

# Examining the Effect of Feedback in Beginning L2 Composition

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**Abstract:** *Although L2 teachers tend to operate under the assumption that feedback on student compositions has a profound and positive effect on student revisions, few investigations have examined the results of teacher feedback. The present study, therefore, replicated a 1997 study by Ferris on the type and effect of feedback on advanced English-as-a-second-language (ESL) composition revisions within a beginning L2 environment. Results of this investigation revealed that brief teacher commentary (4–5 words in length) in the form of imperatives tended to engender successful revisions, and by extension, that successful feedback type was dependent upon the composition environment.*

## Introduction

While reviewing research on English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writing, Goldstein (2001) articulated the following simple, yet unresolved question: “What role does teacher commentary play in helping students become more efficient writers?” (p. 78). Regardless of the context for writing (L1, ESL, or L2), “teachers and students alike intuit that written responses can have a great effect on student writing and attitude” (Leki, 1990, p. 58). Some of us even prefer to believe that student writing improves “in direct proportion to the amount of time [we] spend on their papers” (Hariston, 1986, p. 117).

The illusion that the time we invest in correcting and commenting on student writing has a perfect and positive correlation to the quality of a student’s final product is now under attack. Indeed, years of working as “composition slaves” (Hariston, 1986) has not produced the results that the countless hours of reading, correction, and commentary would demand. Instead of a simple equation wherein a given amount of feedback equals a predictable amount of improvement, Leki (1990) painted a more realistic picture in which she described writing teachers as those who “behave with the same combination of a sense of responsibility and a sense of helplessness as a coach of a football team, booing and cheering while pacing the margins of the student’s paper . . . or like a coroner diagnosing the cause of death” (p. 57).

Given that providing written feedback and writing evaluative commentary is one of the “great tasks” (Conners & Lunsford, 1993, p. 200) both quantitatively in terms of sheer number of hours, and qualitatively in terms of personal investment, one might think it would also be a central area of examination. Although there has been a growing body of literature devoted to the impact of peer response on ESL student revision, studies of teacher response and its effects on revision have been few (Ferris, 1997). According to Leki (1990), there may be a fairly large amount of information examining the type of teacher response in L1 writing, yet “examples of feedback and subsequent student action are rare” (p. 64) and studies of teachers’ responses in the L2 setting are “practically nonexistent” (Zamel, 1985, p. 83). For example, while reviewing all published investigations of teachers’ written commentary on rhetoric and content in ESL and L2 settings, an area of research that did “not really begin until the 1990s” (p. 75), Goldstein (2001) uncovered a paltry 15 studies. Of these 15, only 4 looked at the relationship between

teacher-written commentary and either subsequent student revision or essay scores. The 11 others examined student perceptions of commentary or the type of teacher feedback on final drafts.

In an attempt to address this lacuna, the present study replicated one of the few ESL investigations that examined the effect of teacher feedback on subsequent composition revisions. The major distinction, however, was that the present study focused its attention on a beginning L2 writing population. Results of this investigation will help determine whether or not the ESL findings are unique to that particular population, or are more universal in nature.

### Type of Feedback

In the undeniably few studies examining teacher feedback, there are several trends that emerged. First, there has been considerable debate over where teacher/commentator attention should be placed: on form or content (Hall, 1990). To help inform this debate, Fatham and Whalley (1990) compared revision scores on both form and content among four groups of ESL writers: Group 1 received no feedback whatsoever; Group 2 received grammar or form-focused feedback only; Group 3 received content feedback only, and; Group 4 received feedback on both grammar and content. The authors expected that students would focus on different aspects of their compositions depending upon the type of feedback that the teacher provided (p. 182). After scoring original compositions and revisions, the authors found that students made statistically significant improvements in grammatical accuracy only when they were given explicit feedback on grammar. More surprising, however, was the finding that all groups significantly improved the content of their compositions irrespective of the type of feedback received. In other words, students improved the content of their revisions even when teachers provided no feedback concerning the content of the original essay. Specific feedback on grammar errors appeared to have a greater effect on grammar revisions than general content comments had on revisions of content. Nevertheless, the authors concluded that feedback on grammar and content, whether given alone or simultaneously, both had a positive effect on revision (p. 185).

Despite these encouraging findings, many researchers have lamented the focus that L2 teachers tend to place on form, or surface-level features, rather than content. For many of us, the practice of calling attention to error is still the most common procedure for responding to ESL and L2 writing (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991; Zamel, 1985). For Cumming (1983),

Error identification appears to be ingrained in the habitual practices of L2 teachers who perhaps by reason of perceiving their role solely as instructors of the formal aspects of language, therefore restrict their activities to operations exclusively within the domain

of formal training, rather than that of cognitive development (p. 6).

