Feedback in L2 Academic Writing: Prescriptive or Developmental?

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Abstract
In Academic Writing Courses, there are various ways in which students can receive feedback on their writing: teachers can provide prescriptive feedback (direct error correction), guided developmental feedback (inquiry-based learning process), a combination of both or they can encourage collaborative peer feedback. Constructive peer feedback provided at the opportune time, helps learners to clarify their own ideas, develop a critical eye when reading their classmates' writing, and nurture reflective thinking. The central question which guided this research was: Which type of feedback do students feel is most beneficial to the writing process? Feedback was provided on two writing assignments mid-semester and at the end of the semester via Google Docs. All comments were written in the Google document so the teacher could monitor the quality of feedback. A survey administered to students at the end of the semester determined which style of feedback students preferred and at which point of the writing process it was most effective. Conclusions point to a combination of different types of feedback at the most opportune times for student to assist with their writing development.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Peer Review, Prescriptive and Developmental Feedback

Introduction

Academic Writing courses are typically a part of every curriculum in universities worldwide. The rationale varies among institutions, but generally, it can be seen as beneficial in that academic writing promotes learner development in several ways—it helps students to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills, become effective communicators to various audience, expand their range of vocabulary, increase complexity in expressions, understand how to evaluate writing, and improve research skills. Academic writing classes at the university in which this research took place is a mandatory 2-credit for freshman students. This means that to graduate, they must successfully pass this course. Students enter the university with varying levels of second language proficiency and must meet specific guidelines outlined by the university. In order to meet course aims, teachers are encouraged to give timely feedback so students are aware of their progress throughout the semester. Especially for teachers who have multiple classes of 25-30 students, giving feedback can become exhausting and the quality of feedback diminishes depending on the length of the piece of writing. As such, peer-feedback practices along with teacher guidance are encouraged.

Numerous studies have been conducted on various types of feedback in Academic Writing courses. In these studies, researchers have practiced peer feedback as a verbal or written activity done by the teacher or students. Within verbal and oral feedback can be found an even more intricate break down of terms used to describe feedback such as developmental, prescriptive, peer-to-peer, evaluative, guided, or self-assessed. This begs the question: How do teachers decide the most effective approach to develop students' writing abilities? This was the initial question which started this research project. As students delved deeper into the writing process during the semester, other questions emerged:
1. What are students' perceptions of feedback?
2. How do students rank assessment categories in order of importance?
3. Do students prefer teacher prescriptive feedback, teacher guided developmental feedback, or student collaborative feedback?

These were the questions which framed and guided this study. Its fundamental purpose was to determine the most effective way to provide feedback to facilitate learner development.

Theoretical Foundations

There were several different feedback styles which the researcher considered after reading studies that showed advantages and disadvantages of specific types of feedback. From these readings the researcher decided on three types of feedback that would best meet the needs of freshman second language learners who were being introduced to academic writing for the first time—Teacher prescriptive, teacher guided, and collaborative peer feedback. Student essays were being graded in four categories: format, accuracy of expression, structure, and content, and thus required a different type of feedback depending on language proficiency.

Teacher Prescriptive Feedback

In the case of teacher prescriptive feedback, the teacher provides direct error correction on student writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Pham, 2022). This means, in essence, that the teacher points out specific errors in, for example, word form, vocabulary choice, grammatical patterns, or structural weakness, and then explains how to improve the essay. Teacher

prescriptive feedback was thought to be the most desirable method for lower proficiency learners who required more support; however, it also benefitted higher proficiency learners who could feel more confident about their writing ability from reading the teachers words of praise as well constructive criticism on how to improve further. In this way, the teacher solves the problems for the students by pointing out strengths and weaknesses in their academic writing ability. Although the results of teacher prescriptive feedback can be positive, the major drawback is that it does not help the learners develop their own awareness of or responsibility for specific writing choices as there is minimal processing of information.

Teacher Guided Developmental Feedback

In the case of teacher guided developmental feedback, the teacher provides indirect error correction (Johana et al., 2012; Morra & Romano, 2008). In this method, the teacher points out that there is a mistake, but does not explain what it is specifically. Learners are expected to use an inquiry-based learning process to critically reflect on their writing and make self-directed decisions. This type of feedback was thought to be more suitable for learners who had a higher proficiency and level of maturity. The idea is that through self-inquiry, students are able to become more aware of specific learning points on their own which would foster long-term language acquisition (Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

Table 1 provides a summary of developmental vs. prescriptive methods of feedback.

