Teacher Responses and Student Interpretations in an EFL Composition Classroom*

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This study addresses teacher responses to student writing and student interpretations of their teacher’s feedback in an EFL writing course at a university in Korea. The teacher responses were focused on the purposes and nature, and the linguistic features of the comments. The data comprise the collection of thirty-four students’ writing samples with the teacher comments and interviews with six students. The findings indicate that the teacher’s response to student writing has a powerful shaping effect on the nature and purposes of the comments, using different types of linguistic forms. The comments reflect the teacher’s approach for teaching EFL writing, alluding students’ grades with strengths and weaknesses, and an emphasis of encouragement in order to help the students’ writing. The six students showed different interpretations of the teacher responses: a frustration by detailed comments about grammar; a misunderstanding of a simple request for a meeting; a great admiration about guidelines for form and content; a suggestion of explicitness, and appreciation of positive comments. This study concludes that, while there will be strong individual differences, it is safest to assume that the majority of students value feedback, and that providing nothing more than grades deprives them of a valuable learning opportunity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has taught second/foreign language writing will probably find themselves nodding in agreement with Christine Casanave’s (2004) recent assertion that “perhaps the most great dilemma for writing teachers is how to best help their students improve their writing” (p. 64). Providing written feedback on student papers is arguably the teacher’s most crucial task. This allows for a level of individualized attention and one-on-one

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communication that is rarely possible inside classrooms, and it plays an important role in motivating and encouraging students.

On the other hand, in EFL writing classrooms, students receive an immense variety of responses to their writing, all carrying different messages about form and content, about the role of writing in learning, and about their own competence and even character (Ivanic et al., 2000). It might be very difficult for students to know what they are supposed to make of some of these; how to respond to the responses. In this sense, teachers presumably wish to know how students interpret their responses in order to use for their next pieces of writing. Leki (1990) suggests this by noting that “writing teachers and students alike do intuit that written responses can have a great effect on student writing and attitude toward writing” (p. 58).

Given the fundamentally unchallenged importance of the teacher response to student writing, it is therefore surprising that there has been so little examination of teacher feedback and students reactions to it, particularly in EFL contexts. Further, research on teacher response has often failed to take into account student understanding about teacher commentary. This led to skewed results that fail to capture the dynamics of the composition classroom and the developing communication between teacher and students (Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994). Previous research on teacher feedback has been limited in other important ways as well, as it typically examines teacher response at one particular moment in time, rather than over the course of an entire writing class, and it is often vague and imprecise.

The purpose of the present study is to address teacher responses to student writing and student interpretations about them. It is longitudinal, in that a teacher and her students were tracked over the course of a semester-long EFL university composition classroom in Korea by looking at three different writing assignments. To accomplish this goal, a developed analytic model is designed to describe how the teacher responds to individual student writing, and students’ attitudes and views about the teacher comments are also explored. Based on the above speculations, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) What are the purposes and nature of the teacher’s responses to students’ writing?
(2) What are the linguistic features of the teacher responses?
(3) How do the students’ interpretations of their teacher’s responses differ?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing teachers themselves are often uncertain of the best way to provide feedback to their students, particularly in EFL writing classrooms (Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994; Susser,
The way that teachers structure the writing classroom and the type of feedback they give will no doubt determine how their students approach the writing process, view feedback, and make revisions to their writing (Hedgcock & Lefknoits, 1996; Lockhardt & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992).

Research on teacher feedback has been focused primarily on its ineffectiveness in both the L1 and the L2 contexts (Hillock, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985), blaming either the vagueness of the comments or the reliance on error correction as the primary feedback type (Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996) that has resulted in negative student attitudes toward and inattention to the feedback (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984). The lack of positive, encouraging comments (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hillocks, 1982; Leki, 1990) has also been given as a reason for student inattention to the feedback. However, when teachers provide more specific, idea-based, meaning-level feedback in the multiple-draft context, it can be more effective in promoting student revision in both the L1 (Hillocks, 1982; Ziv, 1984) and L2 contexts (Hyland, 1990).

