

# **An Investigation into the Effectiveness of Teacher Feedback on Student Writing**

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## **A b s t r a c t**

It is common to see English language teachers laboriously marking students' writing assignments, and even more common to hear teachers' frustrations when students take little any notice of their comments. Since the writing component accounts for more than 50% of the compulsory English language courses at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), an understanding of the provision and perception of feedback by teachers and students, and a search for possible ways to improve the effectiveness of feedback provision, forms the motivation for this research study.

By examining the differences in students' and teachers' perceptions of different types of feedback, this paper seeks to explain some of the reasons why the commentary of teachers is sometimes ineffective. Students' responses to teachers' responses, teachers' further responses to these students' responses, and students' further responses to teachers' further responses will be discussed. An attempt to encourage students to write drafts so that teachers can give feedback to different foci at each stage of the process will be reviewed. Based on these findings, the paper will conclude by suggesting ways to prevent teachers' comments from being shelved and forgotten, thereby increasing the intended effects of teacher commentary on student writers.

## **Background**

Many teachers of English as a second language (ESL) would accept as a truism of the profession that the task of responding to student writing is difficult, cumbersome and often ineffective. A review of the literature relating to the responses to student writing reveals that written feedback has not always been effective (Searle, & Dillon, 1980; Freedman, 1984; Zamel, 1985; Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994; Frankenburg-Garcia, 1999). In spite of the fact that teacher effort has sometimes been futile, the importance in pedagogy of teacher response is recognised and the need for teacher contribution is reaffirmed (Freedman, 1985; Chandrasegaran, 1986; Beason, 1993; Ferris, 1997). The majority of studies reported were conducted amongst L1 (native speakers of English) and L2 (non-native speakers of English) learners in English-speaking countries, but we cannot assume direct application of their results on those ESL students who are living in their hometown, such as Cantonese-speaking students in Hong Kong.

## **This Research**

The original intention of this Action Learning Project was that the teacher-researcher would first identify the current practices of giving and using written feedback at HKPU and then explore teaching interventions in a cyclical manner with some of her classes to improve the effectiveness of feedback on student writing. This intention, however, could not be achieved fully

because of administrative changes. By the end of the duration of the project, three phases of the study were completed. These will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Procedures

The study was conducted in three phases over one and a half years. The aim of the first phase was to understand the kinds of written feedback which students receive, and teachers give, at HKPU and how they perceive each other's preferences. Modifying the method used by Straub (1997), we gave 104 undergraduate students and 50 English language teachers a short report written by a first-year undergraduate student. It was annotated with 26 teacher comments.

The students and teachers were asked for their reaction to each comment on a four-point scale: definitely like/ like/ do not like/ definitely do not like. There was a 100% response rate from the students who were drawn from a range of language and non-language related disciplines. We interviewed one student in five to determine in greater depth the reasons for their preferences. Of the 50 teachers, 16 native speakers and 14 non-native speakers responded. We also asked the 30 teachers how often they use different types of comments (such as praise, advice, and questions) in their response to student assignments and why. We next investigated teachers' responses to students' preferences and students' responses to these teacher responses.

After determining the perceptions and preferences for feedback, we then explored in Phase 2 of the project, how individual students utilised the comments made by their English language teacher on their own essays. In Hong Kong, the traditional method of teaching writing is for students to write an essay independently, following which the teacher gives a final grade together with written comments on all areas of the written product. Students must then make revisions to their work based on the comments. Of the students involved in Phase 1, a language major class and three non-language major classes were exposed to this product-revision practice, and so we were able to compare the written products of students with their revised version of those products. The students were asked to indicate for each comment whether they had understood it and found it helpful. Interviews were conducted with the teachers to gauge their reactions to what the students had or had not done in their revision.

The analysis of the findings in Phase 2 revealed several elements which were ineffective with our students. In Phase 3, we attempted to improve the situation by introducing a teaching intervention in the form of a process writing approach. A teacher adopted a three-draft process writing approach with two classes where, for the most part, she addressed higher order concerns such as meaning and global structures in the first draft, other concerns in the second draft with the final draft being graded. This teaching intervention was evaluated by means of a comparison of the drafts, questionnaire (see Figure 1) and interviews.

