

Examining Characteristics of Teacher Feedback in Organizing Written Texts

By

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine teachers' written feedback on student texts in terms of dimensions focused and qualitative characteristics. The study was conducted using content analysis technique that is one of the qualitative research methods. The participants were 28 Turkish language teachers working at middle schools in Nigde in the 2013-2014 school year. In the data gathering process, 6th graders were firstly asked to write sample texts of 250-300-word length. Four of these texts were then selected by three experts. The participant teachers were asked to provide feedback on the four selected texts. The written feedback provided by the teachers were analysed by the researcher and two experts in terms of dimensions focused and quality. As a result of the analysis, a total of 750 pieces of feedback provided by 28 teachers for four different student texts were mostly about the dimension of spelling and punctuation. On the other hand, in terms of quality, 67,1% of the feedback was evaluative.

Keywords: *Written feedback, teaching writing, evaluative, descriptive feedback*

1. Introduction

Creating a written text is one of the areas which students have difficulty in. Explicit teaching of writing includes teaching about (State Literacy and Numeracy Plan, 1999: 22):

- the composition of whole texts, i.e. purpose, text structure and cohesion
- sentences and words, i.e. syntax, grammar, vocabulary and spelling
- surface features, i.e. punctuation and layout

Researches shows that students have problems in many steps of the writing process (Ozbay, 2000; Msanjila, 2005; Ungan, 2008; Arici&Ungan, 2008).

Early research into feedback on student writing viewed writing-as- product and so focused mainly on error corrections (Burke and Pieterick, 2010:18). Early researchers defined feedback narrowly as knowledge of test results, and investigated its effectiveness from a behaviourist perspective. Knowledge of results was one element in the cycle of stimulus (test item), response (student answer), outcome (correctness) and reinforcement (credit) (Sadler, 2010:535). After constructivism was adopted in the field of education following the cognitive approach and the behaviourist theory, studies on the concept of feedback have focus on different dimensions (Cetinkaya and Kogce, 2014). In the process-oriented approach, teacher feedback does play a pivotal role in guiding students to develop their writing proficiency. It transcends the written remarks made on student texts, and it can have an immediate impact on the affective and cognitive development of student writers (Alice, 2005:4). The "process approach" gave greater attention to teacher-student interactions and encouraged teachers to support writers through multiple drafts by providing feedback. The form feedback took extended beyond the teachers marginal or end notes to include oral interaction involving the teacher and the students (Sirigiri, 2013:418).

Feedback is conceptualized as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Effective feedback challenges ideas, introduces additional information, offers alternative interpretations and creates conditions for self-reflection and review of ideas. It provides students with information about

their performance on a task and how they could come to the conclusions on their own (Earl and Katz, 2005:47).

Written feedback is a genre all its own. Word choice matters. Tone matters. For example, consider these two comments written in the margin of a student essay: “You aren’t clear here” and “I don’t see what you mean here.” Both intend to convey the same thing, but the first sounds more judgemental and the second, more descriptive (Brookhart,2008 :31).

According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006:7) good feedback practice:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Straub’s (1997) study analysed the purpose and focus of tutor comments the first year university students thought were most helpful in their efforts to improve their writing. His analysis showed that students in this study generally agreed that two types of comments are helpful: (1) comments that suggest ways of making improvements and (2) comments that explain why something is good or bad in their writing (akt. Burke and Pieteric, 2010:21).

Feedbak is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way (Ramaprasad, 1983:4). Feedback should consist not only of information about how the student is doing at that moment, but also about how he or she can improve (Geyskens, Donche and Van Petegem, 2012).

Feedback from teachers to children, in the process of formative assessment, is a prime requirement for progress in learning. Formative assessment is that process of appraising, judging or evaluating students' work or performance and using this to shape and improve their competence (Tunstall and Gibbs, 1996:389). Teachers’ feedback on students’ compositions is an important channel of teacher student interaction which, if prevalence of practice is an indicator, is widely assumed to be a useful instructional procedure (MacDonald, 1991:1).

