

Academic Writing: In Search of Effective Ways of Providing Students with Constructive Feedback

アカデミックライティング：建設的フィードバックの効果的な方法を求めて

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What is exploratory teaching? Who is the exploratory teacher? Research shows that it is not a new concept, but the one that has been around for a long time. The book “*Focus on the Language Classroom*” by Allwright and Bailey (1991) promotes the concept of exploratory teaching as a practical reality that mirrors what goes on in the classrooms. The authors define exploratory teaching as “teaching that not only tries out new ideas but that also tries to learn as much as possible from doing so” (Allwright & Bailey, p. 197). This book focuses on three basic points pertaining to exploratory teaching:

- there is a great deal to be learned from the results of the research that has been carried out so far;
- there is even more to learn from the procedures of classroom research;
- teachers, researchers and learners have a lot in common and therefore can learn a great deal from each other.

The main tenet of exploratory teaching is that “the teacher is the researcher’s link with learners, and also the learner’s link with research” (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 197). This book served as a trigger for my exploratory teaching practice in search for effective ways of teaching academic writing skills to Japanese university students.

Teaching Context

I teach academic writing to second-year students at the tertiary level at a number of universities in the Kanto area. While the requirements at each university vary, I will focus on one class in particular at a university in the Tokyo area where students are required to write their graduation thesis in English. For such students, knowing the mechanics of English academic writing is essential for graduating.

The overall aim of the academic writing curriculum at this university is to help students develop their academic writing skills in English, (i.e., by being able to utilize English for expanding their knowledge in critical thinking, research skills, as well as the development of logic and cohesiveness). Students are asked to research topics including social, political, and global issues, and present their critical understanding in writing. Teachers are to help students develop their ease and confidence in using English, mastery of the research process and content, clarity in expressing ideas in speaking and writing, and critical evaluation and comprehension of issues. To better develop academic literacy, key activities are usually reinforced through repetitive cycles, (i.e., individually, in pairs, or in groups of three). These include but are not limited to:

- explaining notes
- brainstorming
- outlining
- mind mapping
- identifying issues and questions for research

- presenting key points and issues from research
- paraphrasing and summarizing information sources
- making and re-organizing notes on information sources
- writing journals.

Throughout the 2016 academic year, students were required to produce two well-researched academic papers of different genres (e.g., persuasive, argumentative, comparative) of approximately 1000-1200 words in length. The topics that students chose to research and write about ranged from English education in Japan and Korea, refugees in the EU, nuclear energy in Japan and Germany, voting age in Japan, women's rights in Saudi Arabia, the gender gap, and so on. The students' finished products (two academic research papers) were further exposed to multiple reading audiences: peers and the instructor. To sum things up, the process approach to writing lies at the heart of this writing course and curriculum: *Prewrite, Organize, Write, Evaluate, Rewrite*.

Working Puzzles

All of the 24 students enrolled in the 2016 academic writing course described in this short reflective article were second-year undergraduate students. During their first year of university studies, they had taken a writing course that focused on the development of academic writing skills. At the start of the second year, most of the class members could be ranked as upper intermediate to advanced in general English proficiency.

While I have usually aimed to create an effective learning environment for students enrolled in an academic writing course, I have often found it challenging to provide them with feedback based on *students'* needs. This may mainly be attributed to my assumption that students would be properly equipped with academic writing skills from their experiences as first-year university students. However, this is a myth rather than the reality. So, my main puzzles with this class were: (a) identify students' abilities and types of training, (b) identify the most effective way(s) of providing students with constructive feedback on their drafts/final academic paper, and (c) explore means and modes of feedback students felt most comfortable with. In this short reflective article, I will briefly describe how I tried to use feedback as a teaching tool to support students' academic writing development.

Student Needs

To understand the students' needs, I conducted a survey in English at the beginning of the first semester. I aimed to elicit students' responses to a variety of questions covering (a) general areas of improvement; (b) types of feedback they expect their teacher to provide them with; (c) their research interests (topics); (d) their confidence and skills in writing academic essays/papers; (e) skills they would like to enhance; (f) their use of English/L1 in class, and so on. I designed the survey to find out what my students' needs and struggles were and to explore how to better assist them with improving their academic writing skills. All the students expressed an interest in improving their academic writing skills and in learning how to better incorporate researched data in their writing projects. Further, fourteen of the 24 students had emphasized that the areas they wished to improve most were coherence and cohesiveness in English writing, a lack of academic vocabulary repertoire, and using complex sentences in their writing. Some also reported that they wanted to overcome a tendency to "use simple words" in their final written products, and become able to identify reliable sources for their research.

