted role not only fosters a narrow conception of L2/FL writers as *error producers* and the L2/FL writing classroom as an *error repair shop* but also ignores much of the current research and theoretical discussion on pedagogical grammar. A richer and more comprehensive treatment of language in L2 writing classrooms should combine error correction feedback with lessons on the essential relationship between language and discourse structure (e.g., the use of modal verbs to hedge in argumentation). It would also, as Johns (1994) suggests, make L2/FL learners co-researchers, discovering how grammar functions in academic texts and eventually transferring these discoveries into their own writing.

5. Summary

We have reviewed the previous researches and literature, which examine L2/FL writing in terms of the effective responding and correction feedback. These examination lead us to the following conclusions: 1) The teachers should be concerned not only with its grammatical or lexical correctness but also with its content; 2) L2/FL student writers do not have strongly negative feelings toward peer feedback or feel that it is harmful to them. Collaborative peer review helps learners engage in a community of equals who respond to each others' work and

together create an authentic social context for interaction and learning; 3) Error correction is indeed a useful way to incorporate attention to language into L2/FL writing courses, especially when it is done selectively and strategically.

Thus, when we teach English writing in Japanese junior or senior high school, we should bear above-mentioned three points in mind.

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