According to Sadler’s framework (1983, 1989, 2010; cited in Geyskens, Donche and Van Petegem, 2012:135) there are three important conditions for achieving effective feedback. These are: (1) the student needs to have an idea of the objectives he or she has to achieve and the standard that is expected from him or her; (2) the feedback has to include a comparison between the actual level of the product/behaviour and the expected level and (3) the feedback must provide instructions/suggest actions that will enable the student to close the gap between their current performance and where they need to get to in order to meet the requirements of a task.

The functions of feedback and the characteristics that good feedback should have was mentioned above. Different studies showed that low-quality feedback does not have a positive effect on student performance (Elawar&Corno, 1985; Tunstall&Gipps, 1996; Hattie &Timperley, 2007). In Tunstall and Gipps’s typology (1996), feedback is divided into two categories as evaluative and descriptive. Evaluative feedback has two sub-categories, which are positive and negative. As for descriptive feedback, it also has two sub-categories, which are related to success, and development. Evaluative feedback focuses only on accuracy or inaccuracy of the work performed by students while descriptive feedback provides information that is explanatory and focuses on how the work can be developed. As descriptive feedback provides information that is guiding, explanatory, and enables self-evaluation, it clarifies the

points that students have difficulty in as well as increasing their desire and motivation (Cetinkaya&Kogce, 2014). It is important for teachers to provide descriptive feedback to enable students' active participation in the writing process and make positive contributions to their writing development. The aim of this study was to examine teachers' written feedback on student texts in terms of its focal dimensions and qualitative characteristics. The following research questions were addressed based on this aim:

1. On which dimensions does the teachers' feedback on student texts focus?
2. How does the teachers' feedback on student texts vary in terms of qualitative characteristics?
3. How does the teachers' feedback vary in terms of qualitative characteristics and dimensions focused?

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed content analysis technique that is a qualitative research method. "Content analysis is defined as a systematic and replicable technique in which some words of a text are summarized with smaller content categories based on certain rules" (Büyüköztürk et al., 2012:240).

Participants

This study was conducted with 28 Turkish language teachers working at middle schools in Nigde in the 2013-2014 academic year.

Data Gathering and Analysis

In the data gathering process, 6th graders were firstly asked to write sample texts of 250-300-word length. Four of these texts were selected through an examination using "the analytic rubric for writing skill" (Sezer, 2005) by three experts. In the text selection, effort was made to select two texts that needed to be developed (low level) and two texts that were well-developed (high-level). Therefore, the teacher had the chance to provide positive, negative, success- or development-related feedback. The participant teachers were asked to provide feedback on the four selected texts. In this process, instructions related to what should they do were given to the teachers and any questions they had were answered. In this regard, the teachers were told that they could provide the feedback using techniques such as marking, adding comments and making corrections.

Feedback provided by the teachers was classified into five categories in terms of dimension. These were the dimensions of "page layout", "title", "planning and organisation", "language and expression" and "spelling and punctuation".

The teachers' feedback was defined and categorised according to Tunstall and Gipps's (1996) "feedback typology" in terms of qualitative characteristics. Accordingly, their feedback was classified into two basic categories as evaluative and descriptive. Under the category of evaluative feedback, there are two sub-categories, which are positive and negative. On the other hand, under descriptive feedback, there are two sub-categories, which are related to success, and development.

In the analysis process, the written feedback on student texts provided by the teachers was defined by two experts in addition to the researcher in terms of its dimension and qualitative characteristics. The feedback each teacher provided for written texts was firstly given numbers. Then, the feedback was transferred to the form shown in Table 1. Finally, it was defined in the form as (+) according to its dimension and qualitative characteristics.