Written teacher feedback remains an important component of the ESL academic writing classroom. Identifying the type of teacher feedback that is most appropriate and effective remains a key research question (Ferrris, Pezone, Tade & Tinki, 1997; Reid, 1994).

Besides Zamel’s (1985) analysis of teacher commentary, there have been several experimental or comparison studies which examine various issues surrounding L2 teacher feedback. These have included examinations of the effects of: praise versus criticism (Cardelle & Corno, 1981); feedback on content versus feedback on form (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986); and correction/rule reminders versus meaningful commentary (Kepner, 1991). While all of these studies were systematically carried out and reported and have yielded valuable insights, they also are limited in scope by the constraints of the various experimental designs. For instance, Fathman and Whalley’s subjects were given only 30 minutes in class to revise their papers after receiving one of four possible feedback treatments.1

Two forms of feedback recommended frequently by process advocates are peer response and face-to-face writing conferences between teacher and student. Studies of peer response and of one-to-one writing conferences (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Villamil & deGuerrero, 1996) have utilized precise and systematic analytic methods and have contributed important insights about these two important pedagogical techniques. However, feedback from peer has different purposes and effects than feedback from an expert or authority; teacher-student

1 A recent replication of Fathman and Whalley’s study (Russikoff & Kogan, 1996) allowed subjects one week to revise their papers at home; the findings and conclusion of this study as to the effects of content-or form-focused feedback differ from those of Fathman and Whalley.
conferences, because they involve primarily spoken interaction, operate under different dynamics and constraints than does written teacher feedback. Though most L2 writing experts remain enthusiastic about peer feedback and one-to-one writing conferences as instructional options, they are not always more desirable than written teacher commentary, given individual student variation in L2 listening/speaking ability, in learning style preferences, and in cultural expectations of the teacher-student relationship. For these reasons and others (including constraints on teacher and class time), written teacher comments are likely to remain the most viable and common form of response to student writing and thus need equally careful analysis and evaluation.

There is a burgeoning body of literature based upon an academic literacies approach which views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power. It sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. This approach suggests that one explanation for student writing problems might be the gaps between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing (Cohen, 1993; Jones, Street, & Turner, 2002; Lea & Street, 2000; Younghwa Lee, 2005; Street, 1995).

A particularly relevant line of research on teacher response to L2 writing has examined ESL student preferences about, reactions to, and strategies for dealing with teacher feedback (Cohen, 1987, 1991; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995b; Hedgcock & Lefkovits, 1994, 1996; Younghwa Lee, 2003; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). However, with the exception of two studies by Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) and Younghwa Lee (2003), none of this research attempts to link what students say about teacher feedback with actual commentary provided by teachers. Further, the survey instruments used tend to be very broad, discussing the relative weight given to such general categories “grammar” or “content” in teacher response without looking more closely at what teachers say about grammar or content, and how they say it.

III. METHODS

1. The Context

The investigation took place within the context of an English writing course entitled “English Composition I” as one of the compulsory subjects for the first semester in the department of English Language at a university in Korea. This course was designed for sophomores who needed fundamental knowledge of academic writing for the course of English Composition II in their second semester. This course met once a week for 15
weeks, with each class session lasting 3 hours (150 minutes). The objective of the course, as outlined by the curriculum documents, was to build student confidence in basic academic writing abilities with paragraph-level work, i.e., generating ideas, establishing logic, and remeding grammatical errors, etc.

2. Participants

The teacher. The present study was conducted with a teacher, one of my colleagues, and her 34 students. The teacher working on the course was approached and asked to participate in the study. She was chosen because of her experience in teaching of writing for three years and because she had developed her approaches to giving feedback in teaching writing. She willingly provided the researcher with all the information about the students and her feedback whenever she was asked.

