

Teacher-Student Feedback: Conferencing

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Introduction

Conferencing is most often mentioned in discussions of methodologies for teaching second language (L2) writing as a way of providing teacher-student feedback. According to Ferris and Hedgcock (1998: 141) there are three main reasons why it has come to be a favored procedure in recent years. First, it is believed to save time that would otherwise have to be spending on providing written feedback and evaluation. Second, it seems to offer enhanced opportunities for interaction and negotiation. Third, it may be a more effective way to provide feedback to students who are primarily auditory, rather than visual, learners.

Research on Conferencing

Empirical research into the varied aspects of conferencing has produced several findings. Regarding student and teacher attitudes, several studies found a strong liking for conferencing because of the opportunities that it provides for face-to-face interaction and instantaneous feedback (see for example Zamel, 1985). Discourse analyses of actual conference sessions unsurprisingly found qualitative differences between high- and low-achievers. These findings were duplicated when the researchers examined later versions of student writing that had been discussed during conferences, although one study (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997) showed that conferencing also had a positive effect on the writing of lower-level students.

Development and Criticisms

A process approach to L2 writing tended to suggest that teacher feedback during conferences should be non-directive, in order to avoid appropriating

student texts. However, two concerns were raised with respect to this approach. First, it tends to ignore cultural differences between students. Not all students may feel happy either taking over the responsibility for (improving) their own writing, and not all students may feel comfortable in the actual conference situation, perhaps feeling unable to question or argue with their teacher. Second, researchers posited that non-directive approaches to the teaching and evaluation of writing do not really help students to get to grips with the many genre-focused writing styles that they may encounter outside the class and also do not force students to be linguistically accurate (see for example Johns, 1995).

A typical conference

Use of conferencing usually assumes that the teacher and student are already meeting regularly in a classroom situation. The conference itself occurs outside class time and usually outside the classroom; it may last from anything between 15 to 30 minutes. Conferences can be used to discuss any aspect of a student's writing: they can be used to review previous writing, or a portfolio; to respond to a work in progress; to give students advice on how to improve specific aspects of their writing, and so on. Reid (1993: 220) describes the stages of a typical conference as follows:

- Openings
- Student-initiated comments and questions
- Teacher-initiated comments and questions
- Reading of the paper
- Closings

According to Reid (1993: 220-221), "The tone of the writing conference is usually positive: the teacher encourages the student to think about writing as something that can be organized and improved and gives him/her an opportunity to talk about writing and reflect on individual processes...By the end of the conference the student should have formulated a plan of action."

My own experience of conferencing

Although conferencing is usually mentioned in conjunction with L2 writing, I have used it students who were studying presentation (in the IWE 1/2 classes) in addition to writing students. In the IWE classes, I had videotaped

students' mid-term presentations and was wondering how to use the tapes to provide students with feedback. I thought about selecting a few performances only and giving feedback on them in front of the whole class, however I eventually settled on individual conferences since the first method would have been unfair – both to those students whose performances were not selected and to those who were selected!

Procedure

During class I circulated a timetable and students had to sign-up for a 15-minute conference. These were scheduled from Monday-Friday, over the course of a two-week period, and utilized my officer hours and other time during which I did not have class. Students came individually to the Language Center, where I had set up a video recorder and television, on my desk, in order to view the videos. First, we watched the student's videotaped speech together, in silence. Then I asked for students' responses to watching themselves. I asked them what they liked, and what they thought could be improved next time. I then gave them my own response, again focusing on what I liked first, followed by areas which I thought needed working on (I concentrated on pronunciation, primarily stress). I had asked students to bring their draft of their final presentation to the conference and in the next stage of the conference we went through the draft together, focusing especially on the features of connected speech – stress, rhythm, and intonation. I asked students to mark the words in each sentence that they thought needed stressing and then read their presentation to me after which I gave them feedback and advised them what they should concentrate on whilst practicing their speeches.

Comments

Overall, I would say that conferencing was a success and I enjoyed interacting with the students outside the classroom context.

- It gave students an opportunity to speak to their teacher. This was especially valuable for students who didn't speak much in class. I was surprised to find that many students I had thought to be "shy" were in fact nothing of the sort. One-to-one interaction allowed them to feel confident enough to express themselves without worrying about making mistakes in

front of classmates.

- Most students, although naturally embarrassed, seemed to value being given the opportunity to view their own speeches. It also allowed students who had either over- or underestimated their abilities to get a more accurate picture of their ability to give presentations in English.
- Giving on the spot feedback on students' drafts of their final presentation was certainly a lot less tedious than providing feedback in the form of written comments. Also, students had to pay attention to my feedback – they couldn't ignore it!
- Each student has different strengths and weaknesses. Conferencing allows the teacher to give individually focused feedback.
- Some students had noticeably improved in their ability to produce connected speech when the time came for them to give their final presentations.

Provisos

Although conferencing is a valuable teaching tool, there were several points that I became aware of during the two-week conferencing period.

- With a class of 35 students, conferencing takes a lot of time.
- Finding a place to conduct conferencing is not easy. The Language Center is not ideal since the constant coming and going of students and noise generated was disturbing to other teachers. Also, although I would have liked to have students shouting out loud when practicing the suprasegmental features of language, this just wasn't possible for the same reason – too much noise would be generated.
- Obviously not all students felt comfortable with the format of the conference. Being in a one-to-one situation with their teacher made them more, rather than less, nervous and withdrawn. Similarly, as noted previously, cultural constraints may have prevented some students from taking a more active, questioning, role in the conference. Whether this tendency would be alleviated in subsequent sessions is something that I didn't have time to investigate.

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References

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