Peer Feedback

Some students commented that it was a waste of time reading and responding to each other's papers. In addition, students with weaker writing skills reported that reading their peers' papers was challenging and time-consuming. They explained that they had to constantly refer to a dictionary in order to understand what their peers had written, which somewhat slowed the process and made the task too difficult to accomplish. In such cases, students simply wrote a couple of sentences commenting on the length of the paper rather than on its content. A quote from a male student enrolled in the course illustrates this point aptly: *"I think this paper is good because it shows the problem and solution for it clearly, and has good reasons to make this solution. Moreover, it has some objective opinion and data. However, this paper is difficult to read; therefore you should use more understandable expressions."* (Yuki's peer response)

Another important finding was that students were not used to openly criticizing each other's papers as it is not a common practice in Japanese educational institutions. Hence, some comments were very general and did not necessarily provide constructive and valuable feedback for revising and developing their papers. I also noticed that both male and female students were very careful not to hurt each other's feelings. Empathy was a driving force in formulating peer comments, which may be attributed to Japanese social norms in communication. The following quote illustrates students' attitudes toward giving feedback to their peers: *"Your paper is clear and easy to understand, and includes much information. I can know bad and good points of the topic. In the introduction, you wrote what you discuss clearly, so it is easy to understand and interesting."* (Masayuki's peer response)

To change students' beliefs about giving and receiving peer feedback, I decided to provide the students with some training on how to write constructive feedback so that their classmates could make relevant changes, if necessary, in their drafts: They read and responded to other students papers' by reviewing research papers and problem-solution reports written by students in previous classes (anonymous sample papers written by students from previous years). I explained to students that the main goal of the feedback was to assist each other in finding pitfalls (if any) in their drafts, and also to provide each other with ideas and comments about

- what THEY thought could be interesting to add to the researched topic;
- what questions they thought could be addressed in their writing;
- what part of the essay should be improved (e.g., introduction, body, conclusion, references, citation in the work, tables/graphs).

In the first three weeks of this training I devoted 40 minutes of the class time to work out the mechanics of peer feedback with my students. While advanced students were able to read the sample papers quickly, others required more time to read and understand the content of the papers. Students were provided with a peer response sheet (adapted from Oshima & Hogue, 2013) and made relevant comments accordingly. They were asked to write their comments in either their L1 or L2. Their comments were then discussed in the class where each student had a chance to report on his/her peer response. The training sessions continued weekly during the first seven weeks of the semester with a gradual decrease in the second half of the semester. The results of this training created a positive atmosphere for students to comment on each other's papers without fear of losing face or hurting each other feelings.

During the first seven weeks of the course, students commented on all three drafts, thereby providing multi-audience feedback, rather than teacher-only feedback. With students working in pairs and groups of three at times, each student was able to receive feedback from two or three peers and me. To my surprise, through examining students' peer responses, I found that students' comments were more straightforward than my own

feedback as the teacher of this class. Students had commented that they wanted their peers to make relevant revisions so that when they have read it the second time around, it would be more interesting to learn about the issues that the writers had researched. In sum, the training in providing peer feedback to each other had a crucial impact on students in that it addressed the importance of feedback, its meaning, and value in the planning, revising, and the writing process.

Questioning Teacher Feedback to L2 Student Writers

When I provided my own feedback to students of this class, I always tried to include praise to raise students' motivation and encourage those students with weaker writing skills. The reason for including praise in my comments was based on a student survey response (mentioned above) where a male student reported, "*I need my teacher to praise me. If I am praised I can do my best and my motivation to improve is always high.*" (Yuki's survey response) Yet students already had built-in preconceptions that if their written products lacked any grammar mistakes, their written work would meet the criteria to get an "A" grade for the course. I provided students with a variety of feedback, employing coded comments on grammar and collocations, focusing on global rather than local errors, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of the organization and structure, advising students how to make the papers reader-centered, and identifying research questions related to the discourse of a genre in question. I discovered that some students lacked the metalinguistic knowledge to comprehend my feedback and make relevant corrections or revisions in their future drafts. I also found that even advanced students occasionally could not follow the comments that I had provided them with on their earlier drafts. To solve this problem, I decided to use face-to-face conferencing where I could provide oral feedback to my students on their progress.

