

Spare the red pen!

Icy Lee suggests ten formative feedback strategies in L2 writing.

Giving feedback to student writing is a central and yet one of the most difficult aspects of language teachers' work. In traditional L2 writing classrooms, teachers respond almost exclusively to written errors, filling student papers with red ink (Hairston, 1986; Lee, 2010). A great deal of emphasis is placed on the written product, where single drafts are collected and students are not required to act on teacher feedback. Scores play an important role in classroom writing assessment; even though teachers may give detailed and useful commentary, students tend to ignore teacher feedback as they pay attention mainly to scores (Butler, 1987). Teachers dominate the entire feedback process, relegating students to a passive role. Thus, teacher feedback serves primarily summative purposes, and its formative potential is under-utilised.

What can L2 writing teachers do to enhance their written feedback practice? This article aims to present ten formative feedback strategies to help L2 writing teachers re-think their written feedback practice with a view to better utilising it to improve student learning.

1 Optimum amount of feedback

When teachers play the role of error hunters and language editors, responding to every single error students make, they make the learning of writing a daunting task for students. As students see their own papers filled with red ink, they are frustrated and discouraged. They will probably think: how can I ever cope and improve my writing? If teacher feedback is to serve a real formative purpose, teachers have to remember that more is not better, and less is probably more.

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2 Selective and focused feedback

Feedback that is manageable for students is selective rather than comprehensive; it is focused rather than unfocused. In responding to errors, for instance, teachers could select a few focuses and respond to those areas accordingly. The selection can be based on the language features that are typical of the target genre practised by students, and preferably those language features highlighted in pre-writing instruction. In so doing, teachers can align assessment with instruction and help make learning more effective. As observed by Chappuis (2009), it is important to focus on one learning target at a time in order to promote assessment for learning.

3 Diagnostic feedback

Formative feedback is diagnostic in nature. It is able to inform students of their major strengths and the most critical areas in their writing that need attention. It is important, therefore, that teachers identify a few strengths and areas for improvement in their written feedback. When responding to weaknesses in writing, teachers need to read the student texts carefully, not only identifying recurrent error patterns but

also recognising major flaws in other dimensions of writing (such as the lack of details to illustrate main ideas). To give diagnostic feedback, teachers can make sure that in every piece of student writing they include “major strengths” and “major areas for improvement” in their overall feedback.

4 Balanced feedback

If feedback is to help students improve their learning of writing, it cannot focus mainly or only on errors. It has to have a balanced coverage on content, language, organisation and genre. Given this, it helps if teachers can respond to writing using feedback forms that detail evaluation criteria relevant to these important dimensions of writing (see Appendix 1 for a sample). This can help teachers give equal attention to the different important dimensions of writing, instead of focusing mainly on errors.

5 Constructive feedback

Formative feedback is clear, specific and constructive. Students cannot benefit from feedback that is vague, cryptic and non text-specific. It is always helpful if teachers comment on writing with reference to the success criteria they have established at the instructional stage. As they share the learning goals

and success criteria with students, they also share relevant metalanguage with them. For example, “This is an attention-grabbing beginning with the use of a proverb” is going to be clear, meaningful and specific for the student writer (and more constructive than “impressive opening”), especially if the teacher has already taught students how to write an effective story opening through various means, including the use of a proverb to grab the readers’ attention. Conversely, a comment like “your essay lacks coherence” is not going to be particularly helpful. In giving feedback on textual organisation, if the teacher has taught students the problem-solution structure to help them organise their text, then a comment like “I can see that the essay is based on the problem-solution structure but the solution is not clearly expressed” will help the student identify his/her problem. Such feedback is constructive and is likely to help students improve their writing.

6 Student-specific feedback

Formative feedback takes into consideration students’ needs in order to help them learn. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers respond to writing according to individual students’ needs. This is often easier said than done especially given teachers’ heavy duties and large class sizes in some teaching contexts. What teachers can possibly do, within their constraints, is to vary their feedback according to the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. For weaker students, for example, teachers may like to be more directive, and hence they can use more imperatives.