Prescriptive Feedback	Developmental Feedback
• Instructor tells the student specifically what errors have been made and how the essay can be improved • More beneficial to lower proficiency learners • Minimal processing of information which results in short-term learning	• Instructor points out that there is an error but does not specifically tell student how to fix it • More beneficial to students who are capable of self-directed learning • Deeper processing of information which leads to long-term learning and ability to think critically and problem solve.

Table 1: Developmental vs. Prescriptive Feedback

In addition to teacher feedback, the researcher felt that students could hone their writing abilities further through collaborative feedback.

Student Collaborative Feedback

In the case of student collaborative feedback, the students provide either direct or indirect error correction (Alshuraidah & Storch, 2019; Rollinson, 2005). The differences with teacher feedback are mainly two. Firstly, students step into the shoes of the teacher in giving feedback and must thus critically assess their partner's writing in the four assessment categories. This requires a deep level of understanding of language structure and academic writing conventions. The second is the duration of time required. That is, collaborative feedback in the form of dialogue (written or verbal) takes longer to share and process. The teacher as "expert," is usually able to give commentary quickly using a familiar repertoire of phrases, whereas students tend to take longer to formulate their opinions and ideas about an unfamiliar piece of writing.

For this research, the ideal type of feedback appeared to be a combination of teacher direct, teacher indirect, and student collaborative. It was thought that by introducing each type of feedback at an opportune time would help learners to gradually build their skills and increase learner confidence (Morgan et al., 2014).

Research Background and Data Collection

This research took place at a national university in Japan with approximately 150 freshman students across six faculties. These students had to take this Academic Writing course to satisfy the requirements for graduation, thus it was important for them to perform at a sufficient level. The expectation of the course was for students to understand basic academic writing conventions and write two essays over 16 weeks. Table 2 shows how the academic writing course was structured.

Lessons	Activity	Type of Feedback
1-3	Review of basic writing skills including paragraph structure	Teacher direct feedback
4-8	Basic structure of an essay	Teacher guided developmental feedback
9-16	Academic research paper including citations and references	Student collaborative feedback

Table 2: Basic structure of the freshman Academic Writing course

Data was collected throughout the semester during feedback sessions. In lesson 3, direct written feedback was given on paragraphs via Google docs as a model for students to observe how to give feedback (see excerpt 1). At this time, students did not know that they would be expected to give feedback on another student's writing later in the semester. The aim was to provide a positive example of how to give constructive feedback.

Excerpt 1: Example of teacher prescriptive feedback
Your topic sentence is missing a controlling idea. A topic sentence should be one sentence which includes a topic and a controlling idea. The controlling idea tells the reader what your paragraph will be about.

During lessons 4-8, the teacher began to give students more responsibility for their writing choices. Instead of pointing out errors and explaining how to fix it, the teacher became more indirect in order to encourage students to reflect on the problem and review the textbook to find the solution. As above, comments were given in written format in a Google doc, however time was also allotted during class time for students to ask the teacher for help if they could not self-diagnose the problem.

Excerpt 2: Example of teacher guided developmental feedback
Your topic sentence can be improved. Take a look again at page 60 of your textbook.

In lessons 9-16, students engaged in collaborative peer feedback in which they had to sit with a partner and give constructive criticism on essay format, structure, and content, but not accuracy of expression. Instead, the teacher encouraged students to use software to check grammar and spelling on their own for homework. Students were further taught how to use a thesaurus earlier in the semester to improve choice of vocabulary. This enabled collaborative pairs to make better use of the 90 minutes of class time. Student feedback was mostly direct

given both verbally and in written format. There were some indirect comments or questions when students were unsure of a specific writing point. Most importantly, students were asked to engage in a dialogue with students in the Google Doc so that comments were not viewed from the standpoint of "teacher" (see excerpts 3 and 4).

