ASSESSING WRITING
An International Journal

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Feedback in Hong Kong secondary writing classrooms: Assessment for learning or assessment of learning?

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Abstract

While much of L2 teacher feedback research has focused on the effectiveness of feedback and its impact on student revision and writing, little has been done to examine teachers’ feedback in the larger classroom context of teaching and learning to ascertain the functions teacher feedback serves from an assessment-for-learning perspective. Using multiple sources of data from 26 secondary teachers’ written feedback to 174 student texts, interviews with six of the teachers and 18 students, the present study investigates the nature of teacher feedback and the functions it serves in the teaching-learning-assessment process in the writing classroom. The findings show that teacher feedback focuses largely on assessing writing summatively, primarily serving the purpose of assessment of learning, rather than assessment for learning – i.e., using feedback as a pedagogical tool for improving the teaching and learning of writing. The study calls for greater attention to the implementation of assessment for learning in the writing classroom, and specifically the use of feedback for formative purposes.

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Keywords: Feedback; Teacher response; Writing assessment; L2 writing; Assessment for learning; Secondary school

1. Introduction

In the writing classroom, teacher feedback is a useful pedagogical device to enhance the teaching and learning of writing. It can serve both assessment for learning (AfL) and assessment of learning (AoL) purposes: i.e., to improve student learning (AfL), and to find out what students have learnt (AoL) (Wiliam, 2001).

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doi:10.1016/j.asw.2008.02.003
L2 teacher response research, for the most part, has been approached with a focus on how teachers should give feedback, whether certain feedback strategies are effective, as well as the impact of teacher response on student revision and writing (see e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Little has been done to find out the role teacher feedback plays in the larger context of teaching and learning of writing (Ferris, 2003), and specifically the functions teacher feedback serves from an assessment-for-learning perspective. Taking 26 teachers’ written feedback as a starting point and following up the feedback analysis with individual interviews with six of the teachers and focus group interviews with 18 students, the present study seeks to illuminate the feedback practices of Hong Kong secondary teachers with reference to the functions their feedback serves in relation to the assessment, teaching and learning of writing.

2. Literature review

The AfL–AoL distinction is often seen as a parallel to the longstanding division between formative and summative assessment. To situate “teacher feedback” within the current assessment literature, this section attempts to clarify major issues relating to AfL, AoL, formative assessment, and summative assessment.

2.1. Formative and summative assessment

In the assessment literature, formative assessment and summative assessment have often been seen as two distinct concepts (see Scriven, 1967). Summative assessment aims essentially to “elicit evidence regarding the amount or level of knowledge, expertise or ability” (Wiliam, 2001, p. 169), and is often required for administrative purposes – e.g., to assign grades to students, to place them in the right class, to decide on promotion, etc. (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Formative assessment, on the other hand, aims to “contribute to student learning through provision of information about performance” (Yorke, 2003, p. 478). While summative assessment is usually conducted at the end of a course, formative assessment is continuous and ongoing (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Huot, 2002; Wiliam, 2001). Summative assessment is regarded as formal whereas formative assessment informal. Above all, summative assessment is often associated with the negative aspects of assessment, while formative assessment tends to be viewed in more positive light.

Recent reviews of the dualism formative/summative have, however, shown that they are not “two sides of the same thing” (Roos & Hamilton, 2005, p. 9), as there are overlapping functions between summative and formative assessment. Wiliam (2001) specifically points out that the major difference between formative and summative assessment lies in the use to which the information gathered from the assessment is put, rather than the time of the assessment. An assessment can be summative and formative at the same time because it can serve both formative and summative functions. Take student writing as an example. A writing assessment that takes place at the end of the school term/year is traditionally considered summative, in the sense that it measures what students have learnt in writing in that particular school year, with the scores being used for administrative purposes – to report to parents about students’ performance, to predict future performance, etc. However, it can simultaneously serve formative functions, if the information from the assessment is used to inform students about their strengths and limitations in writing and to improve writing instruction. Conversely, regular writing practice that occurs during the school year, which is ongoing and more informal compared with end-of-term writing assessment, and hence tends to be regarded as formative, can serve primarily summative purposes if the informa-
tion arising from the writing is used to provide judgment of learning, reporting to students about their performance in writing, rather than for reinforcement of learning. When regular classroom writing serves summative rather than formative purposes, it is in reality mini-summative assessment rather than formative assessment. Essentially what distinguishes formative from summative assessment is whether the assessment is used to work towards the improvement of teaching and learning.

