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*The Effect of
Audio and
Written Teacher
Responses on
EFL Student
Revision*

Providing feedback is one of the foreign language writing teacher's most important tasks (Ferris, 2007). However, there is less certainty about the techniques that should be used (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). This article reports on research that investigated the effects of two types of teacher feedback, on-tape and written, and of the absence of feedback on students' (n = 89) error correction. A comparison of the number of macro (content, organization) and micro (vocabulary, grammar, mechanics) errors before and after the experiment yielded a statistically significant reduction in the number of mistakes in final drafts. Students perceived the type of response received (either taped or written) had been helpful in revising their papers and considered the most beneficial aspect of teacher feedback to have been a focus on micro errors. This study offers insights into an eclectic approach to teaching writing in similar EFL contexts.

Over the last twenty-five years, the focus of writing instruction has changed from product to process, from seeing students' writing less as a finished product than as a piece of work perfectible through multiple drafting with feedback between drafts (K. Hyland, 2003; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). Whether the process approach to writing instruction per se has brought about positive results in foreign language pedagogy has provoked much controversy, resulting in a thrust towards a more balanced view of process and form (Applebee, 2000; Bromley, 2003). No doubt the process approach has had a major

impact on writing research and instruction (K. Hyland, 2003). It continues to be applied in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) because by placing considerable emphasis on revising and responding to writing, it allows teachers and students more meaningful interaction. Process feedback, with its emphasis on the recursive nature of writing, has emerged as an essential component of the approach and has stayed in the forefront of instructional practice.

Review of Literature

Several studies have shown the positive results of teacher feedback. These studies have focused on feedback on form (Ferris, 1997) and content (Fathman & Whalley 1990), others on different means of delivery, such as electronic (Greenfield, 2003; Warschauer, 2002; Williams, 2002) and conferencing (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). Additional research, however, has questioned the effect of teacher feedback on language errors (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). A few studies have shown no clear signs of improvement of students' writing accuracy after response, so the debate has continued between those who have believed in the effectiveness of corrective feedback on form and those who have not (Gu enette, 2007). The most adamant argument against grammar correction came from Truscott (1999, 2007), whose position has provoked claims for additional research before the controversy over the effectiveness of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately is settled (Ferris, 2004). Still other researchers have not found significant differences on student revision and editing involving the explicitness of teacher response (direct, indirect) or the means used (written, verbal) (Ferris, 1995, 2006; K. Hyland, 2003).

Both a paucity of research on teacher response to student writing and, in some cases, contradictory results, have left many key questions only partially answered (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006). One aspect in particular has remained virtually unexplored: the effect of taped feedback on learners' revisions, hence the need for further research on teacher feedback in EFL contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The present study aimed at contributing to efforts to improve EFL writing by investigating the effects of two different modes of teacher response: written comments on the margins and recorded feedback. Reformulations made by students who did not receive any teacher feedback during the process were also included in the data for analysis.

Context and Rationale of the Study

This study was carried out at the School of Languages, National University of Córdoba, Argentina, where teachers were concerned about students' poor performance in the composition component of their exams. Many explanations could have reasonably accounted for these poor results: overcrowded classrooms, a deficit of student reading and writing strategies, lack of prior knowledge of content and rhetorical structures, or a flaw at some stage of the teaching practice, among others. These considerations led to an examination of the feedback students were receiving and their reactions to it. Teachers annotated students' written assignments by writing observations on the margins or by making general comments at the bottom of students' papers. Remarks concentrated heavily on language use rather than on content and global organization.

Because learners complained about their not understanding teachers' marginal comments, especially those on macro aspects such as subject matter and relevance of ideas, teachers questioned their approach and began to explore alternatives. A verbal response such as face-to-face conferencing was unfeasible in this context due to the large number of students per class and the lack of school facilities for teachers and students to meet for the sessions. A good choice seemed to be the "taped commentary" suggested by K. Hyland (1990, 2003). On-tape feedback required the teacher to record his or her response on a tape cassette and to write a number on the student's paper to signal what the observation referred to (K. Hyland, 2003, p. 182). As previously said, this means of providing feedback has been virtually unexplored except for K. Hyland's study (1990).