Excerpt 3: Example of <u>direct</u> student Collaborative feedback
> A: It may be better to use "this essay" or "this paper" instead of "I". In this case, I think "I believe that" is not necessary...
> B: Yes, the use of the first person should be avoided.

Excerpt 4: Example of <u>indirect</u> student Collaborative feedback
> A: Does the "it" indicate smartphone?
> B: Actually, "it" indicates "the technology," but it's misleading. I'll change it.

Towards the end of the semester, the teacher facilitated these feedback sessions by following what students were commenting on, and only engaging with students if the advice given was incorrect. In short, the teacher engaged in a sort of "meta" feedback style (McCarthy & Armstrong, 2019).

Excerpt 5: Example of "meta" feedback
> A: You need "Miyahara et al." here because there are two authors and you also need a publication date
> B: You are right, thanks!
> Teacher: Actually, "et al." should be used when then are **three** or more authors. You are however correct about needing a publication date. Good catch!

Results and Discussion

To answer research questions (RQs), a survey was administered to students at the end of the semester. 209 learners completed the survey which included both open- and closed-ended questions. Analysis of responses identified the percentage of students who thought feedback was useful (RQ1), which assessment categories they required most and least help with (RQ2), and the type of feedback preferred (RQ3).

RQ1: What are students' perceptions of feedback?

Of the 209 respondents, 203 (97%) considered peer feedback beneficial in improving academic writing skills and six students thought that it was not helpful. There were several reasons that students found it useful. The most common reasons were:
- Improves the overall quality of the essay by decreasing the errors
- Improves the quality of ideas by receiving a second opinion or perspective
- Students can communicate freely and frankly about their essay's weaknesses
- Thinking about how to write helps one to become a more critical thinker

For the students in this study, receiving feedback clearly contributed to learner development in the academic writing classroom. Through feedback, students were able to gain a deeper understanding of academic writing conventions (similar to findings by Villamil & Guerrero, 2006; and Yu & Hu, 2017); to understand themselves better as writers (Yu & Hu); engage in meaningful dialogue about academic writing (Teo, 2006); and improve critical thinking skills (Berg, 1999). Benefits for the teacher were mostly seen during collaborative peer feedback as

it helped to reduce the burden on the teacher to give timely feedback. When giving feedback on over 100 essays in an academic course using a process approach, teachers can spend hours giving feedback on one class. The researcher in the study had nine academic classes which made it difficult to give sufficient feedback in a timely manner. Implementing peer feedback lessons ensured that feedback was timely and of a higher quality.

For the six students who regarded feedback as unhelpful, they had two comments:
- Receiving advice from non-professionals is meaningless
- Academic writing follows a fixed structure so others can only help with content

In essence, these students considered the teacher to be the professionals and students to be receiver of instruction. These findings are also similar to that of Tsui & Ng (2000) and did not come as a surprise to the researcher. During collaborative peer feedback sessions, there were a few students who said that they could not check grammar because it was a category that they were not confident in which to give advice. The response to these students was to give advice on what they were confident about (such as formatting or structure) and be honest with the writer about not being able to provide advice on style of expression. In this way, students could understand which of the academic writing conventions they had learned deeply and those that they needed to improve. This helped in developing students' own awareness of their abilities and thus improve their self-efficacy. Regarding the comments about an essay having a fixed structure, in the future, the researcher will remind students that everyone in the class is at a different developmental level and that becoming a "professional," enables them to review their own knowledge of academic writing conventions and provides an opportunity to support peers who have not internalized the knowledge yet.

RQ2: How do students rank assessment categories in order of importance?

