

*Stop Being Composition Slaves!

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Do English teachers in Hong Kong want to be “composition slaves” (Hairston 1986)? I am sure the answer is “no”. In reality, however, many teachers find themselves slaving over student compositions, burning the midnight oil to mark student writing. In my article ‘A new look at an old problem: How teachers can liberate themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing’ published in *Prospect: An Australian Journal of Teaching/Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)* (Lee 2009), I challenge teachers’ existing assumptions about feedback and outline ten perspectives to help teachers re-examine their feedback practices from a new vantage point. They are summarized as follows:

1. Students have every right to write in the way they do

Spandel (2005) reminds us of the importance of respecting the rights of student writers, including their rights to go off-topic and to write badly. To emancipate themselves from the drudgery of marking student writing, the first thing teachers can do is to look at student writing using a new lens, treating it as an artefact created and owned by the student writer (rather than the teacher) and showing it greater respect. Rather than labeling it as poor writing or covering it with red ink, teachers could find out what student writing tells them about students’ personal perspectives, what they are able (or not able) to do in writing, their world views, their idiosyncrasies, and above all, who they are as persons and as writers (Murray 1985). Rather than speaking for their students by re-writing student texts (and changing their meaning) on the assumption that they are extraordinarily devoted and hardworking teachers, they could talk to students to find out what exactly they want to say. They could also avoid derogatory commentary like ‘you write badly’, which are unlikely to change

students' ability to write. If students have every right to write in the way they do, then in the first place teachers have to learn to respect this very right.

2. Why 100 percent accuracy?

As teachers respond to every single error in student writing, they are sending a message that they expect students to produce error-free writing. Errors, however, are a natural part of language learning. Even teachers' best efforts at error correction do not produce 100 percent accurate writing (Ferris 2008). So why should teachers act as 'error hunters' (Hairston 1986: 122) and impose an unattainable goal on students and themselves? More importantly, when teachers keep their attention on surface-level concerns, they lose sight of other important dimensions of writing, such as ideas, rhetorical features, style, and voice. Writing is not a mere vehicle for language practice. To rid themselves of 'tunnel-vision', teachers have to bear in mind that there is much more to good writing than grammatical accuracy. Sometimes student writing can be accurate but unnatural because of its non-idiomatic expressions, or it does not read fluently, or it fails to meet the readers' expectations in terms of rhetorical conventions. As teachers change their attitude to surface-level errors, they also broaden their perspectives and let other important aspects of student writing inform their feedback.

3. Tell them and they will forget

While the argument in favor of marking all written errors emanates from the felt need to inform students of the mistakes they have made, teachers have to understand that for the majority of students, their attitude to teacher feedback is one of 'tell-them-and-they-will-forget'. This is particularly so when they have a large number of errors to attend to. There is feedback research which shows that selective error feedback is preferable to comprehensive error feedback (Ferris 2003), with the former being more focused (also referred to as focused corrective feedback – see Ellis 2009) less threatening and more manageable for L2 learners. As teachers work hard at locating, categorising, and providing correct answers for students, or even writing almost the entire paragraph or the

whole piece for students, they are usurping students' right to learn for themselves, also depriving them of the opportunity to develop self-editing skills. Learning in the writing classroom can take place only if teachers are willing to let go of their teacher-dominated role as an editor, let students self-edit or peer-edit, and train them to do so. Tell them but they will forget – involve them, and they will understand. Teachers have to allow students to take greater control of their learning.

4. Change the rule of the game

Currently, the rule of the game is that once students have finished their writing that is the end of their responsibility. They pass their papers to teachers and wash their hands of them. Then it is the teachers' turn to show their effort by responding to the papers laboriously. Teachers become key players of the game. But why is this the case? Who should be doing the error correction and editing? And who should be learning? It is the students not the teachers. To salvage the situation, teachers need to change the rule of the game. When students finish writing, their responsibility is not over. They should be held accountable for their own writing. For example, they should be given opportunities to tell teachers what they want to get from teacher feedback; they can help each other review their writing and improve it; they can also set themselves some short-term and long-term goals and monitor their own writing development. More importantly, they should be given opportunities to act on teacher feedback to bridge their gaps in writing. If effective learning is to take place, students have to be the key players in the game.