Zamel (1985) believed that this trend is due to the fact that ESL (and L2) teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers, rather than writing teachers.

A second major criticism found in the literature concerned the manner in which feedback (form or content focused) is supplied. Even among L1 studies, the research has criticized teachers for being “too general (rubber-stamping students’ papers with remarks like ‘be specific’), for being too specific (giving students advice that is so text specific that they cannot use it in subsequent writing), and for focusing too heavily on surface features” (Goldstein, 2001, p. 60). Others, such as Burkland & Grimm (1986), lamented the futility of providing feedback because many L1 students “read the grade and simply discard the paper” (p. 62).

Summarizing the situation, Zamel (1985) provided an extensive list of typical feedback problems:

- (1) teachers respond to most writing as if it were a final draft, thus reinforcing an extremely constricted notion of composing;
- (2) teachers’ marks and comments usually take the form of abstract and vague prescriptions and directives that students find difficult to interpret;
- (3) teachers (especially ESL and L2 teachers) are often more concerned with language-specific errors and problems and rarely expect students to revise beyond the surface level;
- (4) marks and comments are often confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible;
- (5) teachers appropriate students’ texts and impose their own purpose and ideas on students;
- (6) teachers send mixed messages to students by addressing minor surface features and larger issues of rhetoric and context in the same version of a text. For example, mechanical errors might be pinpointed at the same time that students are asked to elaborate upon an idea; and
- (7) teachers often fail to provide explicit, text-specific directions, guidelines, and revising strategies. (p. 79-82)

Hearing the resounding criticism of both the type and the shape of feedback given to student writers, one must begin to question the value of composition correction and feedback altogether. (Burkland & Grimm, 1986; Hillocks, 1982; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Leki, 1990).

On a more optimistic note, surveys of L2 writers (Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; McCurdy, 1992) have revealed that L2 writers are generally “happy with the feedback they receive, and claim that they pay attention to it and find it helpful” (Ferris, 1995, p. 36). ESL writers in Ferris’s study, for example, reported

wanting and paying the most attention to comments on grammar (67%), with attention to content-oriented feedback close behind (63%) (p. 40). This enthusiastic feedback by ESL writers is much more positive than that revealed by L1 surveys. Indeed, Leki (1991) found that her ESL students equate good writing in English with error-free writing and both “want and expect their teachers to correct errors” (p. 203), whereas L1 students reported not paying much attention to teacher commentary, not understanding it, or feeling some hostility. Inspired by these encouraging findings concerning ESL and L2 students’ self-perceived acceptance of and positive attitudes toward teacher feedback, Ferris (1997) sought to examine more closely the influence that teacher commentary actually had on ESL student revisions. To this end, Ferris examined 1,600 marginal and end comments written on 110 first drafts of papers by 47 advanced ESL students. She then examined the 110 revised drafts in an attempt to measure the influence, if any, that the commentary had on subsequent revisions, and to see whether the changes actually led to improvements. Her specific research questions were:

- (1) What characteristics of teacher commentary appear to influence student revision? and
- (2) Do revisions influenced by teacher feedback lead to substantive and effective changes in students’ papers? (p. 317)

Two sets of analyses were completed. The first examined the feedback provided by the teacher and the second measured the effect the feedback had on the revision process. The comment analysis specifically targeted feedback length, feedback type (i.e., making a request or giving information), the use of hedges (e.g., “maybe,” “please,” “might”), and text-based versus general commentary. The effect of the comments on revision was assessed according to an original 0–6 rating scale (0 = no discernible change, 6 = substantial positive change).

Ferris found that marginal requests for information, general requests (regardless of syntactic form), and summary comments on grammar led to the most substantive revisions. The use of hedges did not inhibit effective revisions as anticipated. In fact, they seemed to encourage positive change. Less influential were questions or statements that provided information to the students and positive comments. Length of feedback appeared to be an important variable. In general “longer comments and those which were text specific were associated with major changes more than were shorter, general comments” (p. 330). Moreover, when either minor or substantive changes occurred, they overwhelmingly resulted in an improvement of the students’ papers. Very few of the changes (less than 5%) were found to have a negative impact. Finally, text-specific comments resulted in more positive changes than general comments.

Ferris concluded that not all feedback is equal and

certain forms may be particularly difficult for students to interpret. She also found that although students generally addressed comments given in the form of a question, the changes that resulted had mixed effects on the revisions. This suggested “that although the students appeared to understand from the comment that something was required of them, they were less clear about how to incorporate the requested changes successfully” (p. 331). A second problematic type of comment was the “give-information comment” (e.g., “Iowa law favors parental rights. Michigan and California consider the best interests of the child.” p. 321). Often, this type of comment did not lead to change or produced mixed results in the revision when it did. Ferris indicates that the give-information comment is less effective because it does not explicitly instruct the writer to incorporate the information that is supplied.