Students were asked to rank the four assessment categories to receive feedback in order of most to least important. In order of importance, students responded mainly that they preferred to receive feedback first on content, then structure, accuracy of expression, and finally formatting (see Figure 1). This is similar to research findings of Reynolds & Zhang (2022). That is, students felt that direct or indirect feedback on their content helped them to develop their writing skills more effectively, whereas they could focus on format on their own.
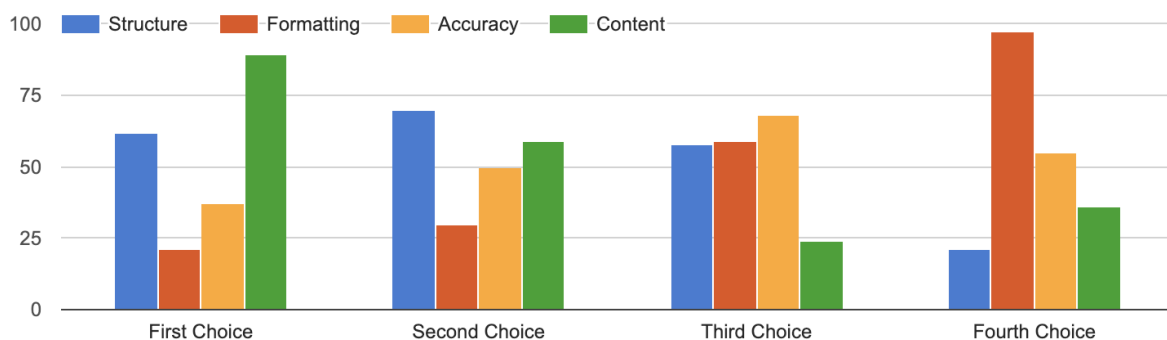

Figure 1: Student ranking of assessment skills

Research question 3 sought to identify students' preferred style of feedback. Overall, of the 209 responses, there was no clear majority in three areas. 38% of students preferred to reflect on their writing choices first before approaching the teacher for help. In a sense, students were keen on developing their independence, but they also recognized the need to have teacher guidance to confirm that they had made correct choices. 33% of students preferred for the teacher to point out all their errors in a prescriptive manner and inform them directly what to do to improve their writing. For future research in this area, it would be prudent to ask learners to self-assess their writing skills and use this information to compare feedback preference and perceived ability. 28% preferred student collaborative feedback to improve their essays. This shows that a combination of feedback types is probably most suitable for the academic writing classroom to meet the needs of all students. The final category asked students if they preferred to work independently without a teacher and only 3 students (or 1%) agreed. In essence, this indicated that teacher guidance was necessary in academic writing classes with students who were experiencing academic writing for the first time.

Figure 2: Student preferences of type of feedback

When asked to select who should give them advice in each category, the teacher, peers, or both, students responded as follows:
- Who should give advice on content? Peers and teacher (66%)
- Who should give advice on structure? Peers and teacher (58%)
- Who should give advice on mechanics? Peers and teacher (50%)
- Who should give advice on format? Teacher (49%)

From these results, the researcher had two main take aways: (a) how to redesign classroom instruction to ensure that feedback would be given at in a compressible and effective manner for learner development; and (b) the importance of developing an awareness of learners' self-efficacy. These insights will be discussed below.

Rethinking Classroom Instruction and Syllabus Design

From the data results, the researcher realized giving the most appropriate feedback at the opportune time and in a timely fashion was key to developing learners' writing skills. The progression from teacher direct feedback, then teacher guided developmental feedback to

