Recursion and Noticing In Written Feedback

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Abstract

Though written feedback is one of the widely researched area in second language writing, cognitive processes of student writers as they attend to teacher feedback is still in its infancy. Previous researches have concentrated mostly on the types of feedback, the teacher or the student writers. Teachers need to understand writers' behaviors to intervene. There is a paucity of literature on the actual thought processes that occurs when a writer attends to written teacher feedback at a particular moment of time. This exploratory study provides a window to two important thought processes of a writer; recursiveness and noticing which have pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Feedback, academic writing, recursive, noticing, verbal protocols

1. Introduction

Feedback plays in intervention role in the writing process. In the writing process (Hayes and Flower, 1980; Hayes,1996) a writer is given opportunities to revise and re-draft an emerging text. In the process, feedback provides control to the writer to reach negotiated goals.

Studies on feedback have generally looked at the comments that teachers make on drafts, the types of errors that writers make and the perceptions of both feedback providers and receivers. (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). What seem to be lacking in the literature is the thought processes of writers as they attended to feedback. One study that looked at the thought processes (Belanger and Allingham, 2004), investigated the processes secondary school students use to respond to teachers' written comments on their writing. Their data comprised of observations, questionnaires, written teacher comments, interviews and students' retrospective think-aloud protocols. Fifty-three students were interviewed by the researchers and another one hundred and nineteen students were given questionnaires about their reactions and their understanding of specific comments made by their teachers. Students were asked to think aloud and were observed while they read their teachers' comments. Belanger and Allingham's (2004) study found that students were more interested in the grades they were given for their writings than in the comments about their writing. Though the students in this study sometimes failed to understand the comments that were given by the teacher, they were however more receptive towards comments that they understood. However, this study did not report how writers responded to feedback.

In order to understand further, how writers respond to feedback, the present case study research sought to answer the following research questions:
1. Does a writer attend to teacher feedback?

2. What cognitive processes does the student engage in?

2. Methodology
2.1. Setting

This case study is based on a larger study involving fifteen postgraduate students. Concurrent verbal protocol data , which formed the main source of data, was supplemented by data in the form of written teacher feedback, written texts, and a questionnaire survey. A lecturer from the university assisted the researcher in the collection of data. He gave the writing tasks to the participants, gave feedback on the participants' essays, administered the survey questionnaires, and collected the verbal protocols from the participants.

2.2. Participant

Wendy (pseudonym) is the participant in this case study. Wendy is Chinese and is a native speaker of Mandarin. English is her second language and she is currently employed as an English Language teacher in a secondary school. Wendy is a mature student and rates herself to be adequate in writing. She is currently enrolled as a second year student in the Master of Arts program majoring in Applied Linguistics.

2.3. Data collection

In this study, Wendy was given informed consent to the research and was introduced to think-alouds. She was required to write an argumentative essay at her own convenience on the following writing topic: *Success in education is influenced more by the student's life and training as a child than by the quality and effectiveness of the educational programme*. The draft was submitted to the lecturer three days later. The lecturer read through the draft and provided written feedback through in-text comments, marginal comments, and end of text comments. The feedback was then sealed in an envelope and given to Wendy. She was instructed to record her verbalizations as soon as she opened the envelope and began attending to teacher feedback. The initial essay, the revised draft and taped verbal protocols were then handed in to the lecturer. The participant was then given questionnaire on her background information and preferences for types of feedback, which she completed and returned to the lecturer. The researcher then collected all the data from the lecturer for analysis.

2.4. Training sessions

Prior to carrying out the research, two think-aloud training sessions were conducted by the researcher to familiarize Wendy with the think-aloud method while simultaneously attempting a task. This was to enable Wendy to become comfortable with the idea of thinking aloud and to provide an opportunity for her to practice on sample tasks. In both sessions, the researcher first modeled thinking aloud while performing a task for the participant. This was to alleviate any fears or anxieties that Wendy may have about the idea of thinking aloud and at the same time become accustomed with the task of thinking aloud and attending to another task simultaneously.

3. Findings
In this section, we discuss the different ways in which Wendy attended to feedback. processes.

3.1. Approaches to feedback

While attending to feedback, Wendy recursively moved back and forth in no set order from written comments to her written text constantly. During this process, Wendy went through several thought

processes before she either accepted or rejected feedback. There were twenty-four instances of Wendy attending to teacher feedback. Of these, she accepts teacher feedback in twenty instances and rejects teacher feedback four times. However, in accepting teacher feedback, she adopted two approaches. In the first approach, she accepted feedback by indicating the changes that she was going to implement in her revision. In the second approach, Wendy merely glossed over teacher feedback and indicated her acceptance of teacher feedback without indicating if teacher feedback was going to be incorporated in her revision.