Given that the manner in which teachers comment and, more important, the effect of comments on subsequent revisions has gone largely unexplored (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Goldstein, 2001; Leki, 1990), and that this lacuna is especially acute in the nonnative writing environment (Ferris, 1997; Zamel, 1985), Ferris’s study was an essential one. However, Ferris examined an advanced ESL writing population only. Would her findings still hold in an L2 context, in particular an introductory L2 environment? Or are the effects of feedback context specific? If Ferris’s findings were not applicable to an L2 context, then a host of studies targeting a range of abilities and languages would need to be run before firm generalizations could be made. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to examine the effect of feedback on subsequent revisions in the beginning L2 environment. The results of this effort should be of practical interest to the L2 teacher, as well as help delineate or reinforce the applicability of Ferris’s findings.

## Method

Instead of looking at the influence of teacher commentary in advanced ESL students’ revisions, the present study attempts to measure the influence that commentary has on subsequent composition revisions in a beginning L2 French class at the postsecondary level. Thus, the primary research questions are:

- (1) What characteristics of teacher commentary appear to have the greatest effect on beginning L2 composition revisions, and
- (2) Do revisions prompted by teacher feedback lead to substantive and effective changes in beginning L2 students’ papers?

## Participants

Twenty-two of the 25 subjects were freshmen; 19 were female and 6 were male. All participants were native speakers of English who had either no formal exposure to French prior to this course, or were placed into the

beginning course as the result of their score on a standardized placement exam.

### *The Course*

The introductory French course was part of a four-semester language requirement. The course focused on speaking, writing, reading, listening comprehension, culture, and grammar. The *Vis-à-Vis* (Amon, Muyskens & Omaggio Hadley, 2000) first-year textbook program was used. This course met for 80 minutes, three days a week for 16 weeks. Other than the formal writing activities discussed below, writing was primarily used as a support skill (i.e., filling in blanks for grammar activities, creating vocabulary lists).

### *The Writing Tasks*

Writing activities (one per chapter, eight chapters total) came directly from the textbook so that students were exposed to the vocabulary, structures, and themes essential to the writing task. Each in-class writing assignment began with a prewriting activity consisting of 3–5 guiding questions. Next, students were to draft a short composition (average composition length was 92 words) based upon the ideas generated in the prewriting activity. Students were mainly asked to compose descriptive texts (e.g., describe your best friend; describe the house of your dreams; talk about your family; describe your eating habits). Students had fifty minutes to complete the prewriting and writing tasks.

### *Procedure*

Only compositions from chapters 4–8 were selected for examination. The first three writing activities, which averaged only 37 words, were found to be too short for meaningful analysis. Ultimately, 516 marginal and end comments written on 114 first drafts of papers by 25 beginning French language students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha were examined and catalogued by the investigator and a second independent reader according to the following features identified by Ferris (1997):

- (1) Comment length in number of words;
- (2) Comment type (pragmatic intent and syntactic form);
- (3) The use of hedges (e.g., please, maybe, perhaps), and;
- (4) Whether the comment was text based or general. (p. 320)

Comment type was further broken down into the following categories:

- (a) Ask for information/question (e.g., Did you consult any sources?)
- (b) Make a request/question (e.g., Can you provide an example here?)
- (c) Make a request/statement (e.g., This would be better earlier in the essay.)

- (d) Make a request/imperative (e.g., Add a citation.)
- (e) Give information/question (e.g., The first case was in 1899. Does this change your view?)
- (f) Give information/statement (e.g., The first case was in 1899, not 1919.)
- (g) Make a positive comment, statement, exclamation (e.g., This is a great start.)
- (h) Make a grammar/mechanics comment, question, statement, or imperative. (p. 322)

Papers with comments were returned to students for revision. Students had two days out of class to revise their compositions. The 114 revised drafts were then examined to measure the influence of the commentary. Revisions were assessed by the investigator according to Ferris's (1997) scale:

- 0 No discernible change made by student in response to comment;
- 1 Minimal attempt to address comment, effect generally negative or negligible;
- 2 Substantive change in response to comment, effect generally negative or negligible;
- 3 Minimal attempt in response to comment, effect mixed;
- 4 Minimal attempt to address comment, effect generally positive;
- 5 Substantive change in response to comment, effect mixed;
- 6 Substantive change in response to comment, effect generally positive. (p. 322)

A 10% sample was verified by a second independent reader. Interrater reliability was 96%.