The students. The 34 students attended the course and were mostly sophomores. Twenty-four (70.5%) were English major sophomores, three English major juniors who rejoined the course because of their low scores last year, and one came from English senior. Six students (17.6%) came from other disciplines, i.e., social welfare, counselling psychology, theology, and childhood education. All of these six students had been doing their double major programs with English. The age of the subjects ranged from 20 to 27 years old. Ten students (29.4%) had been in English-speaking countries either for traveling or study. According to the teacher, the students represented a wide range of English writing proficiency, i.e, around 8 as poor, 21 as intermediate to high intermediate, and 5 as excellent.

3. Writing Samples

The students were asked to submit three pieces of paragraph writing as coursework in accordance with the genres in the textbook. Whenever the assignment unit was started, the teacher presented criteria such as content, organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), grammar, coherence, and layout, etc. permitting students to have normally two weeks to complete each of the assignments. With the permission of the teacher, students’ writing samples which had the teacher’s handwritten commentary on them were collected. A total of 82 writing samples were gathered, i.e., 36 in the first assignment, 20 in the second, 26 in the third. Students could have their own topics, and the manuscript should be written by word processor in response to the writing assignments (described in Table 1) of three different types: introducing people, describing a picture, expressing personal opinions about an issue.
TABLE 1
Overview of the Writing Assignments

The first semester, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing 1</td>
<td>week 4</td>
<td>To introduce one of your family members, in 200 words (Individual work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing 2</td>
<td>week 8</td>
<td>To describe a favorite picture, in 300 words (Individual or co-work)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Writing 3  | week 13 | Choose one of the two:  
(i) To express your own opinions about a current hot social issue  
(ii) To write a formal letter to the president of the university, in 500 words (Individual or co-work) |

4. Interviews with Students

In order to examine how students interpret the teacher’s responses, interviews were used. Six students were selected from three different writing groups, low, intermediate, and advanced writers, in terms of their total writing scores of the three assignments, as shown in Table 2. The scores of the two students from the low group were 14 (1st assignment: 5, 2nd: 5, and 3rd: 4) and 18 (1st: 5, 2nd: 9, and 3rd: 4) out of 30, respectively. The scores of those from intermediate groups were 23 (1st: 8, 2nd: 7, and 3rd: 8) and 26 (1st: 9, 2nd: 8, and 3rd: 9). The ones of advanced writers were 29 (1st: 10, 2nd: 9, and 3rd: 10) and 30 (1st: 10, 2nd: 10, and 3rd: 10). My own office was secured for the interviews. The students were encouraged to bring their writing with the teacher’s comments on it so that they could easily remember their feelings about the feedback. They were asked to answer the open-ended questions (see Appendix) in Korean about their interpretations or views on the teacher’s feedback, including their age, experience of learning writing in English, and the length of residence in English-speaking countries.

5. The Framework for Analysis

The analysis of the teacher commentary is based on Bryman and Burgess (1994) who suggest stages for analyzing qualitative data. These stages are: familiarization before beginning the process of sifting and sorting data; indexing (coding); and categorizing the data. I partly followed their ideas and also adopted some categories described by Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997) for analysis.

2 The second and third assignments could be completed by two students, if students wished, because the teacher wanted to compare the overall quality between individual and collaborative work.
At the starting point, all the students’ writing samples were carefully examined. The researcher found the fact that the teacher corrected grammatical errors as much as she could and made end commentary with a grade\(^3\) out of 10 points which was the perfect score on each piece of student writing. All the teacher comments were, next, reproduced in large sheets of paper one by one, and then these were indexed for categorizing with numbers from 1 to 82 along with the total number of samples. The examination of the teacher commentary included two specific phases: First, the nature and purpose of the comments were judged, and then the linguistic forms of the comments were categorized.

