

Feedback on written feedback in an academic L2 context: The tutor viewed as a reader

Christine Calfoglou

University of Athens & Hellenic Open University

Abstract

This paper explores learners' perception of written comments in an academic distance education context. An extension of a small-scale study on learners' preferred mode of written comments (Κάλλφογλου 2003), it is based on the analysis of the responses to a questionnaire on various types of stylistically, conceptually and macrostructurally orientated feedback provided by 101 postgraduate distance learning students over six years. Data analysis points in the direction of a learner approach to writing feedback that treats the tutor and feedback provider as a committed reader, designing meaning in negotiating learners' own meaning design (Kern 2000, New London Group 1996; see also Straub 1996, 1997, 2006). It is suggested that fathoming learners' preferences with regard to content rather than structural feedback mostly may help widen the scope of feedback-related study, despite, or rather, because of its reduced amenability to neat dichotomies (cf. Ferris 2002, Hyland and Hyland 2006).

Keywords: feedback, writing, content, preferences, distance learning

1. Introduction

Even though we are way past the days when behaviourist positive or negative reinforcement ruled the stage in language learning, feedback, essentially a behaviourist action-reaction chain concept, is still dominant among teaching-of-writing researchers. This paper attempts to show that this essentially neutral process originating in biology, (see Rinvolutri 1994), is highly susceptible to teacher-student interactivity concerns and that this is largely related to the fact that, having "acted on their environment" in Rinvolutri's terms again, students of a tertiary education level engage in dialogic action with the tutor-reader and expect the latter to engage in similar action. More specifically, the present study aims to explore postgraduate distance learning M.Ed learners' preferences with regard to the written feedback they receive on their written assignments. Reporting on the distance learning experience may be particularly relevant in the sense that distance learners are by definition more heavily dependent on teacher feedback, this being one of their few opportunities to converse with another

voice. As will be suggested, this can also give us further insight into the complex issue of learner autonomy.

Section 1 involves a presentation of the theoretical framework within which the present study is couched, section 2 presents the methodology adopted for data collection while section 3 presents the data and the accompanying discussion and section 4 is devoted to some concluding remarks.

2. The theoretical framework

2.1 Feedback provision as an interpersonal act

Let me start by locating this paper within the nebulous feedback universe. The present work traces its roots in L1-related studies of the 80s and 90s (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982, Sommers 1982, Straub 1996, 1997, Ziv 1984, among others), which argue against teacher appropriation of the student's text and in favour of the teacher abandoning the roles of "gatekeeper", "proofreader" and "authority figure" (Probst 1989) to become a "facilitator", a "diagnostician", "a motivator", a "collaborator" and a "fellow explorer" (Straub 1996: 225). This presupposes the assumption that, as Straub (1996: 235) puts it, "the words written on a student's paper inscribe certain social relationships between the teacher and the student". In other words, providing written feedback is a socially situated act, just as creating a text in writing is one, and this evidently goes beyond the specific teacher-student relationship to subsume social norms and attitudes towards literacy (see Gee 2000). In practice, this means that written feedback and the corresponding rhetoric (see Straub 1996) can act as a power booster, minimising interaction between learners and teachers, or, alternatively, question power relations through interaction maximisation.

Within a broader perspective "we (in our case teachers and students alike) are both inheritors and at the same time active designers of meaning (And, as designers of meaning, we are designers of social futures ...)" (New London Group manifesto 1996: 65). It is thus argued that, borrowing Bakhtin's (1986: 89) reference to language learning as a process of assimilation, reworking and re-accentuation of others' words, providing written feedback is yet another process of reworking and, we would add, re-negotiating of the learner-writer's meaning. In accord with Kern (2000: 63), we will suggest that, if literacy, as has already been noted, involves constant reshaping of available designs of meaning or meaning-making resources, the creation of feedback 'text' will form part of such a reshaping process, co-determined by what Kern calls the

“immediate and eventual communicative context”, embedded within a “broader sociocultural context”.