In spite of the scant support from empirical research, on-tape feedback appeared intuitively attractive to instructors in the EFL Department. A comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of feedback and the one traditionally used in our classes yielded the following results (see Table 1).

This study then was undertaken to investigate the traditional written response (with codes on margins) that the staff had been using in their courses for a decade, the innovative on-tape response tried out for two semesters, and the lack of teacher response throughout a multiple draft writing cycle. The researchers of this study proposed the following alternative hypotheses:

1. On-tape feedback may be more effective than written feedback in helping students reformulate their written work at the macro level (content, relevance, organization, coherence, logic).

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of written and taped commentary.

Type of feedback	Advantages	Disadvantages
Written on margins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More viable • Effective if well given • Comments on use of language very helpful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vague and confusing • Too much focus on editing surface errors, root problems overlooked • Risk of teacher's appropriation of student work • Impersonal • Time consuming
Recorded on tape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages students into reformulating their papers to reward the teacher for the individual attention paid to their papers • Helps teacher concentrate on content and meaning more than on use of language • Comments on students' ideas very helpful • Contributes to self-monitoring • Helps less skilled writers • Consumes less time • Motivates more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot be done anywhere • Students may concentrate more on listening than on comments • Students with poor listening skills may be at a disadvantage

2. Written feedback using codes on margins may be more effective than on-tape feedback in helping students correct errors at the micro level (surface sentence errors, grammar, use of lexical items, spelling, punctuation).

Method

Setting and Subjects

The study was carried out in a five-year teacher training and translation

studies undergraduate program at a college in Argentina. The study involved six groups of students taking EFL courses at a post-intermediate level of proficiency according to the criteria established by the Association of Language Testers in Europe. Three of these groups had enrolled in the Teacher Training program and the other three in the Translation Studies stream. For each orientation there were two experimental groups (the innovative one with taped response and the traditional one with written codes on margins), and one control group (no teacher response). Eighty-nine students, producing a total of 267 pieces of written work, participated in the study. Two teachers also participated, each in charge of the three groups in one program of studies (either Teacher Training or Translation).

Materials and Procedures

The two experimental groups and the control group in each program of studies received the same writing instruction for 6 weeks. On week 7, the groups were given a topic and were asked to write a short opinion essay. They produced two drafts and a final version. Between drafts, the innovative group received taped feedback, and the traditional group received written feedback with codes. Previously, the researchers and the two teachers providing feedback had had several meetings for standardization of criteria. In these meetings, instructors received detailed instructions and training on how to use a taxonomy of errors designed by the researchers (see Table 2 for this taxonomy and the codes used for written feedback). Teachers were asked to concentrate on the macro aspects of writing (content and organization) in their feedback on the first draft and on macro and micro (vocabulary, grammar, mechanics) components in their comments on the second draft. No feedback was given to the control groups except for a general instruction for students to revise their compositions and make any changes the writers considered appropriate to improve their written work. All the groups had deadlines for first and second drafts and for their final versions.

When this writing cycle was over, students answered a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix) about the learners' reactions to the type of feedback they had received or the absence of feedback.

Data Analysis and Results

Working on the initial drafts, we identified, charted, and then attributed each teacher-taped comment or written mark to one of the 19 categories shown in Table 2 plus an additional category (used only in the analysis stage for flaws and errors not classified by the taxonomy employed). When a comment or mark did not correspond to one of the categories on

the list, we classified the observation ourselves according to the 20 types established. We proceeded in the same way on the final drafts. Last, we compared the number of macro and micro errors in the first draft and in the final version for each student and, eventually, for each group.