Table 1. Feedback Evaluation Form

Participant No.:		Text No.:								
Sentence number	Feedback	Dimension					Qualitative Characteristic			
		Page layout	Title	Planning and organisation	Language and expression	Spelling and punctuation	Evaluative		Descriptive	
							Positive	Negative	Feedback related to success	Feedback related to development
Total										

The analyses of the researcher and the two experts overlapped at a rate of 98%. Those that did not overlap were decided after a discussion.

3. Findings

The findings revealed in the analysis of the data gathered through the tools described in the method section are presented based on the research questions using tables and interpretations.

Findings Regarding the First Research Question

The first research question of the study was "*On which dimensions does the teachers' feedback on student texts focus?*".

The participants' feedback on student texts were examined in terms of dimensions focused and the findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the teachers' written feedback regarding dimensions

Focused dimension of feedback	f	%
Page layout	91	12.1
Title	99	13.2
Planning and Organisation	140	18.7
Language and Expression	142	18.9
Spelling and Punctuation	278	37.1
Total	750	100

As is seen in Table 2, the teachers provided feedback mostly related to the dimension of "spelling and punctuation". On the other hand, as for the least frequently focused dimension, they provided feedback related to "page layout".

Examples from the feedback provided by the teachers (T) related to the dimensions of "page layout" (example 1), "title" (example 2), "planning and organisation" (example 3), "language and expression" (example 4), and "spelling and punctuation" (example 5) are presented below.

(Example 1) T18: There is no suitable space between paragraphs, lines and the edges of the paper.

(Example 2) T9: The title is appropriate with the content.

(Example 3) K21: The subject was not written in logical coherence. You must reconfigure the text, and you should edit.

(Example 4) K26: Words was repeated. Don't make these repeatations further.

(Example 5) K1: Punctuation is missing or not used in the right place.

Findings Regarding the Second Research Question

The second research question of the study was "How does the teachers' feedback on student texts vary in terms of qualitative characteristics?" .

The participants' feedback on student texts were examined in terms of qualitative characteristics and the findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of the teachers' feedback in terms of qualitative characteristics

Feedback	f	%	f	%
Evaluative	503	67,1	Positive	11,3
			Negative	55,7
Descriptive	247	32,9	Feedback related to success	8,4
			Feedback related to development	24,6
Total	750	100		

As is seen in Table 3, 67,1% of the teachers' written feedback on student texts was evaluative and 32,9% was descriptive. While 11,3% of the teachers' feedback was positive evaluative, 55,7% was negative evaluative. Examining the sub-categories of the descriptive feedback the teachers provided, 8,4% was related to success while 24,6% was related to development.

Examples of positive (example 6) and negative (example 7) feedback in the evaluative category, and examples of feedback related to success (example 8) and development (example 9) are presented below.

(Example 6) T8: Very nice essay.

(Example 7) T27: The result part is inadequate.

(Example 8) T5: Examples have provided a better understanding of the subject.

(Example 9) T16: You said that it is important to grow up healthy. Besides, you can extend the subject by giving the answers of “Why is environment important for us?”, “What can be done for sensitivity?” or “Was the sensitivity decreased?”.

Findings Regarding the Third Research Question

The third research question of the study was "How does the teachers'feedback varyin terms ofqualitative characteristics and dimensions focused?".

The participants' feedback on student texts were examined in terms of qualitative characteristics and dimensions focused, and the findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.Distribution of qualitative characteristics according to dimensions

Dimension	Qualitative characteristics											
	Evaluative						Descriptive					
	Positive		Negative		Total		Success		Development		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Page layout	19	20,9	58	63,7	77	84,6	2	2,2	12	13,2	14	15,4
Title	14	14,1	49	49,5	63	63,6	7	7,1	29	29,3	36	36,4
Planning and Organisation	21	15,0	60	42,9	81	57,9	9	6,4	50	35,7	59	42,1
Language and Expression	32	22,5	53	37,3	85	59,9	8	5,6	49	34,5	57	40,1
Spelling and Punctuation	62	22,3	135	48,6	197	70,9	6	2,2	75	27,0	81	29,1