## **Findings**

### *Feedback Type*

Although no feedback or correction code was used, there was relatively little variation in the type and shape of the teacher's comments. First, all feedback was given in the L1 (English). Second, nearly all comments were direct and succinct with an average comment length of only four words. Third, 398 of the 516 comments were text based rather than general, and there were only three cases where a hedge was used. As for comment type, there were no "asking for information" questions, no requests in the shape of a question, and no requests for information in the shape of a statement. Instead, there were 64 examples of a request in the shape of an imperative. For example, a request for detail was directly stated, "Add more detail here," rather than politely requested, "Can you add more detail here?" or "This would be better with more detail."

There were no cases where factual information was provided to the writer either in the form of a question or a

statement. There were 118 examples of a positive comment, statement or exclamation (e.g., “This is great!”), and 334 “comments, questions, statements, or imperatives” (Ferris, p. 322) focusing on grammar or mechanics, nearly all of which were supplied as an imperative. Examples of form-focused feedback include “Pay attention to verb endings,” or “Don’t forget agreement.” There were no codes, symbols, or systems used in conjunction with the commentary. However, an arrow was often drawn to link feedback to the phrase or sentence in question.

### *Comment Effect*

Ferris’s (1997) scale was used to measure the influence of the 64 “requests/imperative” comments. Using the 0–6 scale, the average rating was 4.4, or “minimal attempt to address comment, effect generally positive.” There were two cases where “no discernable change was made by the student in response to the comment,” and two cases where there was a “minimal attempt to address the comment, with an effect that was generally negative or negligible.” There were 12 cases where the revisions showed evidence of “minimal attempt in response to commentary with a mixed effect” and 14 examples of a “minimal attempt to address comments with a generally positive effect.” There were 16 cases where there was “substantive change in response to comment with mixed effect,” and 18 cases where there was “substantive change with a generally positive effect.”

The 118 positive comments elicited no change whatsoever in any of the revisions. In contrast, the 334 comments devoted to grammar and mechanics had a profound effect. Eighty-eight percent of all such comments led to a successful correction, 8% led to an incorrect change, and a mere 3% were ignored by the students.

### **Discussion**

Several differences in the outcome of the present study and that of Ferris (1997) are worth noting. First, Ferris examined 110 sets of first and second drafts producing 1,600 marginal and end comments. The present study targeted 114 sets of first and second drafts that yielded a mere one third (516) of the marginal and end comments produced in the Ferris study. The much smaller number of comments in the L2 context is likely due to the brevity of the L2 compositions. However, this is only speculation given that the average length of the ESL compositions is not known. Second, whereas Ferris found that the use of hedges led to positive change in the students’ revisions, no conclusions or comparisons stemming from the present study can be drawn due to the rare use of hedges (three total). Similarly, Ferris found that length of feedback correlated positively with the success of the revision. In the present study, all comments were remarkably terse (the average length was four words), yet feedback still led to a large number of

successful revisions. Finally, no comparisons of comment type can be made among the present data or to those of the Ferris study because nearly all comments took the shape of a grammar-focused imperative or a positive comment, statement, or exclamation.

Similarities among the outcomes of the two studies exist as well. For example, just as Ferris found that text-specific comments produced more positive changes, so did the present investigation. Also, Ferris found that less than 5% of the student revisions led to a negative change. Similar results were found in the present study where 8% of the changes were incorrect.

### **Conclusion**

The copious occurrence of brief form-focused comments in this study unwittingly served to reinforce the stereotype of the L2 teacher as one concerned with language rather than composition, and form over meaning. In the words of Zamel (1985) “teachers (especially ESL and L2 teachers) are often more concerned with language-specific errors and problems and rarely expect students to revise beyond the surface level” (p. 79). Certainly, the level of L2 ability examined here (first semester) is one at which one expects to find a great deal of mechanical errors. It is also a context in which students typically “want and expect teachers to correct their errors” (Leki, 1991, p. 203). The clear focus on grammar and mechanics and the simple and direct feedback provided is not entirely surprising, yet it does limit the extent to which comparisons with the Ferris study can be drawn. Unfortunately, this investigation did not yield meaningful data concerning the effect of content feedback—other than general positive comments, statements, and exclamations—or the effect of different comment types (statement, question, request, or provision of information). It did, however, reveal that beginning L2 writers incorporate teacher feedback concerning grammar and mechanics and that they tend to do so successfully. Even at the earliest stages of L2 instruction, teachers need not feel that they must supply surface-level corrections to students during the revision process. Indicating that a mechanical error has taken place through the use of a short and direct imperative or statement appears to suffice.

Although further study is still desperately needed concerning less form-focused feedback, the present study demonstrates encouraging findings concerning the effectiveness of what—right or wrong—is still perhaps the most ubiquitous type of L2 composition feedback. For those who view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers, these findings imply that L2 students do successfully incorporate short and direct form-focused feedback. Moreover, knowing that students are capable of such revisions, and that even first-semester L2 students can successfully revise at the surface level, should encourage teachers to expand their feedback repertoire even further.

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