*Figure 1: Questionnaire*

Dear Students,

We are interested in finding out what you think about teacher comments on students' writing. Of particular interest are the kinds of comments you prefer.

Below is a report using the CILL written by a student with comments by teachers about the report. The comments are taken from responses eight teachers made about students' writing assignments. Imagine that you wrote this report and you are getting it back with these comments from your teacher. How do you feel when you read the comments? How do you react to the comments?

Read the report on visiting the CILL, then respond to each of the comments below.

**DIRECTIONS:** Indicate your reaction to each of the following comments by circling 1, 2, 3 or 4. 1 means 'definitely like', 2 means 'like', 3 means 'do not like' and 4 means 'definitely do not like'. Try to use all four categories in your response. In the space provided, please explain the reason(s) for your choice. Feel free to ask anytime if anything is not clear.

## Report on visiting the Centre for Independent Language Learning

I love the hearts but be aware that they would not be used on a 'normal' report.

'vocabulary' - a collection of words

1 I love the hearts but be aware that they would not be used on a 'normal' report.

2

3

4

5

6

7 prep.

8

9 Think about the sentence structure.

10 Poor connection.

11 What do you mean by this?

12

13 Do be more careful with your choice of words.

14

15

16

17

18 Explain. What is it you search?

19 You need to explain this more thoroughly.

20

21 not a sentence

22 Is this the preposition you want to use here?

23

24 The layout could be better using headings and sub-headings.

25 Your report is reasonably well developed, describing your first and second visits to CILL. However it has no strong conclusion. This is a weakness.

26 There are many grammatical slips and errors that I leave you to correct. The accumulative effect spoils the report somewhat. Nevertheless, a clear account.

Report on visiting the Centre for Independent Language Learning

♥ Quite often, when I write an article or speak in English, the variety of words used is very limited. I am not bad in grammar and usually get good scores in writing and oral work but I believe I will be likely to perform better if I learn more words. So (Then) I visited the Centre for Independent Language Learning last week.

♥ First, I went to the computer to find what and where the suitable materials were. I could use books, CD-ROM or computer as the learning aids. Among the three, I decided to learn by the computer programmes because I was bother to find reference books on the shelves. The first programme I played was matching opposites. (Easy operation of the programme, simple instructions, these were followed) I could seek help by just pressing the Hint key when I could not work out the answers. And after finishing the programme, the scores and the model answers would be displayed. Even a primary student can do the questions. They were so simple. Also, there were just several questions that obviously inadequate for improving vocabulary knowledge. Next, I tried the other programme that needed the player to choose an appropriate word to insert in each sentence. (Again there were not enough matchings to help a lot) Afterwards, I open the other programme, the vocabulary cards. I was very much attracted to the colour drawings and detailed explanations on them. After reading the cards, I took an

test exam from it. When I did not get the correct answers, it could provide hints and assistance.

Maybe I did not familiar with the programme operation, I could find no more cards later. I was stuck. Then I asked the staff at the counter, he told me that it was all in the programme.

♥ I did not stop there; instead I made a second trial to explore more useful materials in the CILL on another day. I remembered I had to finished a management project soon and therefore I searched on the shelves. (It was not difficult to locate the right books because of the colours introduced. The colours on the cover had already indicated the levels.) Yellow: elementary; Blue: early intermediate; Green: intermediate; Red: upper intermediate.

♥ The books were of great variety of topics for different purpose writing. Furthermore, other than giving detailed descriptions, explanations and guidelines of the writing skills, they also focused on vocabulary and grammar usage. I read several chapters in some of them and put down the notes in my books for later use.

♥ From this experience, I learnt that we could not gain English knowledge solely from one source but through different accesses and media. The most effective way to learn a word first is understanding the word by the dictionaries because most of the words are there. What to do next is to read as much as possible.

Why use plural form?

Programme : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gender : M / F  
 1st Language : \_\_\_\_\_

No. : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date : \_\_\_\_\_

**DIRECTIONS:**

Indicate your reaction to each of the following comments by circling 1, 2, 3 or 4.