The coding stage was long and complex. Teachers had not applied the feedback categories consistently. For example, in written feedback we found marks with no codes attached or with codes not listed in the taxonomy agreed upon. For taped feedback, we judged some comments as “vague,” “unnecessary,” or “misleading.” In both cases, we found instances of incorrect feedback, that is, teachers had suggested a change be made even though there was no error. We spent long hours analyzing and coding the data, going over ambiguous comments and, in cases of disagreement, appealing to a third party, a colleague thoroughly acquainted with our taxonomy. Instances of students’ unsuccessful revisions (incorrect reformulations, no change made in spite of teacher comment) were set apart for future analysis.

The data were analyzed using the non-parametric Wilcoxon's Paired Signed Rank Test to investigate, by means of a unilateral analysis, the statistical significance of the difference between the number of macro and micro errors before and after the taped or the written feedback. Wilcoxon's test was also used to analyze control-group data to investigate whether the absence of feedback had any impact on the number of errors found in the final versions of the students' essays (see Table 3).

The results of the statistical tests indicated that the null hypothesis could be rejected in all cases and that the differences found after treatment (taped, written feedback, no feedback) were statistically significant. The results also showed that these changes had been positive both at the macro and micro level in all but one group. The Translation Studies group, which had received taped feedback, showed negative changes at the micro level—that is, after treatment, this group registered an increase in the number of micro errors. In regards to the two control groups, the differences found were also statistically significant and positive in all cases. In sum, five of the six groups that participated in the study showed a statistically significant reduction in the number of errors in the final drafts of their essays.

Results of the questionnaire revealed that 87% of the subjects in the experimental groups were able to understand their teacher's comments. Moreover, the students stated that the type of response received (either taped or written) had helped them revise and rewrite their papers. Also, 56% of the subjects in the control groups acknowledged that the opportunity to review and reformulate their papers even without any observation or comment on the part of the teacher had been beneficial.

Table 2. Taxonomy of errors used by teachers providing feedback and codes for written response.

Error type and description	Codes (written feedback)
1. Content	
Relevance, richness of information	RI
2. Organization, Coherence, Cohesion	
Thesis/Topic sentence(s)	TS
Supporting sentences	SS
Concluding sentence(s)	CS
Logical development of ideas	LD
Use of transitional signals (one-word connectors, transitional phrases, and sentences)	Trans S
Referencing (shifts in pronouns, usage of "it," "this," vague or ambiguous reference)	Pr Ref
3. Lexis	
Collocations	Colloc
Word form	WF
Choice of word (specificity in relation to topic)	WC
4. Grammar	
Subordination	Sub
Double subject	D Subj
Omission of subject	O Subj
Word order (order of imbedded questions, subject-verb inversion, others)	WO
Verb (tense, form)	V
Agreement (subject-verb, singular-plural, excluded pronoun reference)	Agr
Prepositions	Prep
5. Mechanics	
Punctuation (commas: subordinate, main clauses, period, semicolon between main clauses, punctuation with connectors)	Punct
Spelling	Sp
Others (used only for analysis of data)	

Table 3. Results of the Non-Parametric Wilcoxon's Paired Signed Rank Test.

Groups in the Translation Studies Program

	Macro Errors	Micro Errors
Written feedback	SS 16 $\Sigma + 136 \Sigma - 0$ T 35	SS 16 $\Sigma + 124 \Sigma - 12$ T 35
Taped feedback	SS 16 $\Sigma + 134 \Sigma - 3$ T 35	SS 16 $\Sigma + 34.5 \Sigma - 101.5$ T 35
No feedback	SS 12 $\Sigma + 78 \Sigma - 0$ T 17	SS 12 $\Sigma + 71 \Sigma - 4.5$ T 17