3.2. Wendy's thought processes

In the first approach of accepting teacher feedback, she either justifies herself first or make plans before she accepts feedback. She also indicates the changes that she intends to implement in her rewrite. The following is an example of Wendy's thought processes of the first approach.

Wendy first reads teacher feedback aloud: *this paragraph might be better as a concluding paragraph*. Reading teacher feedback aloud seemed to have prompted her to reflect on her essay by referring to it which is evident in the following think-aloud. *Maybe he commented because in this paragraph I state that the educational program still influences students' learning results*. Her reflection seemed to have shed light on the intention of teacher feedback and brought about an understanding which she explains to herself in this way: *yes, I think that sounds more like a conclusion*. Having come to terms with the reason for teacher comments, Wendy shows her acceptance of teacher feedback and indicates that she will incorporate teacher feedback in her revision in the following protocol: *yeah, I will put that at the end of my essay when I do the second draft*.

In another instance, Wendy shows her acceptance of feedback by making plans on what to include in her revision. She begins with reading teacher feedback first: *Justify why do you say so*. Reading teacher feedback aloud seemed to have prodded Wendy to explain her writing by justifying as is evident in the following protocol: *Why I say so because when they just learn from the life and training as a child, mostly cannot find many questions to ask*. Finding an explanation made her realize the disparity between her writing and teacher feedback and this seemed to have pushed her to accept teacher feedback which she voices out in this manner: *Oh, so there is no evidence. All right, I will find some evidence*. In accepting the comments, Wendy went on to outline her plan for revision in this way: *So, what I will do after this is that I will do some more research and find evidence to support all my points to strengthen my argument*.

In contrast to the first approach, in adopting the second approach, though Wendy seemed to have engaged with teacher feedback and shows her acceptance of teacher feedback, she does not indicate if she gave any consideration of incorporating the given feedback in her revision. The following is an extended example of this approach. Wendy reads aloud teacher feedback: *Who? Justify your claim*. She then returns to the source, her essay and reads aloud what she wrote. *Some people think that the student's life and training as a child is more important*. Attending to teacher feedback and reading aloud her essay seemed to have been the catalyst to make her think about what she wrote in her first draft and give an explanation to justify it in the following protocol: *Maybe when I want to say some people, I just mean that there should be someone*. Explaining appeared to have made her take notice of what was amiss to warrant teacher feedback and accepts the teacher's feedback which she observes in the protocol that follows: *I see. You are right. I don't have the actual name about the people*. In accepting teacher feedback she follows through by justifying in this manner: *What I wrote was what I read which came from some articles and books which I read about. So I didn't mention any particular names*.

In our analysis we also found that Wendy rejects teacher feedback. However, though she seems to reject the teacher comments she also appears to accept them when she appears to understand the expectation of the comments provided. In the following example for instance, Wendy responded by reading the comment: *Rephrase your sentence*. Wendy's immediate reaction was outright rejection of the comment which she verbalizes in the following protocol: *Actually I think my style of writing like*

this in this part is ok. However, as she tries to come to terms with the feedback, she appears to understand and accepts the feedback based on understanding the expectations of that particular feedback. Her understanding and acceptance of teacher feedback is evident in the following protocol: *Maybe my style of writing may cause some confusion. Maybe next time I will change my writing into a more direct approach.*