This communicative context Kern defines as including the (writing) ‘task’, the (writing) ‘topic’, the ‘physical situation’, the ‘social roles’ involved in the specific act of writing, the ‘purpose’ for which one writes and the ‘audience’ targeted. We would translate these co-determinants in the case of written feedback on learner assignments as follows: the ‘task’ would be that of providing feedback, the ‘topic’ would relate to the type of deviance addressed, the ‘physical situation’ would hinge upon the physical absence of the learner-writer added to the physical absence that forms part of the distance-learning mode. On the other hand, the ‘social roles’ would be determined by the way the teacher and feedback-provider constructs him/herself as a reader in relation to his/her audience, namely his/her learners, as well as to learners’ expectations, determined, in turn, by the way they visualise their own as well as their instructor’s role in the learning process: less or more autonomously or as contributors of some kind or submissive recipients, for example. All this is, we would argue, inextricably linked to what teachers/feedback-providers see as their purpose in providing feedback, namely dictating solutions, suggesting, inviting reflection and so on.

Postulating such co-determinants in the feedback-provision process entails envisioning this process as not just a one-to-one teacher-learner interaction but as strongly affected by broader, social parameters, a cognitive and social issue alike (see Goldstein 2001, Hyland and Hyland 2006, Lee in press for an L2-related dimension). It is, then, our contention that learner preferences in the study presented will reinforce Knoblauch and Brannon’s (1981) point concerning the ‘teacher-student ongoing conversation’, but with a contextual colouring of the type referred to above. Specifically with regard to the issue of directing as against facilitating learners, we would agree with Straub (1996) that there can be no neat dichotomy between directive or authoritative/authoritarian and non-directive/facilitative feedback, and that the directive-non-directive distinction may perhaps form part of a continuum, borrowing features from all along the line. Culture may also come into play in this respect in the sense that what may be thought of as authoritarian in one culture might not be so in another, so learners’ L1 background could be said to be decisive.

2.2 A taxonomy

Crucial to the present discussion is Straub's (1996) distinction between the focus and the mode of teacher comments. Focus involves the type of deviance targeted, that is, whether it is 'local', relating to sentence structure, lexis, spelling, or 'global', relating to content, style, organisational pattern issues. Mode, by contrast, involves the way the comments are presented, whether they appear in the form of criticism, phrased as a command, a piece of advice or a question, along with the specific lexical 'attire' (see Κάλφωγλου 2003). To this distinction we would add the actual content of the comment, namely whether it includes an alternative, explains what the problem is or illustrates it through examples and so on.

In terms of focus, the first component of the distinction made above, the balance in L2 feedback-related studies is tipped most heavily on the side of local errors, evidently closer to what Ferris (2002) calls 'treatable' errors. The exploration of feedback on more global, content-related errors, focal in the present study, is more or less a *terra incognita*. In terms of mode, again the research is rather scarce as far as L2 learner responses to specific instances of teacher feedback are concerned. Sugita (2006) found that imperatives were more influential than either statements or questions in terms of student revision, corroborating Ferris (1997), as well as that students' attitudes towards the use of imperatives in written feedback are more positive than they are towards questions or statements (see discussion in Ferris *et al.* 1997). Questions, in particular, were found to be rather unhelpful in directing students towards what needs to be revised.

Contrary to this, however, and in line with the learner-teacher interaction spirit outlined earlier, we will argue in favour of forms that boost the interaction element, even somehow 'deceptively', in the form of closed questions, for example. Such boosting might not necessarily involve the use of questions but would generally involve, according to our hypothesis, the use of language forms that construct the teacher and feedback provider as a fellow-interactant. 'Mute' comments with minimal feedback provider involvement, as in simply underlining the error or simply stating the problem, and dry evaluative statements like 'I find this .../This is ...' as well as blunt rejection are therefore expected to be strongly disfavoured.