- 1 - means 'definitely like'
- 2 - means 'like'
- 3 - means 'do not like'
- 4 - means 'definitely do not like'

Try to use all four categories in your response. In the space provided, please explain the reason(s) for your choice. Feel free to ask anytime if anything is not clear.

Definitely do not like ↘  
 Do not like ↘ |  
 Like ↘ | |  
 Definitely like ↘ | | |  
 | | | |

Reasons

1. (Teacher points to the ♥ and writes)  
 I love the hearts but be aware that they would not be used on a 'normal' report.      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
2. (Teacher crosses out 'scarce' and replaces with) 'limited'      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
3. (Teacher inserts after 'oral!') 'work'      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
4. (Teacher underlines 'likely' and writes on top of it) 'able'      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
5. (Teacher underlines 'vocabularies', writes 'words' on top of it and writes in the margin)  
 'vocabulary' – a collection of words      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
6. (Teacher circles 'Then' and writes on top of it) 'So'      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
7. (Teacher points to 'by' and writes) prep.      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_
8. (Teacher underlines 'was bother' and puts on top of it) '?'      1 2 3 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Definitely do not like ↘  
 Do not like ↘ |  
 Like ↘ | |  
 Definitely like ↘ | | |  
 | | | |

9. (Teacher puts brackets around 'Easy ... followed' and writes)  
 Think about the sentence structure.      1 2 3 4
10. (Teacher points at the space between 'displayed' and 'Even' and writes)  
 Poor connection.      1 2 3 4
11. (Teacher points at the sentence beginning with 'Again' and writes)  
 What do you mean by this?      1 2 3 4
12. (Teacher underlines 'open' and writes on top of it) T      1 2 3 4
13. (Teacher crosses out 'exam' and writes) 'test'      1 2 3 4
14. (Teacher underlines 'consultance' and writes) 'assistance?'      1 2 3 4
15. (Teacher points to 'exam' and 'consultance' on these two lines and writes)  
 Do be more careful with your choice of words.      1 2 3 4
16. (Teacher underlines 'did' and writes) v.      1 2 3 4
17. (Teacher circles 'staff' and writes) 'assistant' – staff: a group of workers      1 2 3 4
18. (Teacher points to 'searched' and writes) Explain. What did you search?      1 2 3 4



5. Closed question -	Questions that either get a 'yes' or 'no' as answer, or else a simple one-word answer	Do you think you've given an adequate evaluation? * Is this word used literally or figuratively
6. Open question -	Questions that require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer, often starting with 'what', 'where', 'why', 'who', 'when' and 'how'	* Who gives / gets the lessons? * What does this mean?
7. Mechanics -	Comments that deal with grammar, punctuation, spelling, word choice etc.	<i>appreciate</i>  I <u>am appreciated</u> the help of the people at the counter.  <i>verb</i>  Although parents <u>permission</u> him to...
8. '?' -	No comments except a '?', usually meaning 'don't understand'	??  <u>Many argument government get attract more people from oversea.</u>

From the students' reactions to the 26 teacher comments on a first year student's report, it appeared that students preferred praise and friendly reminders in advice mode, did not mind helpful criticism, and disliked comments in the form of open or closed questions which they found to be sarcastic and condescending. They had mixed feelings about comments that focused on grammar and vocabulary, and ranked those that were accompanied with an explanation considerably higher than those that were not.

Teachers' response to the same 26 comments revealed some similarities and differences between their preferences and students' (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: A comparison of students' and teachers' ranking of feedback mode (The lower the mean, the higher the preference)

Rank	Students			Teachers		
	Type	Mean	(S.D.)	Type	Mean	(S.D.)
1	Praise	1.88	(0.61)	Praise	1.97	(1.00)
2	Advice	1.89	(0.61)	Advice	2.00	(0.81)
3	Mechanics	2.10	(0.75)	Closed question	2.02	(0.96)
4	Criticism	2.11	(0.77)	Open question	2.11	(0.78)
5	Imperative	2.21	(0.75)	Mechanics	2.12	(1.01)
6	Open question	2.22	(0.71)	Criticism	2.18	(1.07)
7	Closed question	2.34	(0.76)	Imperative	2.31	(0.92)
8	'?'	2.65	(0.89)	'?'	2.60	(1.01)