In summary, Wendy's thought processes gives a clear indication that attending to teacher feedback and thinking aloud seemed to have brought about changes in Wendy's thoughts and understanding. She either justifies or explains her reasons for writing which warranted teacher comments before she either accepts or rejects written feedback. Her thought processes are modeled in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Wendy's thought processes
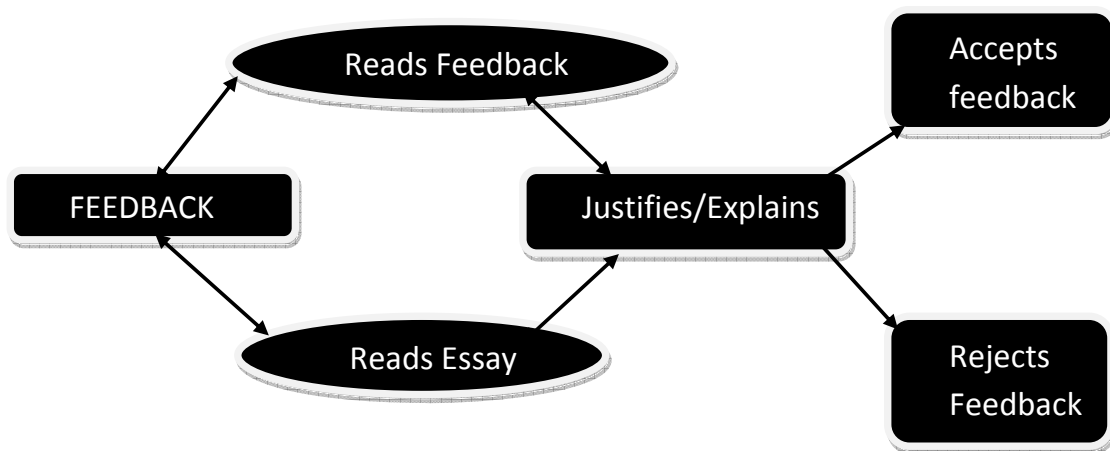
4. Discussion

This study gave rise two insights into the thought processes of a writer as she attends to feedback and think-aloud simultaneously. The first insight is that responding to feedback is recursive in nature and the second, thinking-aloud leads to noticing.

4.1. Recursion

A first insight of this study is that attending to feedback is a recursive process (Kumar, Kumar & Feryok, 2009). Wendy of this case study displayed a similar recursive process as she responded to teacher feedback. She more than just planned on what to revise and how to revise. She interpreted and evaluated teacher feedbacks and made decisions about rewriting her initial draft by considering and reflecting on the issues that were highlighted in teacher feedback. These processes were brought about as a result of recursive activity as Wendy move forward and backwards between teacher feedback and her written texts and finding solutions to the issues highlighted in teacher feedback. This concurs with Hayes (1996) who suggests that writers go through a recursive process in the various stages of writing. This action thus pushes writers through the various cognitive processes to achieve their writing goals. As feedback is essential for the development of second language writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), teacher feedback in this case study appears to have intervened in assisting Wendy to bridge the disparities that are present in her writing. It aided in her to understand and "see' how well she wrote how she might further develop her writing (Ryan, 1997) when she revised. All these were done to achieve negotiated goals.

4.2. Noticing

Another insight of this study is that thinking aloud led to noticing. Perhaps because speaking is a cognitive activity (Lantolf & Appel, 1994), verbalizing her thoughts helped Wendy to notice and reflect on the issues that were commented in the feedback. Feedback need to be noticed for it to aid writers in their writing (Wigglesworth, 2005). As Wendy moved between teacher feedback and her draft, she noticed the disparity that existed between her draft and teacher comments when she says: *I see. You are right. I don't have the actual name about the people*. Verbalizing aloud seemed to have aided Wendy to notice what was amiss in her initial text which parallels past studies which claim that output, in this instance verbalizing, promotes noticing (Cumming, 1990; Qi, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) suggesting that verbalizing her thoughts could have contributed to how Wendy's thought processes were shaped as she attended to teacher feedback. Hence, thinking aloud triggered noticing (Swain, 1995) in Wendy.

5. Conclusion

The role of teacher written feedback is important if one aims to help a writer develop his potential as a writer. It is feedback that provides a sense of direction and tells the writer of the writing goals that are achievable. The type of feedback that is provided to encourage recursivenss is also an important component. Feedback, thus, plays a socio-emotional role in the writing process (Kumar & Stracke, 2007) and it aids in self-regulated learning (Stracke & Kumar, 2010). It has been reported (Kumar & Stracke, 2007) that expressive feedback not only motivates the writer but also encourages the writer to revise and identify new links in the text that is generated. This study also affirms the importance of providing written feedback that encourages recursion leading to revisions.

This study suggests two implications. First, recursiveness could be taught or modeled by teacher to student writers as a method of engagement with teacher feedback to promote further development in their writing skills. This could be a way of making students become aware of what is expected of them when they are given feedback. The role of peer review and writer response groups seem be possible opportunities to advance the idea of recursion.

Second, the role of think-aloud as a technique to enhance thinking about feedback seems promising. From this study, it is clear that thinking aloud created an awareness of the strategies and skills – noticing for example, indicated the recursive nature of how one attends to feedback. Given this insight, the think aloud seems to be a useful tool that can be used pedagogically. The very act of thinking about feedback itself could promote development experiences among writers (Swain, 2006).

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