In order to describe the teacher’s aims for specific comments or the nature of them, I relied on Searle’s (1976) taxonomy of speech acts. One general class distinguished by Searle consists of “all specific acts whose function is to get the hearer to do something” (Ellis, 1994, p. 337), and includes asking for specific information and request. In developing categories for analysis of the nature or purpose of the teacher comments, four types were identified: (a) asking for information, (b) making suggestion/request, (c) correcting grammar/mechanics, and (d) giving positive response. In addition to rating the teacher’s purpose in composing each comment, the linguistic aspects of the comments were analyzed. The analysis consisted of four distinct types: (e) statement, (f) question, (g) imperative, and (h) phrasal form. The definition and examples of these specific categories are presented in Table 3.

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\(^3\) Grades shown on each of the writing samples are not presented here as they are not the focus in this study.
TABLE 3
Categories Identified in Teacher Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example (Writing sample no.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Asking for information</td>
<td>The comment asks the student for further information unknown to the teacher.</td>
<td>* Where is the picture you’re describing? (#39) * Can you explain what kinds of aspects of him you are fascinated with? (#13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Making suggestion/request</td>
<td>Suggestions or requests appear in either statement or phrasal form.</td>
<td>* You need to focus on your friend, Young Ki, rather than talking about his girlfriend, as your title is ‘My best friend.’ (#7) * Too short and would be better with more description of outer appearance. (#9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Correcting grammar/mechanics</td>
<td>The comment concerned exclusively with issues of grammar and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, typos).</td>
<td>* Please check verbs, tenses, and articles. (#41) * Check sentence structure and the use of comma (see *). (#59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Giving positive response</td>
<td>The comment gives positive feedback, involving mainly praise.</td>
<td>* A persuasive piece of work. Well-done (#63) * This writing has good organization of intro-body-conclusion. (#54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Statement</td>
<td>The comment is given with a complete form of sentence.</td>
<td>* It would be better if you could use transitional signals, i.e., firstly, secondly, etc. (#82) * The support for the first problem is too long in comparison to the second. (#27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Question</td>
<td>The comment is given with a question form.</td>
<td>* Why don’t you confess your feeling to her? (#26) * It’s a too short writing, isn’t it? (#48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Imperative Hedges</td>
<td>The lexical “please” is included in the comment to soften a criticism or suggestion.</td>
<td>* Please check the grammatical errors. (#15) * Please see me (#42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct form</td>
<td>The comment gives directions without any forms of hedges or softeners.</td>
<td>* Be careful with confusion of pronouns. (#10) * Check the layout and structure for a paragraph. (#56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Phrasal form</td>
<td>The comment is given with a form of fragment rather than a full sentence.</td>
<td>* No grammar mistakes but no opinions either. (#44) * 2 effect of punishment (intro) but talking about 3 reasons (body) (#74)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note** “Please” is particularly identified as a “hedge” (Biber, 1988) with which the teacher tries to soften a criticism or suggestion, and this is distinguished from the direct form of imperatives.
IV. FINDINGS

This section considers three issues in order to address the research questions. The first issue focuses on how the teacher’s responses can serve many different purposes and nature. The second issue is to see what types of linguistic features were used in the teacher comments, both intentionally and unintentionally. The last one is to examine how the students interpret the teacher’s comments.

1. The Purposes and Nature of Responses

All of the teacher comments are carefully examined, as these reveal the overall nature and purposes of the responses. Compared with the four categories, a, b, c, and d, in Table 4, many of the teacher’s comments are aimed at giving positive response to students’ work: More than half of the all comments is clearly focusing on this function. Table 4 outlines each comment type with percentages for each subtype across the three writing assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1st assignment (N=36)</th>
<th>2nd assignment (N=20)</th>
<th>3rd assignment (N=26)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Asking for information</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8 (6.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Making suggestion/request</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29 (23.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Correcting grammar/mechanics</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29 (23.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Giving positive response</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>59 (47.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>125 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of 125 teacher comments were given to the 82 (N: 36, 20, and 26) writing samples in terms of the four subtypes, a (Asking for information), b (Making suggestion/request), c (Correcting grammar/mechanics), and d (Giving positive response). Of the total number of comments made to student writing, 8 (6.4%) were made to the “asking for information,” and 29 (23.2%) were made to the “making suggestion/request” and “correcting grammar/mechanics,” respectively. It is important to note that the frequency of “giving positive response” comments was higher than any other types of
comments, reaching to nearly half of all the comments. That is, the teacher paid far more attention to encourage the writers by indicating the positive features of what they had written, which accounted for 59 out of the total comments, 125. In addition, she equally focused on both suggestion for content and correction of grammar for form, because the frequencies of these two categories were the same (29: 23.2%), and the sum of them (58: 46.4%) was similar to that of positive response (59: 47.2%). These frequencies of the each comment type demonstrate some important quantitative distinctions in the teacher comments, because the teacher is making overwhelmingly positive comments, although paying attention to both making suggestions and correcting grammar/mechanics. On the other hand, there were less instances of “asking for information” in the comments than any other ones.