Figure 4: A comparison of the mean score accorded by students and teachers (The lower the mean, the higher the preference)

Comment	Description	Students' Mean (SD)	Teachers' Mean (SD)
1	Use of Hearts	1.92 (0.61)	2.16 (0.96)
2	Crosses out 'scarce' and replaces with 'limited'	2.03 (0.75)	2.29 (1.06)
3	Inserts 'work' after 'oral'	2.16 (0.73)	2.09 (0.97)
4	Underlines 'likely' and writes 'able'	2.00 (0.61)	2.25 (1.10)
5	Underlines 'vocabularies' and give meaning	1.83 (0.88)	1.98 (1.15)
6	Circles 'Then' and writes 'So'	2.06 (0.72)	2.24 (1.00)
7	Prep.	2.65 (0.74)	2.21 (1.05)
8	Underlines 'was bother' and writes '?'	2.65 (0.89)	2.60 (1.01)
9	Think about the sentence structure.	2.41 (0.82)	2.03 (0.92)
10	Poor connection	2.50 (0.84)	2.60 (0.91)
11	What do you mean by this?	2.26 (0.71)	2.15 (0.78)
12	Underlines 'open' and writes 'T'	2.21 (0.87)	1.74 (0.76)
13	Crosses out 'exam' and writes 'test'	2.19 (0.77)	2.33 (1.01)
14	Underlines 'consultance' and writes 'assistance?'	2.10 (0.77)	2.24 (0.86)
15	Do be more careful with your choice of words.	2.08 (0.78)	2.24 (0.81)
16	Underlines 'did' and writes 'v'	2.11 (0.74)	2.09 (0.96)
17	Circles 'staff' and writes 'assistant' - staff: a group of workers	1.76 (0.76)	1.89 (1.00)
18	Points to 'searched' and writes 'Explain. What did you search?'	2.06 (0.75)	2.44 (1.21)
19	You need to explain this more thoroughly.	2.17 (0.70)	2.47 (1.03)
20	(Yellow ... upper intermediate) and writes 'not a sentence'	2.19 (0.82)	2.20 (1.07)
21	Points to 'Furthermore' and writes 'Do you need this word here?'	2.24 (0.76)	1.73 (0.96)
22	Is this the preposition you want to use here?	2.44 (0.80)	2.30 (1.09)
23	Underlines 'dictionaries' and writes 'Why use plural from?'	2.17 (0.81)	2.06 (0.93)
24	Comment on layout.	1.67 (0.60)	1.59 (0.80)
25	Comment on overall report and conclusion.	1.71 (0.61)	1.78 (1.00)
26	Points out errors and positive end remark.	2.05 (0.77)	2.16 (1.08)

Figure 3 demonstrates that while praise and advice are ranked highest by both students and teachers, the ranking for open and closed questions (the two comment modes that students claimed to dislike) are quite different. This possibly shows that students preferred to receive straightforward comments that either corrected or pointed out errors whereas teachers preferred to give indirect comments which encouraged students to think and make changes accordingly. Figure 4 demonstrates an interesting result: that for the 26 margin comments, students' means are

lower than teachers', except for 10 comments. These 10 comments include comments in the form of an open question (comments 11 and 23) and a closed question (comments 21 and 22) the '?' symbol (comment 8), an imperative statement that begins with the word 'think' and remarks which relate to grammar using marking codes (such as 'v' for verb, comments 7, 12 and 16) but without more explicit corrections. This phenomenon indicates clear differences between students' and teachers' favourite modes of feedback. For example, when students made a mistake with grammar or lexical choice, they preferred the teacher to give them the correct word plus an explanation (see, for example, comments 5 and 17) much more than a marking code, such as "T" in comment 12. Teachers, however, preferred comment 12 to comments 5 and 17, believing that a marking code was sufficient in simple cases where no extension was called for. In the interviews, teachers commented that another consideration as they responded, was the hope that students would re-think what they had written when they read their teacher's feedback and come to their own conclusion about what needed to be revised. This is rather contrary to students' preferences, i.e. to be told the what, how and why reasons. These conflicting preferences may explain the figures which show that teachers preferred questions and 'think' statements more than students.