2.2. Assessment for learning vs. assessment of learning

It is clear from the above that AoL and AfL are not mutually exclusive, as assessment can serve both AoL and AfL purposes (though it is possible for an assessment to stop at AoL). In AoL, students’ performance and progress are assessed against specified learning targets and objectives, often serving reporting purposes. AfL, on the other hand, focuses on the improvement of teaching and learning (Earl, 2003). It aims to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses through quality feedback to enhance learning, and to help teachers review their teaching objectives and strategies to improve instruction (Curriculum Development Institute [CDI], 2004). In AfL, students no longer play a passive role but instead are active participants in the assessment process (Gardner, 2006).

In recent years, the potential of AfL in the classroom has been more and more recognized, as shown in the increasing importance put on AfL in curriculum policy statements in different parts of the world, as well as a growing interest in research on classroom-based assessment (see Rea-Dickins, 2007) – e.g., in the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong. In the UK, AfL research has begun to make a direct impact on assessment practices at the classroom level (see Black & Wiliam, 2003). In Australia, AfL is a central plank of curriculum reform, and recent research conducted on AfL in Queensland schools has demonstrated the beneficial outcomes of AfL practices in Australian secondary education (Sebba & Maxwell, 2005). In Hong Kong, Davison (2007) reports that work in introducing school-based assessment (Davison & Hamp-Lyons, in press; Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority [HKEAA], 2007; SBA Consultancy Team, 2006) reflects a growing concern with how AfL can be integrated into summative assessment.

2.3. Feedback and assessment for learning vis-à-vis assessment of learning

In AfL, feedback has a crucial role to play. Feedback is “information that provides the performer with direct, useable insights into current performance, based on tangible differences between current performance and hoped for performance” (Wiggins, 1993, p. 182). Using Wiliam’s (2001) definitions of formative assessment, to use feedback to promote assessment for learning, i.e., formative feedback, the following are essential:

- Students are told about their strengths and what needs to be done in their writing – e.g., areas for improvement, in terms of content, organization, language, etc.; the assessment is prospective;
- Information is communicated clearly and made intelligible to students in terms of what they have learnt, hence a close link between teaching, learning and assessment;
- Students act on the teacher feedback and are provided with opportunities to improve their learning based on the teacher feedback;
- Students play an active role in managing their own learning.
According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), good feedback practice specifically has the following characteristics: it (1) clarifies what good performance is; (2) facilitates the development of self-assessment; (3) delivers high-quality information to students about their learning; (4) encourages teacher and peer dialogue; (5) enhances motivation and self-esteem; (6) provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; and (7) enables teachers to fine tune their teaching. Feedback is forward-looking, helping students improve their future performance, and hence feedback is also feedforward (Carless, Joughin, & Liu, 2006).

Applying Wiliam’s (2001) definitions of formative assessment and the principles of good feedback practice proposed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) to the writing classroom, I establish six characteristics of feedback that are used to promote assessment for learning. These form the framework for analyzing the nature and functions of teacher feedback in the study.

1. The assessment is prospective: students are told about their strengths and what needs to be done in their writing – e.g., areas for improvement in terms of content, organization, language, etc. (also see Jones & Tanner, 2006);
2. Information is communicated clearly and made intelligible to students in terms of what they have learnt, clarifying what good performance is and also fostering a close link between teaching, learning and assessment;
3. Students are provided with opportunities to act on teacher feedback and to improve their writing – i.e., to close the gap;
4. Students play an active role in managing their own learning – e.g., in engaging in peer/self-assessment and/or a dialogue with the teacher;
5. Students enhance their motivation and self-esteem in writing as a result; and
6. Feedback is used to improve teaching.