2. Linguistic Features of Responses

The teacher’s comment types proved to be significant, in frequency, in terms of linguistic features across the whole semester of data collection. Table 5 demonstrates a number of important differences among linguistic features in the teacher’s responding patterns – despite the fact that it was the same teacher teaching the identical course with only a few weeks between writing assignments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1st assignment (N=36)</th>
<th>2nd assignment (N=20)</th>
<th>3rd assignment (N=26)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>e. Statement</td>
<td>28 (28/61=46%)</td>
<td>11 (11/26=42%)</td>
<td>10 (10/38=26%)</td>
<td>49 (39.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Question</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 (8.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Imperative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedge</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21 (16.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct form</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 (9.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Phrasal form</td>
<td>9 (9/61=15%)</td>
<td>8 (8/26=31%)</td>
<td>16 (16/38=42%)</td>
<td>33 (26.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61 (48.8%)</td>
<td>26 (20.8%)</td>
<td>38 (30.4%)</td>
<td>125 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher wrote less “statement” comments and more “phrasal form” as time went by during the writing course. For instance, the “statement” comments appeared the most
frequently, 28 (46%) out of 61, on the first papers, but this showed the least frequency, 10 (26%) out of 38, on the third assignment.

In contrast, “phrasal form” appeared the least frequently on the first papers, 9 (15%) out of 61, and the most on the third, 16 (42%) out of 38. On the other hand, the teacher wrote more “hedge,” accounting for 16.8%, than “direct form,” 9.6%, for the imperative form of comments throughout the semester. That is, the percentage of “hedge” reached to nearly twice of that of “direct form.”

3. Student Interpretations on Teacher Responses

The interview with students revealed some different interpretations and understandings of what students thought that they were meant to be doing in their writing than what the teacher thought. All the students in the interviews were agreed with the scores they received except one, S2. S2 was not satisfied with his score, 4 out of 10 for his third assignment, but he admitted why he should have the score. Throughout the course, grammar was a major writing concern for S2, who suggested in his interview that the things that helped him to write better were gaining a good knowledge of grammar and syntax. He was aware that his lack of grammar ran counter to his teacher’s concerns:

I was deeply frustrated when I saw the comments about grammar with the lowest score ‘4’ in the third assignment. I know my problem and already received the same comments from the teacher orally during breaks and at a private meeting with her. So I’ve always tried to fix them. However, the teacher should understand my efforts and give me specific advice on how she thinks that my grammar should be fixed.

S2 admitted his writing difficulties, as mentioned in the above comments, and these were the main challenge for him in learning writing in English. He complained, however, of the fairly negative feedback which did not seem to consider his efforts for improving his writing. S2 also had difficulties in understanding how he could achieve a success in a piece of work that was well described with little language problems and wondered how to make it a better writing. Although S2 had correction, he found that this did not help him very much with his level of writing.