Exploring Teacher-Student Conferencing

Research in EFL writing indicates that, to be effective, feedback should be provided in a variety of modes, be focused on individual variables and preferences, and serve as the pedagogical tool for learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Peterson, 2008). The axis around which teacher-student conferencing revolves is the Vygotskian concept of *scaffolding*, providing a solid platform for the dialogue between a teacher and student. To ensure efficient learning outcomes as a result of this dialogue, teacher-student conferences should be carefully planned and delivered. One of the most salient issues that Ferris (2006) addresses is the right timing for the conferencing. She insists that earlier teacher-student conferencing is more productive and efficient in that students can make revisions and corrections during the process of writing rather than waiting for the final draft.

So what has worked in my class? Prior to the conferencing, students were given a rubric asking them to prepare a list of questions pertaining to their piece of writing. Some students in my class asked me whether they could use their L1 during the meeting in case they could not make themselves understood in the L2. Surprisingly, most students felt comfortable using the L1 during the conferencing, reporting later that it was easier for them to use L1 metalinguistic knowledge to clarify comments and feedback provided by the instructor. As the class was comprised of 24 students, each student was given 5-7 minutes to discuss issues related to their writing. Throughout the two semesters, each student had four chances to have a conference with the instructor. Those students who could not attend the sessions were asked to have a teacher-student conference after classes. After the conferencing, students were required to reflect on the outcomes and record their reflections in their *learning journals* (a note-book accounting for 30% of their final grade), which were a part of the assessment portfolio.

During the conferencing, I usually made notes about each student's individual learning variables; however, I did not have enough time to talk to a student and make notes simultaneously. As a result, I asked my students in English and in Japanese if I could possibly audio-record our sessions using a voice recorder. I also informed them that the recordings would be used for keeping record of their academic progress and kept safely in my house until after the semester ended. After that, the recordings would be deleted. As no student objected to my request, I recorded the sessions, which turned out to be more effective than the written feedback I provided them with on their first drafts. I could easily transfer the files to my personal computer and keep the record of each student's conversations. These records helped me to prepare for the next meeting and also see how each student progressed throughout the course. That is to say, I wanted to see (a) if students followed up on agreed points of discussion we had had during the teacher-student conferencing, and (b) if they made changes/revisions (if necessary) to their second drafts.

Continuing to Learn from L2 Student Writers

Developing English writing for academic purposes is highly challenging for undergraduate students, particularly when they are writing in an L2. I fully realize that finding the most effective way(s) of teaching L2 learners how to write English academic essays and/or research papers is not an easy task, as each student follows a different pathway of development and so requires a different set of responses from the teacher to help them develop further. What I am striving to do is to explore what works and what does not work with the L2 student writers that I teach. While some pedagogical techniques are successful at times, others require modification, adaptation, and adoption of eclectic approaches to teaching based on students' abilities, needs, and development of academic skills necessary to graduate from a university. In a word, I am learning from my students how to be a better teacher. The journey is an ongoing process of exploration with my students, in relation to research in the field. The puzzles that I'm interested in exploring next are how and why the deployment of writing journals may have a beneficial effect on developing students' fluency skills in writing in English for academic purposes.

References

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Reader Response to “Academic Writing: In Search of Effective Ways of Providing Students with Constructive Feedback”

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The experience of writing an academic paper can be an exhilarating one. When we have a passion for a topic, when we've learned about and drawn conclusions about it, and have a burning need to share a message with a receptive audience, academic writing can be a deeply satisfying process. On the other hand, writing a paper simply because we are required to can be a confusing, tiring, and, in the end, discouraging struggle.

As someone who teaches academic writing to Japanese university students myself, I'm particularly interested in Ms. Shaitan's efforts to see that her second-year students have the former, positive experience. Her practices include a prewriting survey inviting students to reflect on their own areas for improvement, training in peer support, and carefully timed teacher-student consultations. There are more things I would still like to know, however, about how these three components impacted students' attitudes toward writing as well as the quality of their writing.

A prewriting survey such as the one Ms. Shaitan administered is a valuable step for students to go through; their first-year course seems to have helped them identify areas for improvement in their own writing. Still, since she found that she had overestimated the writing skills they had built in that first year, I'm curious as to what extent the first- and second-year courses are coordinated; it seems there's room for improvement.

Ms. Shaitan describes her experiences with some of the perennial challenges of peer feedback, including students who seem overly concerned with discouraging each other with negative comments. The weekly training sessions help nurture a supportive classroom atmosphere, but I'd like to know whether, by the end of the course, students felt that their critical thinking skills had evolved. My own students have little experience even differentiating between facts and opinions in English texts; this makes it difficult for them to evaluate whether the arguments they read are sufficiently supported.