Following this tripartite taxonomy, namely focus, mode and content, feedback preferences were next hypothesised to be determined by the teacher accounting for the comment (as in 'too personal for an academic piece of writing'), proposing an

alternative, the presence of praise and/or mitigators (as in ‘the overall spirit of the text indicates awareness...’ or ‘more or less deficient’ instead of ‘deficient’ alone), the teacher’s openness to questioning as demonstrated by an interrogative, inviting learners to reconsider their course of action. Specifically with regard to mitigators, the existing evidence is pretty controversial. It appears, nevertheless, that most researchers (e.g., Hyland and Hyland 2001, 2006; see also Ferris *et al.* 1997) would agree as to ‘hedges’ and mitigation generally leading to a number of misunderstandings in learner reception of teacher commentary. As suggested in Κάλφωγλου (2003), however, students, at least in the distance mode, apparently favour a language coating which detracts from the critical nature of the comment. We would thus expect comments making use of mitigation to outdo those bluntly stating the problem at hand.

To sum up, the research questions explored in this study are:

- (a) How are learner/writers’ preferences affected by the mode and content of the written feedback provided on global, content-related errors? Do learners opt for more or less concrete feedback? How directly judgemental do they want this feedback to be?
- (b) What do these preferences tell us about the way learner/writers construct themselves and their teacher socially in the specific context?

3. Data collection: The methodology

The respondents were 101 students enrolled on the postgraduate M.Ed. programme for the teaching of English at the Hellenic Open University. They were all competent users of the language, with a minimum of three years of teaching experience. The data was collected over a period of six consecutive years and it was based on students’ responses to a questionnaire regarding written feedback administered to six different groups of learners. Students were called upon to respond to the questionnaire in their third or fourth contact session, namely after they had received written feedback from their tutor on a minimum of two assignments. This is closely related to the fact that the specific questionnaire, as in Straub’s (1997) study, was data-driven in the sense that most of the feedback samples to which learners were asked to respond were taken from the actual feedback provided by the researcher/author in assignment correction.¹ The advantage of this methodology was that learners were not asked to grapple with idealised forms of

¹ One drawback, to be countered in subsequent research, might have been the fact that this very exposure may have somehow prejudiced learners in favour of or against specific forms of feedback.

response to their writing, which might also have led to idealised responses to the feedback presented. The whole project was presented as a means of raising students' awareness of their expectations with regard to written feedback, which would, in turn, sensitise them to their own students' preferences in their teaching context.

More specifically, respondents were presented with various types of feedback and were asked "which of them they would respond to more positively as writers". They were also asked to explain their choice if possible, as this, it was anticipated, would shed more light on the rationale underlying their preferences. Double choices were not ruled out but students were generally encouraged to make the 'best' choice. The questionnaire was composed of six (6) questions: one on style, one on grammar, two on cohesion/coherence and two on concept-related issues, all in a multiple-choice format. The local, grammar error question was included to defuse the effect of the focus on content and will not be included in our discussion. With the exception of two of the questions, the 'error' commented upon was made available. The feedback was marked off by being italicised. Thus, in example (1) below students were presented with the problem bit ("My first criterion is ...") and they were expected to choose among mere underlining and the comments in italics, while in (2) they had to decide on the comment they would favour most in the absence of the deviant part:

- (1) a. "My first criterion is ..."
 b. "My first criterion is ..." *Your tone is over-personal at this point*
 c. "My first criterion is ..." *Too personal for an academic piece of writing*
 d. "My first criterion is ..." *Too personal; you could have said 'One of the main criteria involved in ... is ...' instead*
- (2) a. *I find your arguments obscure.*
 b. *I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please make it clear?*
 c. *I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Are you suggesting that ... ?*
 d. *I find your arguments obscure. You should have ... and*

4. The data: Results and discussion

The results obtained indicated an overwhelming learner preference for facilitative feedback, that is feedback helping learners out of the difficulty involved in each case, by pointing to alternative courses of action in particular. Chi-squared, differences reached significance at the 0.001 level in all questions. Thus, there seemed to be a robust preference for concrete feedback, whose degree of directness, however, did not

underscore the critical element. Where an evaluative statement is involved, it is only welcome when accompanied by the teacher and feedback provider's attempt at meaning reconstruction.