Students themselves often internalized the language of feedback in their own ways, interpreting the comments by themselves, and S1’s case was evidence of this. The teacher comments requested him to visit the teacher in his first writing. In the interview the researcher asked him whether he did come to see the teacher or not after looking at the last comment of hedge, “Please see me.” Interestingly, he showed his own fairly well-defined views with respect to what the teacher feedback meant in higher education. He said that:
No, I didn’t, because I didn’t think it really meant as it said. I normally accept around two-thirds of the comments, and just drop the rest of the one-third because the feedback itself just indicates students’ proficiency in writing. I interpreted it as meaning that I should just consider the comments, and didn’t think that I should go and see the teacher personally.

A student, S5, showed a great satisfaction with the teacher feedback, and described how she had completed her piece of work. She believed that the teacher comments were well constructed and appropriate for students to learn writing in English. She found that the teacher comments did help her very much establish content beyond just the form in academic writing as mentioned below:

It (commentary) is an enormous motivator. I have never ever received such a detailed feedback like this. I like this type of comments which focus on the overall content and structure rather than focusing on just grammar. I always make efforts to catch all the comments in doing for next pieces of writing.

S5 felt that the teacher’s comments which go beyond grammar should be important elements to be a successful writer at an academic course. She told the researcher:

When I read the feedback, I can realize what I missed and how I can improve my writing in the future.

However, students often felt unsure and confused about what they had done wrong and how they could develop their writing by using the comments because of the implicit although they agree with the responses. What seemed to be appropriate comments on the teacher’s side were sometimes found to be quite inappropriate for students. Although students frequently had guidelines from the teacher, they found that these often did not help them very much with this level of writing. They seem to feel that such guidelines can be dealt with matters that they can know from a more advanced level of writing. The reaction of S6 is the evidence of this:

Other classmates often ask me how I could get the score 10 everytime. But I couldn’t give them any advice or sort out their problems, although I admire the teacher’s comments. I think that feedback would be suitable for writers in a higher level of writing class. So it would be better if the feedback could be in more detail. For example, it could say, ‘You should write in this way in this case in this task.’...
The two writers who did find enjoyable experiences were two male students from the intermediate group in this study, and they interpreted the teacher comments as very positive effect in writing. They described how they felt with the positive responses and how this made doing their writing tasks more “enjoyable.” These came out the interview of S3:

...um... the praises in the comments makes me very happy and I feel more confident than before in writing. I don’t think writing is difficult any more.

Similar encouragement was expressed by S4:

If the teacher gives me positive comments it means I succeed. I’m very pleased this moment because I have got the score 9 out of 10 from the first task. 9! How glad! But better mark would be wonderful.

In fact, most students in the course did receive positive responses from the teacher like the cases of S3 and S4. The teacher gave grades, as already mentioned, for all of the students’ written work with positive comments as much as she could, asking for suggestions or correction of grammatical aspects as weaknesses which needed to be developed. However, the interpretations made by S3 and S4 can be surely a motivation factor, and the combination of a good grade and positive teacher responses make students encourage in doing their writing.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

1. Study Skills with Strengths and Weaknesses

The findings in this study indicate that the teacher has her own views regarding what constitute the elements of a good piece of teacher response to student writing. That is, the comments present the strengths and weaknesses of students’ writing in most of the cases with the similar proportions. For instance, the teacher firstly starts positive comments with praise, 59 (47.2%), and then she makes both suggestions in content or asks for corrections particularly in grammar or mechanics, which accounted for 58 (46.4%) of the total comments. It is particularly interesting to examine that the teacher focuses on positive responses and the students in interviews expressed motivation and encouragement from the praises or strong points in comments as shown in the case of S3, S4, and S5. According to the teacher’s explanation, this reflects her belief about feedback on student
writing that comments of praise or encouragement are important to develop writers, as many researchers agree (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 1995a).

On the other hand, the comments on correcting grammar or mechanics are very explicit as the teacher rewrote or edited the wrong parts in students’ work. This can be related that it is essential to ensure the students to know the weaknesses of their work so that they do not challenge a relatively low grade. However, the teacher is giving blank statements of suggestions or advice about what the student must do to improve next time. One of the problems with this is that advice such as “Your conclusion is not enough.” does not give any indication of how the student is to achieve what the teacher is recommending. S6’s reaction about the teacher comments in this study is a typical case of this.