Our next step was to determine whether students knew what types of comments teachers preferred to give, and why, and vice versa. We managed to show the students' preferences to 19 of the 30 teachers who had responded earlier. Without exception, the teachers expressed disappointment over students' wish to be 'spoon-fed', and surprise at their negative feelings towards comments in question form. None of the teachers believed that they would accommodate all of the students' wishes although most of them said they would avoid writing the '?' symbol, and try to write a few more extended remarks. Most of the teachers stated that they would continue to write questions in response to student text, firmly believing in the strength of asking questions over overt corrections in developing students' writing and thinking abilities. However they agreed that they should check that they had worded their questions clearly. A few teachers were especially appreciative because these findings had raised their awareness of feedback provision and of the need to know what students need and want in teacher commentary. The interviews also became opportunities for teachers to vent their frustrations about students' learning attitudes and practical constraints such as a 'packed' and 'heavy' syllabus which prevented them from spending more quality time on responding to students' assignments.

We next contacted 16 students who were involved in the earlier tasks and asked them what they felt about teachers' views and preferences of feedback mode. All 16 students claimed that it was useful to know the reasons behind teachers' preferences and now that they knew, they could accept and understand. Nine students stated that they would become more receptive to comments in question and imperative forms. The '?' symbol, however, remained unpopular and all the students interviewed urged teachers to discontinue using this vague and confusing remark.

## **Lessons Learnt: Phase 2**

For the purpose of consistency, we used an anonymous student's report in Phase 1. However, reacting to comments on another person's writing can be different from students reacting to comments on their own work. In Phase 2, therefore, we sought the co-operation of four teachers and their classes to examine the revisions which students made upon receiving their teacher's written feedback on their writing assignments. The practice in the four classes was to take a single-draft approach where students had to re-submit a corrected version of their work after the teacher had graded and commented on the written product. After examining the changes made on the 'corrected version', we discovered, at best, only half-hearted revisions, i.e. students handed in sloppy work littered with careless mistakes. Where the teacher had given overt corrections and very explicit hints, the percentage of appropriate revisions was high. Where students had

to put in more effort, such as using a dictionary to determine the correct part of speech or preposition, and re-phrasing sentences, the percentage dropped notably. Students made all sorts of ludicrous and annoying mistakes that demonstrated their lack of attention to detail. For further discussion, refer to Chen, & Hamp-Lyons (1999).

Similar to Phase 1, students were asked to rank each comment they received on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 meaning that they liked the comment very much, and 4 that they did not like it at all. The comment modes that students ranked in descending order of preference were: praise, advice, mechanics, criticism, imperative, open question, closed question and '?'. This ranking is the same as that found in Phase 1. End comments continued to be preferred by all students, even end comments in question form were perceived more favourably than those in the margin comments. Interestingly, the scores students gave to their teacher's comments on their own work were slightly higher than those they gave to the comments made on another student's report used in Phase 1. Students claimed that they were not more lenient with their own teachers, but we cannot rule out the possibility that teacher-student rapport can affect students' reaction to feedback.

Out of the four classes of students, we succeeded in arranging group interviews with nine students from three classes about their feelings of the production of a 'corrected version'. As far as revising a written product was concerned, they were unanimous in their dislike of the 'corrected version' practice, a practice which they had been experiencing since primary school. They cited three reasons for their negative view of the practice. i) They believed that an assignment was completed when it was submitted for grading, not when it was returned with comments and grade. They believed that no further work needed to be done after the written product had been presented. One student described writing his 'corrected version' with 'Garfield eyes', i.e. eyes half shut, not caring if he wrote nonsense or missed a comment. He did not believe that there was any more to learn once he knew his grade. ii) The realisation that the corrected version would not help improve the grade was another 'justification' for their unconcerned attitude. All the students interviewed said that if revising could lead to a higher grade, they would have tried much harder. iii) A further cause of the sloppy work was their perception of the teacher's attitude. Most of the time, their teachers simply returned the 'corrected version' with a tick and the students thought that there was no reason why they should spend a lot of time revising when teachers did not read the revision carefully. Reading the teacher's written feedback on their written products in order to do further revisions was therefore seen to be unnecessary and a total waste of time.