This is clearly recorded in Table 1 below, presenting learner preferences in declining popularity order. The number of respondents who selected each comment appears in parentheses²:

Table 1. Feedback preferences

<i>Order</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1.	Too personal; you could have said 'One of the main criteria involved in ... is ...' instead.	85/101
2.	I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Are you suggesting that ... ?	61/101
3.	Does the second sentence follow from the first?	59/101
4.	Yes, but need it always be so?	52/101
5.	In line 10, paragraph 2, the linking is somewhat deficient. This is also the case a few lines further down, where	37/101
6.	The overall spirit of the text indicates awareness of the complexity of issues but the linking of the component parts is more or less deficient.	30/101
7.	Linker missing	25/101
8.	I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please make it clear?	23/101
9.	How do you define 'skills integration'?	23/101
10.	There are linking problems in your text. Consider, for instance, ...	19/101
11.	Yes, but cf. Kern (2000)	18/101
12.	I find your arguments obscure. You should have ... and ...	12/101
13.	Too personal for an academic piece of writing	7/101
14.	No cohesion	6/101
15.	No coherence	5/101
16.	Your tone is over-personal at this point	2/101
17.	I find the linking of the component parts deficient.	1/101
18.	I find your arguments obscure.	1/101
19.	<u>"My first criterion is ..."</u> (underlining)	0/101
20.	No!	0/101

²It should be noted that students had to choose among these forms of feedback as arranged in groups of four, which becomes clear in the discussion that follows. In any case, this overall preference ordering helps us see the pattern forming.

As we can see, comments like (1) “too personal; you could have said ‘One of the main criteria involved in ... is ...’ instead” fared much better than ‘too personal for an academic piece of writing’, rather low on the student preference rank and simply accounting for the negative evaluative statement by invoking the academic nature of the text. Similarly, comments like ‘In line 10, paragraph 2, the linking is somewhat deficient. This is also the case a few lines further down, where ...’ or ‘There are linking problems in your text. Consider, for instance, ...’, which go beyond stating the problem alone to illustrate it through specific examples, outperform in popularity a comment that confines itself to stating the problem alone, as in ‘I find the linking of the component parts deficient’. Most interestingly, the interrogative mode was generally popular, while learners apparently opted for the feedback entailing most active teacher engagement, when presented with a choice. Thus, ‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Are you suggesting that ...?’ and ‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please make it clear?’ swept the stage by being selected by a total of 84 out of 101 respondents but the former outperformed the latter, presumably due to the reconstruction attempt it involves.

Contrary to Straub (1996), closed questions may actually be popular, relieving the authoritative strain of the comment as they do. As a matter of fact, open questions might sometimes run the risk of appearing too indirect, as in the case of ‘How do you define skills integration?’ (9), hinging less clearly on the content of the learner’s statement³ than its rival ‘Yes, but need it always be so?’ (4), which, though rhetorical, ensures direct relevance through its use of anaphora and features most prominently among learner preferences.

That questions, in the conversing mode, were largely preferred is further testified to by learners opting for ‘Does the second statement follow from the first?’ rather than the statement ‘Linker missing’ in one of the cohesion/coherence items, seventh on the rank, even though both perform a similar function, namely identifying the problem.⁴ Dominant among learners’ comments in relation to their choices was the fact that questions may function as ‘food for thought’, which indicates that they favoured their teacher’s invitation for reflection. Thus, our data do not support suggestions in the

³ The learner statement commented on here was ‘the reading syllabus involving skills integration would incorporate speaking or listening at the pre-reading stage and writing at the post reading one’ and the comments pointed to the learner’s misconception of the notion of skills integration.

⁴ The specific preference might also be linked to the use of metalanguage (e.g., Chandler 2003). This is also indirectly reinforced by the preference demonstrated for ‘linker missing’ over competing items with a stronger metalinguistic flavour, like ‘no cohesion’ or ‘no coherence’, for instance.

literature as to the question mode in teacher feedback being unwelcome in the sense of indicating teacher “incompetence” or “abdication(s) of authority” (see, among others, discussion in Ferris *et al.* 1997: 176). On the contrary, questions proved to be learners’ favourite, testifying to our hypothesis regarding the role of the teacher as a co-respondent.