These students experienced writing for multiple readers, with both their teacher and their classmates responding to their papers. I'd like to know more about whether they kept this particular “audience” in mind when choosing their topics, clarifying their writing purpose, and developing their writing. My Academic Writing students represent a variety of departments and tend to choose topics specific to their own academic interests. Thus, they are unlikely to be familiar with each other's content; a marketing major researching and writing about stealth advertising, for example, may get only limited feedback from students majoring in architecture or tourism. As part of the prewriting phase, I have students discuss their topics and positions in groups. Through gauging classmate's understanding (or lack thereof), students will hopefully come to understand two things. First, their paper's message needs to be understandable to a relatively wide audience, and second, this understanding requires that the message be supported by clear organization, flow, and language. I'm curious about whether Ms. Shaitan's students felt that they were able to overcome knowledge gaps through the student interactions she set up.

Ms. Shaitan's idea of having students practice providing peer responses with papers from previous classes strikes me as an ingenious way to provide student writers with experience looking critically at others' writing. I agree with her that giving and receiving constructive comments is challenging for students whose educational culture places relatively little value on peer feedback. I would like to know more, however, about whether her students, initially reluctant to criticize and be criticized on writing, were able to synthesize peer feedback with the insights they gained from the series of teacher-student conferences.

I've enjoyed this overview of Ms. Shaitan's exploratory teaching, and would like to hear more about how the routines of peer and teacher feedback she established in her classes influenced (a) her students' comfort with English academic writing, and (b) their writing itself. On her pre-writing survey, they identified very specific target areas for advancing their academic writing; did she—and did they—see improvement?

Reader Response to “Academic Writing: In Search of Effective Ways of Providing Students with Constructive Feedback”



Martin A. Cater
J. F. Oberlin University

In her short reflective article, Alex describes her struggle to provide constructive feedback to her students. The problems she discusses are issues that many language teachers have to deal with. I can certainly relate to these challenges, and feel a little better knowing that I am not alone in looking for ways to help students become more autonomous through developing feedback and review processes for themselves.

Last year was the first time for me to teach writing at a Japanese university, and initial exploratory practice sessions revealed a real lack of learner enthusiasm towards any kind of peer review: similar to Alex's learners, many of mine strongly believed that it was strictly the teacher's job to provide feedback; others also expressed a reluctance to criticise the work of their peers. As sophomores, the learners had all had some experience of peer review in their previous year, yet any training, if it had been given, had not resulted in them feeling positive about their experience. Due to this feedback, I limited the scope of peer review work in class and spent quite a substantial amount of time marking work at home. This was possible because I had a limited university workload that year; were I to have had more writing classes, such an approach would have been impractical. Students responded well to face-to-face feedback in class although the time available for such sessions was very short, like Alex's, averaging just over five minutes.

Although my students had made it clear that they felt it was not worthwhile, I feel that my decision to minimise our focus on peer review actually denied learners the opportunity to develop valuable skills. The practice of peer feedback, when done well, should foster a sense of community in the language classroom. Being able to critique the work of others in a polite but effective way is not only an important academic ability, but also useful in the

workplace. As learners begin to value the input of their peers, the role of the teacher changes, allowing space for a genuine autonomy to develop. It is clear to me that Alex was right to include this in her lessons, and spend time focusing on how it could be effectively nurtured.

As I begin a new academic year teaching writing at a different institution, I am looking to take a fresh approach to implementing peer feedback in class. Although my new group is at CEFR A1 proficiency, the benefits of conducting the activity are applicable to all levels. This year, I plan to get learners to do a number of short, collaborative writing tasks. This work will then be shared with other groups, who will provide feedback with the help of an instrument focusing on specific aspects of organisation and target structures related to syllabus objectives. It is my hope that the collective nature of creating and evaluating written work will make it easier for students to give each other constructive criticism. A collateral benefit of reducing the volume of output will also allow me more time to give my own feedback. I fully intend to take on board Yuki's response regarding the importance of praise, and will also validate learner comments by echoing them in my own feedback.

As a fellow believer in exploratory teaching, I am sure that my new approach will create additional puzzles as well as address problems for me and my learners. But through a continued process of exploration, reflection, and learning with my own peers such as Alex, I am optimistic that small advances can be made.