### **Lessons Learnt: Phase 3**

One of the obvious conclusions of the study conducted in Phase 2 was that for students to make use of feedback, there must be a learning environment that encouraged them to do so. The one-draft approach was certainly not effective, and so a logical teaching intervention would be to introduce a multiple-draft approach to see whether students would be more diligent about incorporating teacher comments into revisions. Following discussion with a colleague experienced in process writing with her students, it was agreed that she should attempt a 3-draft approach with two of her language proficiency classes, one class of 10 students in year 2, and the other a class of 7 students in year 3. In this approach, she focussed her written feedback on higher order concerns in the students' first draft, such as content and organisation, offered other comments including those related to grammar and vocabulary in their second draft, and a grade to the third and final draft. Students were given between two days and a week to carry out revisions. The project team received the students' consent to compare their drafts, and by using questionnaires and conducting individual interviews, they were able to determine the feelings of students about the new

approach and the whole process. At the same time, we kept in close contact with the teacher throughout the intervention and conducted a lengthy interview with her at the end.

Five students out of 17 had no experience at all of process writing, whereas the rest claimed to have attempted it previously. Upon further probing, it was found that 11 of them had written drafts and revisions on their own for one-off assignments, but teachers just read the final product. This meant that only one student had had experience of process writing with her teacher. All but four of the students followed the 3-draft approach. The reasons why those who did no draft will be explained later in the evaluation of the teaching intervention. Questionnaire and interview results revealed that 88% of the students found feedback on the content and organisation of their first draft helpful, and 100% believed that feedback on the language used in their second draft helped in their preparation of the final draft (Figure 5). Although only 47% could understand over 80% of the teacher's comments, 94% of them claimed that they were able to revise based on teacher feedback alone. In reality though, more than half of them approached the teacher in between drafts on a one-to-one basis for clarification and advice. After students had submitted their final draft, but before they received their grade, they were asked to compare the 'new' way with the 'old' way of writing. All except one considered that the 'new' approach, in which teachers gave focussed feedback in stages, better than the 'old' approach, and that they could learn more about writing this way. 15 students believed that they could make more use of teacher feedback, while one student felt that she used feedback less. This latter student explained that she could not get used to the 'new' method, especially when the teacher did not respond to grammar problems in the first draft. As far as academic results were concerned, everyone agreed overwhelmingly that they could improve their final grades using this 'new' approach.

*Figure 5: Students' perceptions of teacher feedback in process writing approach*

Question	Answer	% of response
Is this the first time you wrote essays in drafts?	Yes	29.40%
	No	70.60%
Do you find the comments given on your 1 <sup>st</sup> draft helpful to you in revising your assignment?	Yes	88.20%
	No	11.80%
Do you find the comments given on your 2 <sup>nd</sup> draft helpful to you in revising your assignment?	Yes	100%
	No	0%
Do you understand the comments you received?	Yes	94.10%
	No response	5.90%
How much do you understand?	81%-100%	47.10%
	61%-81%	41.20%
	41%-60%	5.90%
	No response	5.90%
Were you able to revise your draft based on the teacher's comments alone?	Yes	94.10%
	No	5.90%
Compared with the usual way of writing only one draft with the teacher giving comments on everything at the same time, is this 'new' approach better or worse?	Better	94.10%
	Worse	5.90%
Do you think you can learn more or less about writing using this 'new' approach?	Learn more	94.10%
	No response	5.90%
Did you make more or less use of teacher comments using this 'new approach'?	Used more	88.20%
	Used less	5.90%
	No response	5.90%
Do you think you can get a higher or lower grade using this 'new' approach?	Higher grade	100%
	Lower grade	0%