Although this is not explicitly verbalised in learners’ comments, mitigation seemed to be an asset, though perhaps less so than concreteness. This is to be noted in the primacy accorded to items including ‘more or less’ or ‘somewhat’, tentatively phrased statements like ‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean’, the increased popularity of ‘you could have said’ as against ‘you should have ...’. On the other hand, the relative advantage of the axiomatically put ‘I find your arguments obscure. You should have ... and ...’ over some of its rivals, like ‘I find your arguments obscure’ alone, suggests that a more crucial determinant than mitigation may be the concreteness of the comment, involving the specificity of a proposed course of action.⁵ This is also supportive of the hypothesis regarding the directive-non-directive continuum discussed in section 1. ‘Sugaring the pill’ (in Hyland and Hyland’s 2001 terms) by allowing praise to precede criticism, as in ‘The overall spirit of the text indicates awareness of the complexity of issues but ...’, was also very welcome, boosting learner confidence, as noted in respondents’ comments.

It appears, then, that the content of the comment, that is, whether it incorporates a proposal or illustrates the problem through examples, is important. Yet the mode is also relevant, as indicated by the advantageous treatment of questions as well as comments tempering the negative element via the use of mitigation.

Overall, blunt, terse statements identifying the problem alone or phrased in an evaluative spirit, like ‘Your tone is overpersonal at this point’, ‘I find the linking of the component parts deficient’, ‘I find your arguments obscure’, or exclamatory rejections, like ‘No!’, were strongly disfavoured, as hypothesised. Also, strongly disfavoured were instances of minimal guidance and commenting, as in the case of mere underlining.

Thus, learners’ feedback preferences with regard to global, content errors point in the direction of relatively increased guidance, which may not, however, always compare directly with the somewhat neater case of local, form errors. Students rank comments proposing alternatives or illustrating the issue concretely as most helpful.

⁵Consider also the relative popularity of ‘Yes, but cf. Kern (2000)’, helpful in so far as it refers learners to a bibliographical source.

And then, the questions opted for in the last two instances are closed, which precludes much ‘aimless straying around’. Because of the apparently complex role of content and mode features, e.g., the function of mitigators, the question format, the amount of concreteness, a continuum, as suggested in Straub (1996), seems to be more ‘true to life’ than a neat directive-indirective dichotomy.

5. Concluding remarks

All in all, it appears that students construct their tutor socially as conversing and reject the image of an omniscient judge, know-all punisher and Fuller’s (1987) ‘detached critic’ (see also Straub 1996: 224) in favour of the image of Zamel’s (1985) ‘genuinely interested’ and, we would add, committed as well as helpful reader. What is expected of this reader is that he/she stoops over students’ work and goes into it meticulously, co- and re-designing meaning in Kern’s (2000) terms in doing so. Besides the distance mode element, this might also be related to the fact that, as noted in Chaney (1999), teachers’ attitude towards different types of error might vary, as they might feel that certain types of error, more ‘global’, content-related errors in our case, need more guidance to be successfully treated; this is in turn reflected in learners’ predilection for quite an amount of coaching where such errors are involved. This point is in agreement with Ferris’s (1999) argument that less directly treatable errors may tend to be corrected more directly but also demonstrates the value of exploring content-related feedback rather than structural feedback alone.

On the other hand, this is an interesting conclusion in so far as it points to autonomous distance learners’ partial abdication of autonomy. It appears that learner-writers are always in need of an understanding audience and that the mildly directive and strongly facilitative teacher voice (Αγιακλή 2003, Κόκκος 2001) is more than welcome. In the light of the somewhat controversial evidence in the literature underlining learner preference for relatively indirect feedback, it would be interesting to meticulously compare homogeneous data, untangling the local-global error threads and using authentic response samples. It would also be interesting to see how the Greek distance learner experience compares with that of other cultures with a less or more collaborative literacy tradition. It might well be visualised, for instance, that open questions would be more welcome among more autonomous learners in an autonomy-boosting literacy setting and that teacher comments would also incorporate this autonomy spirit more actively. As Sperling (1994: 202) puts it, “think(ing) of written

comments as multidimensional social acts” might help us better understand how “reader perspective is projected as students learn to write”.

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