Groups in the Teacher Training Program

	Macro Errors	Micro Errors
Written feedback	SS 20 $\Sigma + 185 \Sigma - 5$ T 53	SS 20 $\Sigma + 192 \Sigma - 28$ T 60
Taped feedback	SS 13 $\Sigma + 72.5 \Sigma - 17.5$ T 21	SS 13 $\Sigma + 60 \Sigma - 17$ T 17
No feedback	SS 12 $\Sigma + 66 \Sigma - 12$ T 17	SS 12 $\Sigma + 90 \Sigma - 1$ T 17

When asked about the features of their written work reformulated after feedback or after being given the opportunity to revise and rewrite, 88% of students said that they could correct errors in grammar, lexis, spelling, and punctuation (micro errors); 44% also stated that they had succeeded in overcoming weaknesses in content, coherence, relevance, and meaning (macro errors).

As to the type of feedback preferred, 96% of those who received on-tape comments chose this type of feedback; 88% of all students who completed the questionnaire ticked written feedback as their preference, and only 14% of those who did not get feedback said they had enjoyed reviewing and rewriting their compositions without any kind of teacher response.

Discussion and Conclusions

Responding to student writing appears to have a positive effect on learners' written work regardless of the means used (written or taped). In this study, the number of students' errors and weaknesses at both the micro and the macro level decreased significantly in the final version except for one group in the Translation Studies program. The implications of this result will be discussed below.

Another important finding of the study is that the mere opportunity for students to revise their compositions on their own, without teacher feedback, resulted in a reduction of the number of flaws. This outcome emphasizes the importance of self-assessment, contributes to research that shows improvement of students' end-products after rereading and rewriting their own papers without any feedback (Ferris and Roberts 2001), and supports findings of limited teacher response to the progress students make in their writing (Graham, 1983, cited by Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Truscott, 2007). Thus, it would probably be beneficial, as Fathman and Whalley (1990) suggest, to encourage teachers to make a place for more independent writing in their classes (such as diaries, which demand no teacher intervention) and to promote more self-guided revision at home, thus paving the way for greater autonomy in assessment and revision.

Furthermore, the perception of 88% of our subjects that the most beneficial aspect of teacher feedback or of the opportunity to revise their writing on their own was linked to formal aspects of language use suggests polemic issues for teachers of EFL writing at the university level, at least in the context of where this study was conducted: What should be the main objective of a writing class? How much attention must be paid to language accuracy in the composition class? Should teachers be satisfied with a spotless composition even if it is weakened by poor

argumentation or insubstantial content? Or should they teach strategies for focusing on relevance and richness of ideas as well as on language forms? The students in this study seemed to adhere to a documented belief among EFL writers that places high value on a composition free of surface errors (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2003; Leki, 1990; Morra, Badenes & Musso, 2003). This conviction may grow out of a major concern in EFL academic contexts about the learner's language proficiency being far from a near-native operational command. The students involved in this study are expected to improve their accuracy as they progress in their studies because they will be graduating as teachers of EFL or becoming translators. Probably as a result of this, learning to write is synonymous with acquiring and rehearsing the use of lexical items, syntactic patterns, cohesive devices, and other language forms, a practice which focuses on accuracy and clear exposition before content. EFL writing teachers might choose, then, to help learners develop awareness that producing effective texts also involves substantive content and information-gathering strategies. Further research is needed in similar EFL contexts to find out whether the feedback modes studied here result in improved writing performance.

This study also supports research in EFL feedback that suggests that students do take teachers' observations seriously and do not feel upset by them (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Leki, 1990). Such an attitude contrasts with evidence provided by studies of feedback in English as the native language (Ferris, 2007). Our classroom experience indicates that EFL writers are aware of their language limitations and, consequently, expect and want their teachers to correct errors. A similar attitude in second-language learners is reported by F. Hyland (1998).