As can be seen in Table 4, in all of the five dimensions, evaluative feedback was more frequently used by descriptive feedback. 84,6% of the 91 pieces of feedback provided towards the dimension of page layout was evaluative while 15,4% was descriptive. As for the sub-categories, negative evaluative feedback with 63,7% and descriptive feedback related to development with 13,2% were the most frequent. 63,6% of the 99 pieces of feedback provided towards the dimension of title was evaluative while 36,4% was descriptive. As for the sub-categories, negative evaluative feedback with 49,5% and descriptive feedback related to success with 29,3% were the most frequent in this dimension. 57,9% of the 140 pieces of feedback provided towards the dimension of page layout was evaluative while 42,1% was descriptive. Regarding the sub-categories, negative evaluative feedback with 42,9% and descriptive feedback related to development with 35,7% were the most frequent in this dimension. 59,9% of the 142 pieces of feedback provided towards the dimension of language and expression was evaluative while 34,5% was descriptive. With respect to the sub-categories, negative evaluative feedback with 37,3% and descriptive feedback related to development with 34,5% were the most frequent in this dimension. 70,9% of the 278 pieces of feedback provided towards the dimension of spelling and punctuation was evaluative while 29,1% was descriptive. As for the sub-categories, negative evaluative feedback with 48,6% and descriptive feedback related to development with 27,0% were the most frequent in this dimension.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study aiming to examine the teachers' written feedback on student texts in terms of dimensions focused and qualitative characteristics, four texts, two low-level and two high-level, were used. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that 28 teachers provided 750 pieces of feedback on student texts. These pieces of feedback were then defined in terms of dimensions focused and qualitative characteristics.

12,1% of the feedback was about page layout, 13,2% about title, 18,7% about planning and organisation, 18,9% about language and expression, and 37,1% about spelling and punctuation. The results revealed that the feedback mostly focused on the dimension of spelling and punctuation. Spelling and punctuation rules have an important function to prevent misunderstandings and deliver the message properly. "The primary purpose of a written text is communication. for this reason, a written text should have the quality to deliver the content to the reader, in other words, it should be reader-centred" (Ulper, 2012). In order for the text to fulfil its communicative duty, all of its parts should be well-organised. In this sense, it is necessary for the grammar rules to be used properly and the semantic and logical relations to be well-developed so that the reader can make sense of the text. The teachers mostly considering spelling and punctuation errors can prohibit students from focusing on the dimensions of planning and organisation, and language and expression which include the basic textuality criteria such as text content, logical development and expression characteristics.

Regarding qualitative characteristics, 67,1% of the feedback was found to be evaluative while 32,1% was descriptive. There could be many reasons for the teachers mostly using evaluative type of feedback. This finding can be interpreted as that the teachers did not know exactly how to provide feedback, or they might want to do it very quickly by providing evaluative feedback such as "this is not good enough", "it is not how it should be", "improve the page layout" and "the title is not good". "The effect of the feedback is closely related to the content and the quality of the information provided" (Cetinkaya&Kogce, 2014). Evaluative feedback does not contribute to students' writing skills because such feedback does not include any explanations to help them understand the source of the errors and how they should do it differently. Kluger and Denisi's study (1996) that aimed to identify the effect of evaluative feedback on learning and student motivation, neither positive nor negative feedback had any positive effect on student learning. Butler's study (1987) that aimed to determine the effect of different types of feedback on student performance revealed that the performance of the students who received descriptive feedback increased throughout the process while the performance of the students who received evaluative feedback only including grade and appraise showed less improvement than those received no feedback. Also according to students' own perceptions, feedback is necessary in terms of facilitating learning in the teaching and learning process, and the quality of education. However, the feedback being effective is as important as the necessity of feedback. In order for the feedback to be effective, it should be open, comprehensible, and appropriate to the learning outcomes and evaluation criteria (Karaca, 2011). As also mentioned in the introduction section, descriptive feedback is extremely important for students to see their errors or weaknesses, and develop ideas and strategies for solutions.

