GIVING FEEDBACK ON STUDENT’S WRITTEN WORK

Márcia Helena Venâncio Faleiros
Mestre em Educação.
Docente dos cursos de Letras e Tradutor e Intérprete e da especialização em Língua Inglesa da Universidade de Franca (Unifran).

RESUMO
Neste artigo, falaremos rapidamente sobre o processo da escrita, especialmente sobre o retorno dado a escrita dos alunos. Uma amostra de uma redação de uma aluna de nível pré-intermediário será avaliada. O foco dessa avaliação está em mostrar aos professores como demonstrar suas habilidades em: identificar onde os erros de estrutura gramatical ou ortografia ocorrem; fornecer correções precisas e apropriadas; evitar correções desnecessárias.

Palavras-chave: escrita; erros; dando retorno.

ABSTRACT
In this article, we will talk briefly about the writing process, especially the giving of feedback on students’ written work. A sample of a pre-intermediate learner’s composition will be marked. The focus while marking the composition is to show teachers’ how to demonstrate their ability to: identify where errors of grammatical structure or spelling occur; provide accurate and appropriate corrections; avoid unnecessary correction.

Key words: written work; mistakes; giving feedback.
INTRODUCTION

The written process

Helping students to communicate in a foreign language is part of the teacher’s role, and communication does not only involve the spoken, but also the written language. Concerning the written process, helping students getting ideas and composing is only one part of the teacher’s job, the other part is giving feedback on student’s written work.

According to Harmer (1998) the most important reason for teaching writing is probably writing as a skill, just as important as listening, speaking and reading, since students need to know how to work with paragraph construction, coherence, cohesion, punctuation, and so on. Other reasons that will be briefly summarized here and also mentioned by Harmer (1998) are:

- **reinforcement**: it is when students write sentences with language they have already learned to benefit from it. It helps some students keep the language in their memories and also understand how it fits together.

- **language development**: it is when students learn by writing down pieces of information. They develop the mental activity which is part of the writing process and also of learning a language.

- **learning style**: it is an aid to students who have to work at their own pace to learn a language, which means they can take longer to produce it.

Most of the students complain about the difficulties they face when writing, compared with the other skills. Therefore, it is the teacher’s job to help students develop their ability to overcome these difficulties. Teachers should make them aware of facts such as the ones suggested by Edge (1995): accurate spelling, punctuation, layout appropriateness, the use of cohesive devices, text cohesion, register and others.

The relationship between the writer and the reader should also
be shown by the teacher. As the writer cannot benefit from facial expressions, gesture, intonation, and other strategies available to speakers, they have to compensate them by writing clearly with good paragraphing and punctuation so that the message is well conveyed.

To produce a piece of writing students usually follow a task. To fulfil the task students need enough language and guidance to generate ideas. This guidance can be divided into four general categories according to Dangerfield (1991, p.193):

- **controlled**: where the student is given little or no room for error, for example in an exercise involving simply the choice of alternative words to fill each space in a given text where each of the chosen alternatives for each space is acceptable. This level of guidance produces what is little more than a copying exercise.

- **cued**: in which the language of the exercise is given, but the student has to perform a task such as joining given sentences with given connectors.

- **guided**: in which details of content are given but students have to formulate their own way of expressing that content.

- **free**: in which students are provided only with a subject for their writing, perhaps in the form of a composition title, and, a purpose for which they are writing.

As important as helping students generating ideas is responding to students’ written work. This is what we will talk about on the next topic.

**Giving feedback on students’ written production**

Giving feedback on student’s written work, which is the purpose of this article, is a major part of all teachers’ job, so it is something teachers must be careful with since they can undermine student’s confidence depending on how the feedback is given. Teachers
should focus not only on bad points but also on good ones since it is clear that the writing skill is complex and writers find it quite demanding.

Concerning what is important to correct, teachers should find a balance between accuracy and content. Harmer (1991, p.146) points out what usually happens: “[…] the tendency is for teachers to be over preoccupied with accuracy. This means that students’ work is often covered with red ink and no comment is made about whether the work was interesting or succeeded in its purpose.” To avoid over-correction teachers can tell students that for a particular piece of writing they will be assessed on language form or organisation and presentation or on content. Students must be aware of what feedback should be mainly on, as Ur (1996, p. 170) explains:

\[\ldots\] the most important thing about writing is content: whether the ideas or events that were written about were significant and interesting. Then there is organisation and presentation: whether the ideas were arranged in a way that was easy to follow and pleasing to read. Finally, there is the question of language forms: whether the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation were of an acceptable standard of accuracy.

Another important aspect to be considered by teachers is the distinction between errors, slips and attempts as Edge (1993, p. 9) points out:

- **errors** are mistakes that a student cannot self correct even if they were pointed out by the teacher;
- **slips** are mistakes which a student can self-correct if they are pointed out;
- **attempts** are mistakes students make by trying to produce language that they have not learned yet. Therefore they have no idea how to structure it or when it is not clear to the teacher the structure or meaning he is trying to use.

*Errors, slips and attempts* are part of the learning process. Byrne
(1995, p. 15) states that “a piece of written work which has a number of mistakes in it may nevertheless convey the writer’s communicative purpose perfectly adequately, while another piece, superficially free from mistakes, does not.”