In regard to the mode of teacher feedback preferred, the taped response was chosen by almost 100% of the students who experienced this type of feedback in the study and could thus compare it with the more familiar written type. These students stated that the recordings' "shortened distance" with the teacher made them feel as if they were actually "talking" with the teacher even if they could not participate in a face-to-face dialogue. They reported a sense of commitment that led them nearly always to hand in their revised papers back on time. But perhaps a more important point students made was that, with their papers in hand, they felt they could grasp the teacher's comments easily. They could clearly see what she or he was aiming at, where ambiguity impaired comprehension, and where there were gaps in the line of thought. Similar student reactions have been reported by K. Hyland (1990).

As mentioned earlier, one of the groups that received taped feedback

showed an increase in the number of micro errors after treatment. K. Hyland (1990) suggested that both those who give and those who receive taped feedback tend to concentrate more on macro aspects of writing. In fact, the final version of the essays of the students belonging to this group revealed more clarity in the expression of ideas despite the number of language errors.

To conclude, most of our subjects expressed preference for either written feedback or taped feedback, and a small percentage found self-reviewing effective. Thus, student response to feedback may be more or less effective depending on the mode of teacher response. A possible pedagogical implication for teachers could be to offer students a taste of different types of feedback for them to choose from, thus responding to students' individual needs. Future studies should attempt to investigate this further with a single group of students; this was not feasible in this study. Also, it would be interesting to complement the quantitative nature of the present piece of research with a qualitative one to capture teachers' perception of the effectiveness of the type of feedback they provide.

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Appendix

Survey

Thank you for participating in our research project. As a last step, we would like you to answer this questionnaire. Please, choose the answer(s) that best represent(s) your experience and complete the blank spaces provided.

A. Which of the following types of feedback (comments made by the teacher) were you familiar with before the experiment? (*Note*: You can choose more than one answer here.)

1. Use of a minimum "abstract" code, e.g., underlining of words or phrases; use of signs such as ? ! [] ^ v.
2. Words or letters written on the margins, such as *ST*, *Agr*, *Sp*, *WO*, etc.
3. Longer and more detailed comments and suggestions written on the margins
4. and at the end of the written piece.
5. Tape-recorded feedback.
6. Feedback sent by e-mail.
7. Face-to-face conferences with the teacher.
8. Oral or written comments made by peers.
9. Other (please specify briefly): _____
10. None of them.

B. What type of feedback were you given during this experiment?

1. Comments written on the margins (with codes).
2. Tape-recorded feedback.
3. None.
1. If you received teacher feedback, how helpful was the feedback when re-writing your essay?
 - a. Very helpful.
 - b. Quite helpful.
 - c. Rather helpful.
 - d. Not helpful at all.
2. If you had no teacher feedback, how helpful was the chance to revise on your own?
 - a. Very helpful.
 - b. Quite helpful.
 - c. Rather helpful.
 - d. Not helpful at all.

C. In which of the following aspects was the feedback you received or the chance to revise without feedback most helpful? (*Note: You can choose more than one answer here.*)

1. To express your ideas more clearly, e.g. emphasizing what is important and discarding secondary ideas.
2. To organize your writing in a better way.
3. To improve your grammar.
4. To improve your vocabulary.
5. To improve your spelling.
6. To improve your punctuation.
7. Other (please, specify) _____

D. How many times did you submit your essay during the experiment?

1. Only once.
2. Two times.
3. Three times.

E. If you did not comply with the three scheduled submissions, why didn't you?

1. You didn't think rewriting your work was going to help you improve your writing skills.
2. You were not able to understand the comments made and, therefore, you were not able to correct them.
3. You could not meet the stipulated deadlines.
4. Other (please specify briefly): _____

F. Which of the types of feedback you are now familiar with have helped you the most to improve your writing skills?

1. Oral or written comments made by peers.
2. Comments written on the margins (with codes).
3. Longer and more detailed comments and suggestions written on the margins and at the end of the essay.
4. Minimum "abstract" code (underlining, use of signs such as ? [] ^ v).
5. Tape-recorded feedback.
6. Face-to-face conferences with the teacher.
7. Feedback sent by e-mail.
8. Other (please specify briefly): _____
9. None of them.

Thank you.