Regarding the sub-categories, 85 pieces of the evaluative feedback were positive and 418 were negative. This shows that the teachers' feedback tended to focus more on the insufficient or wrong structures. Negative evaluative feedback only refers to errors. It does not provide any explanations on the source of errors and how they can be corrected. Furthermore, students mostly ignore negative evaluative feedback (Karaca, 2011). The results of the studies in the literature show that negative evaluative feedback does not contribute to students' development in any respect (Bangert-Drawns, et al., 1991; Weaver, 2006; Kluger&DeNisi, 1996). Weaver (2006) states that feedback that focuses on negative aspects and that does not guide students to develop has negative effects on their learning. Besides, results of different studies show that negative evaluative feedback that teachers provide causes students to have negative attitudes towards writing and experience writing anxiety, and lowers writing motivation (Rezaei&Jafari, 2014; Younas et al., 2014). According to the theoretical approach, positive feedback increases individuals' confidence so that they are able to pursue their goals, leading people to expect successful goal attainment. Negative feedback, in contrast, undermines people's confidence in their ability to pursue their goals and their expectations of success (Ryan &Deci, 2000; cited in Fishback et al., 2010:517).

As for the sub-categories of descriptive feedback, 63 pieces were related to success while 184 was about development. Similar to what it was in the evaluative feedback, in the descriptive feedback types, the elements the students successfully formed were ignored. Clarifying students' errors as well as the proper

elements is important for them to maintain their skills. On the other hand, it can be argued that the motivation of students who receive feedback related to their success would increase in the process, and they would have more positive feedback towards writing.

The distribution of the qualitative characteristics of the feedback according to the dimensions focused showed that in all of the five dimensions, evaluative feedback was more frequent than descriptive feedback. Specifically, high rates of evaluative feedback were provided in the dimensions of page layout (84,6%) and spelling-punctuation (70,9%). Results of the studies that focus on students' usage of spelling and punctuation rules show that students experience difficulty in using these rules in their writing (Ozbay, 2000; Akkaya, 2013; Hamzadayi&Cetinkaya, 2013). It is stated that this incompetency is due to students' lack of knowledge or they do not pay sufficient attention to this aspect. Teachers considering students' lack of knowledge in spelling and punctuation rules, and providing descriptive feedback with explanations and examples can make students' learning error corrections more effective. It is remarkable that in all of the five dimensions, the rate of the negative evaluative feedback and the feedback related to development was high. This finding can be interpreted as that the teachers preferred providing feedback on weak or incorrect aspects of the student texts. In other words, the teachers ignored well-developed parts, and cared more about providing feedback. The results of Ulper and Cetinkaya's study (2014) examining students' level of considering teacher feedback and making corrections showed that the students mostly took the feedback regarding page layout into account and were able to make acceptable corrections. It was also remarkable that the rates of the developmental feedback being taken into account by the students and making acceptable error corrections were low. Developing the content of a text requires high order cognitive skills. For this reason, teachers' negative evaluative feedback such as "the content should be developed" or "the content is not sufficient" does not contribute to the process. But, descriptive feedback related to development that includes explanations and examples towards how and in which ways the content can be developed is expected to contribute. In this regard, Ulper's study (2011) examining students' preferences for receiving feedback on their texts showed that the students wanted to receive feedback that includes praise and explanations.

As a result, a total of 750 pieces of feedback provided by 28 teachers for four different student texts were found to be mostly about the dimension of spelling and punctuation. On the other hand, in terms of quality, 67,1% of the feedback was evaluative. Teacher is an important factor in developing students' writing skills. The reason is that the quality of the feedback provided by the teacher is the base of students to continue the writing process. Therefore, teachers should provide descriptive feedback including detailed explanations related to the positive aspects of the draft texts of students and how they can be developed.

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