For stronger students teachers can ask more questions to stimulate them to think. Teachers can also respond to writing by allowing students to make one or more individual requests for each piece of writing. Students can highlight expressions that they would like the teacher to respond to, or they can write those special requests on a cover sheet. For instance, some students may like teachers to point out for them if paragraphing in their writing is appropriate, or if the ending is impressive.

7 Encouraging feedback

Formative assessment takes account of learner motivation (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Therefore, it is essential that teachers are sensitive to student needs and encouraging in giving feedback. This may not always be easy because some students do write badly. In spite of the negative feedback teachers have to give students, what they can do is to create a classroom culture where mistakes are a natural part of learning and where everyone can improve. Teachers should not forget to praise students for their effort, their improvements, and their willingness to take responsibility for their learning. Feedback forms can also contain categories that are expressed in the form of “can-do” statements (see Appendix 2 for a sample), so that students focus on what they can do and what they have achieved, instead of what they cannot do and what they cannot achieve in writing.

8 Empowering feedback

If feedback is to serve formative purposes, teachers need to involve students in the process of learning and

share responsibility with them. There are different things teachers can do. They can make self-/peer evaluation a regular activity in the writing classroom. They can ask students to keep error logs and/or reflective journals (where students set goals for each writing task, write reflective notes after reading teacher feedback, and set further goals for improvement). They can also tell students to suggest areas of feedback that they want from the teacher, participate in the development of feedback forms, and/or suggest areas for discussion in teacher-student conferences.

9 Prospective feedback

Formative feedback is prospective, that is, it helps students understand what they can do to improve their future writing (to close the gap between a desired goal and the present state in their writing). It is concrete and constructive feedback that provides a recipe for action, so that students know what to do to improve their writing. Given this, opportunities for revision are important. If one-shot writing is required (i.e. students do not need to revise their writing), teacher feedback will mainly be retrospective. To consolidate students’ knowledge about the strategies they need to practise in order to further improve their writing, post-feedback activities are needed – e.g. post-writing grammar workshops, or follow-up discussion about how best to structure the text of the target genre.

10 Feedback that integrates assessment, teaching and learning

Finally, feedback serves formative purposes if it is able to help integrate assessment, teaching and learning. When teachers teach what they assess and assess what they teach, the feedback they give is able to interweave assessment, teaching and learning. This is because feedback relates directly to their instructional input, reminding students of the success criteria outlined in the instructional stage; it also relates to students’ learning goals and serves to reinforce learning. When feedback is communicated clearly and made intelligible to students in terms of what

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they have learnt, a close link between teaching, learning and assessment can be fostered.

Conclusion

To conclude, formative feedback is feedback that has an impact; it suggests action and is understood by students; it allows them to clarify their learning goals, provides opportunities for them to evaluate where they are (i.e. current performance, with reference to desired performance), gives an indication about where to proceed next as well as how best to achieve the desired goals, and is able to engage learners. Formative feedback is feedback that is designed to make students believe that they are able to improve, and that ability is incremental (hence having one learning target at a time is important, i.e. focused feedback) (Wiliam, 2005). The ten formative feedback strategies suggested in this article will, hopefully, provide a recipe to guide teachers' action.

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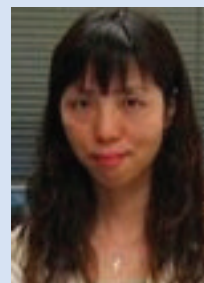
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Appendix 2: Story feedback form (with can-do statements)

1: Needs improvement

2: Acceptable

3: Good

4: Excellent

	1	2	3	4	Comments
1. I can begin the story with an attention-grabber.					
2. I can give clear information about the setting of the story.					
3. I can provide interesting details about the main characters.					
4. I can use suitable vocabulary to describe the setting and characters.					
5. I can create a problem that arouses interest.					
6. I can develop ideas in the story.					
7. I can describe the events in a logical sequence.					
8. I can provide an interesting ending.					
9. I can write simple dialogues.					
10. I can use the simple past tense to narrate past events.					
11. I can write in neat paragraphs.					
12. I can end the story impressively.					

Overall comments