student collaborative feedback was successful; however, the researcher realized that there were teaching points that could have been improved in each of these areas. First of all, it is important to review or teach how to do basic self-checks of grammar, spelling, and punctuation using word processing software (for example, Microsoft Office, Google Docs, Turnitin plagiarism checker, etc.) so they can check accuracy of expression and formatting by themselves. A second point that could have been improved was the type and amount of scaffolding given. Rather than simply providing direct teacher feedback for only three weeks, instructors must recognize that each class operates independently of each other and thus be more flexible in how to progress with feedback. Students in certain faculties such as Medical and Aeronautical Engineering had higher levels of English proficiency and maturity, whereas students in other faculties were less motivated when it came to learning English and required more coaxing. The final point which will be built into future courses is increasing the amount of time for critical and reflective discussions to deepen understanding of the writing process and rationale for writing choices. That is, encouraging student to discuss and self-evaluate for example, their choice of topic, outlines, thesis statement, or flow of ideas (in their L1 or L2) would help them to be more critical writers and promote responsibility in their learning. What the teacher hoped to accomplish was a movement away from professional advice giver to an inquiry-based model of learning.
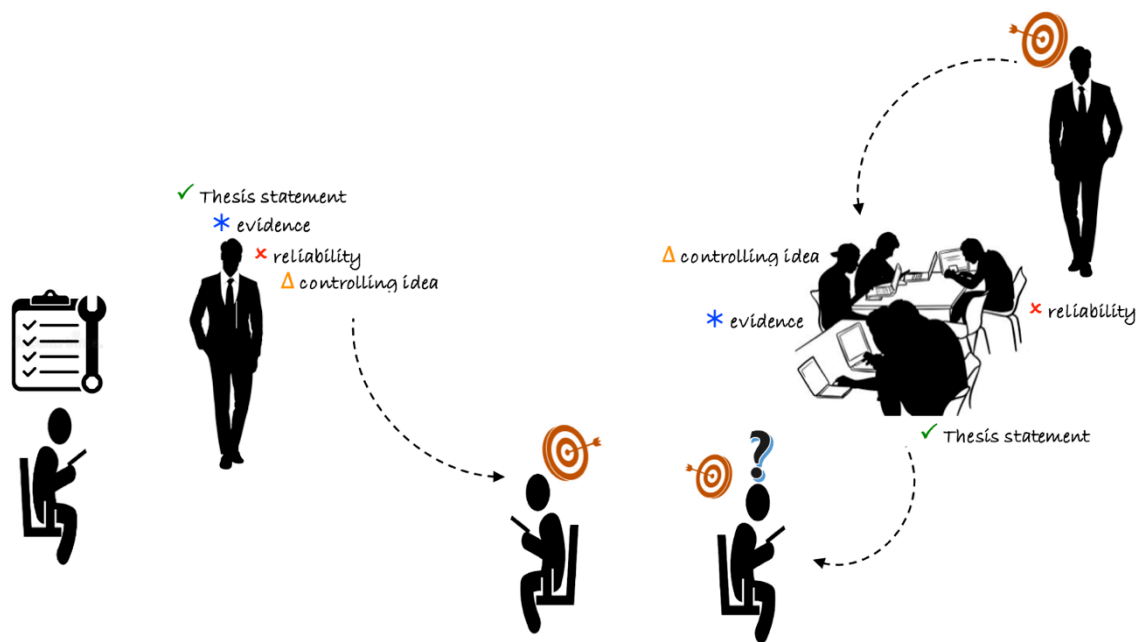

Figure 3. Rethinking classroom instruction and design

Developing an Awareness of Learners' Self-efficacy

Understanding learners' level of self-efficacy is essential to build learner confidence in giving feedback. Tools that were provided during the 16-week Academic Writing course were diagnostics, self-checklists, and the use of the comment feature in Google Doc so that students could engage in meaningful dialogue with the teacher as well as other students. What could be improved in future courses, as mentioned previously, is having more critical discussions. For L2 learners however, it can be difficult to formulate thoughts on the spot, thus including reflective questions at the end of each stage of the writing process will be a necessary step to partake effectively in discussions. For the teacher, being able to read self-reflections at critical points during the semester would help to understand students' level of understanding and how to proceed forward in the course. That is, reflections on learning

would inform the instructor which parts of the course content needed reviewing or if the course could proceed as planned. For both learner and teacher then, this Academic Writing course generated transformative learning and development.

Conclusion

How teachers decide the most effective approach to develop students' writing abilities is the question that began this action research project. After reading several articles, book chapters, and conference reports, the researcher was able to design an Academic Writing course that would meet the expectations of the curriculum and help learners to develop and hone writing skills. Findings in research literature are somewhat inconsistent but it mostly depended on research context. For this study, the researcher found a combination of feedback to be most beneficial for the students in this particular context—English as a Foreign Language in a national university in Japan. The researcher found that collaborative peer feedback should be complementary to teacher direct/indirect feedback and self-checks as a way of facilitating learner development. Further, student training through direct and indirect modelling of feedback is key to successfully learning and internalizing knowledge. One of the most important recommendations would be to include one technology training session during the semester to thave students practice the basics of word processing software to understand how to self-check formatting (margins, fonts, etc.), grammar, spelling, punctuation, and finding appropriate synonyms to improve word choice. This would allows the teacher more time to focus on essay structure, quality of expression (tone and formality), finding reliable sources, and writing logical content. In the end, it is the quality of feedback that should be central in any Academic Writing course as this is what transforms learners into more professional writers.

Acknowledgments

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