During the interviews which were conducted separately, it became apparent that 9 of the students were not satisfied with the way the teacher had conducted the third draft. They believed that over and above the grade, the teacher should give them end comments on 'overall impression', 'need to improve ...' and 'comments on all the aspects'. Despite the teacher's prior explanation of the rationale on which focussed feedback is based, students insisted on demanding more in-depth comments related to ideas and format at each stage of the writing, and for more overt correction of grammatical errors. They said that they had not previously referred to teacher feedback as much as they had with this exercise, and never felt such a strong need to understand each comment thoroughly, and to "consult the teacher one to one" for clarification and further directions. A few, however, were not used to 'dragging on' with the same assignment week after week, and as they "want to finish it as quick as possible", they simply guessed the meaning of whatever comment they did not understand without seeking help. The students indicated that process writing required a tremendous amount of their time. Although they had to spend about twice as much time on their writing as usual, they still liked the 'new' approach. They agreed that using the step-by-step method, they could: "avoid the mistake that we made in the previous draft"; "learn a lot from this process"; and "get a better grade because there are fewer mistakes".

The interview with the teacher revealed similar findings as well as other concerns. The teacher had also felt, happily, that many students' felt the urge to receive comments from her, they wanted to understand the comments and to improve on their drafts. She felt the importance and necessity of supplementing her written comments with one-to-one conferences where she could explain, and expand on, her written remarks. Since process writing takes more time to finish than a one-off assignment, the teacher emphasised the importance of motivation to keep students re-drafting and revising. She mentioned that the main difference between the two classes' attitudes lay largely in their motivation to keep improving their script, which in turn was determined by how much the assignment counted in their final grade. The third year students' assignment carried a significant part of the whole semester's grade, in contrast to the light weighting of the second year students' assignment. How weighting affects students' motivation to learn from teacher feedback was magnified by the fact that two second year students did not bother to submit the second draft and another two only handed in the final draft.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study in each phase of the project, we have the following recommendations to make. What we discovered about students' responses to teachers' preferences and vice versa is an obvious indication of the importance of teacher-student communication. Mismatches between students' and teachers' perceptions of feedback effects, and misinterpretation of feedback intention, exist. If we do not want students to shift their attention from " 'This is what I want to say', to 'This is what you, the teacher, are asking me to do' " (Sommers, 1982, p. 150), we teachers must take the initiative to remove some of the confusion. Negotiation of feedback foci and modes, and the extent and depth of coverage would eliminate some misunderstandings and should build up students' appreciation of the teacher's effort. Consequently, students may be more receptive to teacher feedback. Perhaps teachers can design a short unit of work for students to 'learn to learn from teacher feedback'. Students can find out how they could explore their own writing in various ways with the help of their teacher's written comments and apply them in future assignments.

To make feedback work, it is imperative to have a learning situation where there is great incentive to act on teacher response. We investigated with a 3-draft process writing approach in our teaching intervention, and the results made us feel excited. But there is still room for improvement, for example, in future attempts, the teacher can think of giving more than a grade

for the final draft without making her workload much heavier. As Mitchell (1994, p. 194) stated, "a grade alone is not enough to indicate to students what is weak". In a practical-oriented society such as Hong Kong, teachers have to find ways to motivate students to read their feedback and make use of it when there isn't much carrot or stick.

Throughout the phases, a great majority of the teachers whom we interviewed expressed a strong desire for the incorporation of other ways of providing feedback to supplement the written method. Conferencing seems to be a popular choice but its demand for time and labour may be antithetical to what the intense EAP/ESP syllabuses can afford. It remains to be seen what integration of feedback methods can be most effectively employed in the development of student writers in Hong Kong.

## Acknowledgements

The work described in this paper was substantially supported by an Action Learning Project grant from the University Grants Committee of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. We would like to thank everyone who participated in this project, including Ms. Aishah Binte Jantan, our Research Assistant, colleagues and students in the Department of English (from November 1997 to May 1998) and those in the Department of English and the English Language Centre (from June 1998 to June 1999) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

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