When correcting students’ compositions, teachers can follow a number of correction techniques based on what they wish to achieve, as Dangerfield (1991, p. 195) suggests:

- **full teacher correction**: […] the full written correction of all mistakes by the teacher, […] by far the most common correction technique used, but the question arises of exactly how much attention students give to their mistakes thus corrected […] how much learning takes place as a result of this effortless process of glancing over the homework.

- **student-student correction**: students check each other’s homework in pairs, discussing it and making any necessary alterations before handing it in to the teacher. This requires them to think carefully about what is and what is not acceptable, and thus learning is more likely to take place. However, this method does have a disadvantage in that students may wrongly identify mistakes and, as a result, reinforce mistaken ideas.

- **indication but not correction**: First, the mistake can simply be underlined by the teacher, leaving the student to identify the nature of the mistake and to correct it. Second, as well as underlining the mistake, the teacher can indicate why it is wrong by using a code. […] it is, of course, important that the students are made familiar with it beforehand and that they are able to understand the terminology used.

Having in mind the theory we have just discussed, we will show a sample of a student’s written work on which feedback was given.
Giving feedback – the sample

The following sample of a written guided composition was done by a pre-intermediate level student, aiming to develop her ability to write narratives. The language she was expected to use was Past Perfect and Past Simple since she had analysed a model in which these key structures were used. She was also expected to use useful expressions to link parts of a story such as: when, suddenly, after that, finally, and so on, and some useful language such as: fortunately, to my great relief, in the morning/evening and so on.

The technique chosen to use was indication but not correction since the student was expected to be able to self correct it, as she had already been taught the two key structures mentioned above and she had also been exposed to a model in which the same structures, the useful expressions and the useful language, were used. Sometimes, it was also indicated inadequacies in vocabulary to guide the student to an adequate communication of the message.

To help her self-correct her written work, mistakes were underlined and symbols, which the student was familiar with, were written above the mistakes. Some comments about content were made at the bottom of the page to focus on general details that were relevant to the written work according to instructions.

When the written work was handed back, the teacher allowed her some time to identify her mistakes and correct them.

A final word teachers should keep in mind is:

Remember that when you or any other reader responds to a student’s piece of writing, your main job is not to pass judgment on its quality (unless you are an examiner and not a teacher), but to help the writer see what to do next. Ask yourself: What

1. The female gender was chosen to refer to the student whose composition was analyzed in this article.
2. The symbols can be seen in a box below.
INSTRUCTIONS

Write a composition about “A day I shall never forget”. First think of some days you will never forget.

Use the guidelines to help you

PARAGRAPH 1: Give background to the events describing what had happened before.

PARAGRAPH 2: Describe the details of the event and what your feelings at the time were.

PARAGRAPH 3: Describe how things ended and what some of the consequences were (if there were any).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOLS</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VT - verb tense</td>
<td>Last night we go to the cinema.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GR - grammar</td>
<td>I’m staying with a English family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WO - wrong order</td>
<td>I go always sightseeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WW - wrong word</td>
<td>She said me my English was good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WF - wrong form</td>
<td>She goes swim every week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP - spelling</td>
<td>The film wasn’t very exiting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep - preposition</td>
<td>I came in London two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1 - L1 interference</td>
<td>I knew him last week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P - punctuation</td>
<td>I want to learn english.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( ) - leave out</td>
<td>She should (to) go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∧ - something missing</td>
<td>Mr. Bennett is _ teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The feedback

- *slips* and not *errors* were indicated to help self correction;
- the equivalent in English for “*penetas*” and “*Hippie party/ clothes*” was given as the student did not know it;
it was called the student’s attention to some features of narrative, which were not well developed in this composition: she wrote short paragraphs and she used brackets, which are not appropriate in narratives;

• mistakes which were irrelevant to what the teacher was focusing attention on were not corrected;

• the teacher praised the student by letting her know what the strengths were.

THE DAY I SHALL NEVER FORGET

I have thought a lot about the happiest day in my life. I shall never forget my 15th birthday. It was very good.

VT   WW theme party
I decided to do a hippie party with a band and lots of rock’n roll.

VT theme
My mum had a hippie party when she was 15 so I decided to have one too.

WW
At first I was very nervous because I didn’t know what clothes to wear or who I was going to invite but at the end everything was ok.

My electric guitar teacher had a band called Diabo 4, so I asked her and to play at my party. I invited a lot of people (I really mean a lot),

WW gatecrashers
but only my really friends came \(\langle\) and of course the “penetas” \(\rangle\)

\textbf{Prep}

\textbf{At} the day of the party \(\wedge\) rained a lot and I was very worried

\textbf{VT}

because I was afraid nobody \textit{came}. Only half of the people I

\textbf{Prep}

had invited came. But \textbf{at} the end it was ok because the band was really good and \(\wedge\) people started to dance.

\textbf{WO theme}

I and my friends were all wearing hippie clothes and we all danced and enjoyed the party.

\textbf{WF/L1}

It was one of the \textit{bests} days of my life and I shall never forget \(\wedge\).

Ann\textsuperscript{3}, what a nice and interesting party! It is also a good composition: you followed the guidelines talking about what happened before the party, which helped you to make your decision and you also gave details about the party and how things ended. But, you have to be careful with paragraphing: write longer paragraphs, instead of seven paragraphs you could have written only four, joining the same information in the same paragraph; and don’t use brackets in narratives because this kind of composition is usually more formal than others.

Have a look at the codes to correct some language mistakes. Talk to me if you still have doubts about the correction.

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\textsuperscript{3} This is a fictitious name.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