Overall the key element in the comments is that the teacher indicates precisely what was strong or weak with advice which will be useful in next writing, dealing with both content and form. The findings from the interview with S5 in this study are evidence of this. S5 interprets that the issues of both form and content mentioned in the teacher response involve broad way of guidelines which can be ‘ways of knowing’ (Baker, Fox, & Clay, 1995) for herself. She regards this as a defined structure which concerns with the formal organization of a piece of writing - introduction, main body, and conclusion - or as argument, involving advice on the necessity of developing a position rather than providing ‘just’ a description or narrative. She could assimilate the teacher’s general advice on writing ‘techniques’ and ‘skills’ and found it useful to move from the general to using this advice in a particular text in a particular writing task.

This can be consistent with the ‘study skills’ (p. 34) described in Lea and Street (2000), which focuses on the students and suggests that students lack a set of basic skills that can be dealt with primarily in a remedial study or learning support unit. In this sense, the writing lessons after the feedback may be the place of the remedial study or learning support unit for the study skills, because certain aspects of weaknesses shown in student writing can be taught for next pieces of work.

2. The Amount of Feedback

The amount of teacher commentary varied at different assignments of the semester. The results of this study showed that particularly the frequency of the phrasal form of comments gradually increased (15% -> 31% -> 42%), as the assignment progressed, whereas the statement types decreased (46% -> 42% -> 26%). Though it is possible and even tempting to blame teacher fatigue and burnout for this trend, this can be explained that as the student and teacher’s shared knowledge increases as the consequence of ongoing teacher feedback and in-class discussion and instruction, the need for extensive
commentary lessens somewhat, as noted by Reid (1994). This also can be partly related to a discussion with the teacher, which suggests that the linguistic differences across the assignments may be attributed to the increased teacher sensibility. That is, during the period when the data were being collected, the teacher cooperated in a research project on the teaching of writing. She felt that her heightened awareness of her own responding practices and of students’ reactions to them had an effect over time on the amount, substance, and tone of her written comments.

Further, it is to be hoped, as the student shows progress over the semester, his/her need for copious response should decrease proportionately. It has been suggested that teachers should systematically decrease the amount of feedback given during a writing course to help students develop as independent self-editors (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Ferris, 1995b). Along similar lines, Fathman and Whalley (1990) point out that the mere act of rewriting, i.e., without any feedback, can lead to student improvement.

3. Students’ Different Interpretations and Understanding

Studies of ESL students’ problems with and strategies for dealing with teacher feedback have suggested that L2 students may struggle with responding to teachers’ written requests, with understanding their teachers’ intentions (Cohen 1987; Ferris, 1995a; Leki, 1990). The case of S1 in this study is evidence of this. S1 did not seem to recognize that the wording ‘Please see me.’ was a medium for the teacher and the student to have an one-on-one discussion regarding his writing. He saw this comment only as a matter of evaluation from the teacher and did not feel it necessary to respond to it.

This may be rooted in inadequate pragmatic knowledge, whether of rhetorical jargon and of the nature and purpose of hedge as request used by the teacher. This may also result from a mismatch of personal expectations: a student, for instance may misinterpret the teacher’s request as signs of incompetence, as abdications of authority (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997), or as indications that there is just a little problem with the paper (since the teacher has not said specific time and place for a meeting). With an analytic model which focuses both on the nature and purpose of the teacher responses and on the linguistic features of the commentary, it becomes possible to identify types and forms of feedback which may be more or less helpful to EFL students.