5. No more double standard – stop being so harsh to developing writers

Writing is a painstaking process. Whether it is L1 or L2 writing, in real life it takes time for ideas to incubate and for students to get started, to draft and redraft, and to polish their writing. Real-life writing is never a simple process. Teachers know it. While teachers themselves may write with full awareness of their constraints as writers, in writing classrooms they may apply a different

standard to their students. They may not give students enough time to gather ideas, to let ideas develop, to draft and redraft, and to edit their writing. In addition, they may not explicitly teach students how to do so. Worse still, they may put students in exam-like situations where they are given a topic and have to write within a certain time limit. If even teachers themselves reckon that writing is a difficult process, why are they so harsh to their students, who are but developing writers? The fact that teachers have to spend so much time reading less than satisfactory student writing is partly because they have not given students sufficient time to develop a good piece of work.

6. More is not better

Teachers exhaust themselves through marking student writing perhaps because they think more is better – more red marks on the page, more errors corrected, more error codes, more comments, as well as more compositions from students. In some contexts (like EFL school contexts), it is not uncommon for teachers to collect a great number of compositions from students in one academic year (e.g. ranging from 10 to 14), all treated as terminal drafts performed in a relatively exam-like environment (i.e. timed and with minimal help from the teacher). Teachers may also think that the more they assess, the better teachers they are. However, more error corrections, more codes, and more compositions do not necessarily make students better writers. Instead of teachers marking all student texts, isn't it the case that some of them can be read by students for peer or self-assessment? Instead of enforcing more exam practice, can't teachers adopt a process approach, assign fewer writing tasks but give students more time to produce a piece of work through multiple drafting? Instead of writing lots of comments on student papers, would it be possible for teachers to give fewer but more focused comments, especially those they believe students are able to act on and benefit from? As teachers start to think that more is not necessarily better, they will work smarter.

7. Feedback as well as feedforward

Feedback should also serve the purpose of feedforward (Carless et al. 2006) – that is, students using feedback information to improve their writing. Given this idea, teachers' focus should not be on feedback per se (i.e., getting their job of delivering feedback done) but more importantly on how feedback can be utilised to help students improve their writing. A paper filled with red ink suggests that there are probably far too many things for a student to attend to, while feedback that addresses the major problems in student papers can help students focus on specific areas, and this is likely to be more manageable for students. So why mark student writing so feverishly?

8. Don't be a coroner – be a diagnostician

As teachers toil away at student writing, they tend to play the role of a judge – specifically that of a coroner, declaring the 'death' of student writing and commenting on it retrospectively. If feedback is to fully realise its potential as feedforward, teachers have to play the role of a diagnostician, helping students identify the most critical problems in their writing (Murray 1985). Rather than let student compositions overpower and overwhelm them, as diagnosticians teachers take control, work on student papers, and tease out the most serious problems for students to act on.

9. Teach not just test

Why do teachers think that students don't write well? Why does student writing exhibit multiple problems? It is because students are under-prepared. Teachers have to spend so much time marking student writing because there is a missing link between teaching and assessment. Apart from diagnosing student writing, teachers have to be coaches. They need to put a greater emphasis on teaching, and specifically teaching that informs assessment, and spend less time on testing. If teachers teach what they assess and assess what they teach, then marking student writing will be a much easier job to do.

10. The hidden agenda of feedback

As institutions or schools set up expectations for teachers to mark student writing in certain ways, teachers have to comply because they are held accountable. Failure to do so may result in unsatisfactory evaluation by students and even negative appraisal by school administrators (see Lee 2008). How much do teachers want, through their meticulous feedback, to show their students, parents, colleagues and superiors that they are hardworking, dedicated and competent teachers? Given such a hidden agenda of feedback, if teachers are to fully harness the potential of feedback and emancipate themselves from the drudgery of feedback, they probably need to undertake a feedback revolution, which will require them to negotiate with school administrators, talk to colleagues, students and parents, and initiate a whole-school approach to change.

If teachers can challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about feedback outlined in the ten perspectives above, and if they can think outside the box and explore alternatives together with their colleagues, responding to student writing will become a more rewarding and productive experience.

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