Just as some writers may have problems coping with teacher feedback that is unclear to them, novice teachers learning to provide commentary on students’ papers are not helped much by vague prescriptions such as “address content before form” and “use questions rather than statements or imperatives.” Such advice does not address the issues of how to determine the most important issues or problems in a student’s paper, of what goals to set in responding, or of what forms of commentary are the most comprehensible to writers.
The case of S6 in this study is evidence of this. Although S6 had previous experience in learning writing in an English-speaking country and was excellent in writing, the teacher response was not enough for her to grasp the issues that she had difficulty grasping in terms of how to write specific, course-based knowledge for a particular task or genre of writing. The implicit advice received from the teacher made her confused. Tools such as the analytic model developed in this study can help writing teachers to examine written response more critically and carefully, thus aiding them in building their own knowledge and skills.

The findings of the present study indicate that the teacher’s response to student writing has a powerful shaping effect on students’ encouragement, motivation, or efforts for better writing with different types of linguistic forms. The comments reflect the teacher’s approach which enables to engage in dialogue with students in teaching EFL writing, alluding students’ grades with strengths and weaknesses, and an emphasis of encouragement in order to help the students’ writing. On the other hand, most students do try to make sense of the responses they receive. While a student was frustrated by detailed comments about grammar, another was daunted by a simple request for a meeting. A student talked about feeling ‘validated’ by detailed responses, and saw that she allowed useful learning, whereas a student suggested more explicit commentary. Lastly, two students appreciated the compliment of the responses which were very helpful, legible, and timely for them.

In short, while there will be strong individual differences, it is safest to assume that the majority of students value feedback, and that providing nothing more than grades deprives them of a valuable learning opportunity. Studies by Radecki and Swales (1988), Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990), and Leki (1990) provide further evidence and discussion of this.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

Of course, analysis of the responding practices of one particular teacher with the students in a single writing classroom does not yield sweeping implications which are generalizable to all composition teaching. With a large number of sampling which includes a variety of EFL writing classrooms and teachers, the research would have shown the results that could be generalized to teacher responses and student interpretations in English composition classrooms. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed without consideration of the students’ reactions to the teacher feedback, and from which the effect of teacher response and the improvement of the writing class also cannot be explored.

There are several implications of the study resulting from the development of the model and from the results of this study. Firstly, writing teachers could use or adapt the analysis
system in this study to become more aware of both the purposes and types of their written comments. Similarly, teacher trainers could use marked student writing and the analysis categories induced from the data in this study to illustrate real teacher response and to build trainees’ schemata about the substance and form of written commentary. Secondly, teachers should feel free to adjust the amount and types of feedback they give as a course goes on in order to establish feedback and instruction given already, respond to the students’ improvement, and build increasingly independent revising and editing skills. Finally, to help prevent misinterpretation, teachers and students should talk together in detail about their aims and expectation with regard to feedback. Teachers need to allocate some time for face-to-face discussion with the individual student on feedback issues, to gain an awareness of the student’s perspective and an understanding of what each individual student brings with them to the course in terms of past experiences and expectations. This will enable writing teachers to be sensitive to the needs, abilities, and personalities of their students in providing feedback. There is no “one-size-fits-all” form of teacher feedback, as Ferris et al (1997) suggest.

All the six students in this study were interested in developing their future writing with higher scores. There is a need for a further research on how students develop or revise their writing with the teacher’s written feedback, using ethnographic techniques such as observation of the students’ writing process and interviews of them. More research is needed to establish what problems can be caused while the students engage in their writing in the Korean EFL context and what writing strategies work best for them so that teacher responses can be targeted in these areas.

REFERENCES


Teacher Responses and Student Interpretations in an EFL Composition Classroom

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### APPENDIX

**Student Interview Questions**

| Question 1 | Do you agree with your scores? |
| Question 2 | Are you satisfied with your scores? |
| Question 3 | How do you feel about the teacher comments? |
| Question 4 | Did you understand the teacher comments? If not, what is it? |
| Question 5 | Did the teacher comments help you prepare for the next assignment? |
| Question 6 | Have you had any experience to stay in a foreign country? |
| Question 7 | Have you had any experience in learning writing in English before this course? |
| Question 8 | Is there anything you want to say about teacher comments or the writing course? |

Applicable level: tertiary education

Key words: teacher response, student writing, interpretation, purpose, linguistic form

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