3. The study

3.1. Purpose of study

The present study aims to investigate the nature and functions of teacher feedback to find out the extent to which teacher feedback serves assessment for learning purposes. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of teacher feedback in the Hong Kong writing classroom?
2. To what extent is teacher feedback exploited for assessment for learning purposes?

Before turning to the method of study, information about writing and AfL in the Hong Kong secondary context is provided.

3.2. Writing in Hong Kong secondary classrooms

In Hong Kong secondary classrooms, writing has an important role to play. Students are generally required to submit compositions every two to three weeks, with schools requiring a total of 8–12 compositions in each school year. Student writing is assessed and given scores/grades, which count towards the final grades students receive at the end of the school year (e.g., 20–30%). Such writing is often timed and takes place in product-based classrooms of large class sizes (about 35–40 students). The majority of teachers rely heavily on textbooks (produced by local commercial
publishers), where composition topics mostly come from. Writing lessons are often based on ideas provided in textbooks, which generally draw attention to the content and organization of ideas in texts. In Hong Kong, there is a strong assessment culture that is geared towards preparing students for public examinations (Hamp-Lyons, 2007), though recent education reforms have encouraged a greater emphasis on AfL (CDI, 2004). In Hong Kong, secondary students have to take two high-stakes examinations, one at the end of Secondary 5 (Grade 11) and the other at the end of Secondary 7 (Grade 13). In 2009–2012, a new 6-year curriculum (i.e., Secondary 1 to 6/Grades 7 to 12) will be implemented, which requires students to take only one public examination at the end of Secondary 6 (Grade 12). In preparation for the upcoming curriculum reform, a number of assessment innovations have been introduced in recent years, such as school-based assessment in English for Secondary 5 (Grade 11) students and the use of standards-referenced assessment in the 2007 Secondary 5 (Grade 11) public examinations. In writing, for example, the standards-referenced assessment evaluates student writing in terms of five levels (1–5), with specific criteria provided for each level (e.g., “relevance and adequacy of content for purpose”, “accuracy and appropriacy of punctuation, vocabulary, language patterns”, “planning and organization”, and “appropriacy of tone, style and register”), unlike the previous public examination that assessed writing in terms of broad criteria like content and accuracy.

3.3. Assessment for learning in Hong Kong context

In Hong Kong, assessment for learning is one of the top priorities in the English language education reform agenda (CDC, 2004; CDI, 2004). The oral assessment innovation in school-based assessment at Secondary 4 and 5 (Grades 10 and 11) is a recent initiative to promote AfL in English (SBA Consultancy Team, 2007). Research on AfL is beginning to develop in English language teaching in Hong Kong – e.g., Carless (2002, 2005) on AfL in primary schools and Davison (2004, 2007) on classroom-based assessment in secondary schools.

In the writing classroom, a number of initiatives have been proposed to support assessment for learning, such as portfolios, feedback sheets or checklists, and conferencing (CDC, 2002, 2006). Process writing is recommended for enhancing the teaching and learning of writing (CDC, 2004). It is suggested that teachers give feedback on students’ drafts, focusing initially on ideas and organization and subsequently on language and style. Teachers are advised against placing too much emphasis on language in the writing classroom:

Teachers should, therefore, avoid adopting solely traditional product-based approaches to writing which are mainly preoccupied with the teaching of form and usage, with the finished product seen as a display of learners’ ability in accurately manipulating grammar, vocabulary and mechanics (such as spelling, punctuation and handwriting). (CDC, 1999, p. 95)

The importance of “quality feedback” is emphasized, which refers to feedback that is “motivating, specific, constructive and clearly linked to the success criteria that have been established between the teacher and the learners at an earlier stage” (CDC, 2004, p. 200). A focus on using feedback to enhance learning is evident.

Local research on curriculum reform has indicated that there is often a mismatch between curriculum intentions and school realities (Morris, Lo, & Adamson, 2000; Yung, 2001). The growing AfL research (e.g., Carless, 2002, 2005; Davison, 2004, 2007), though limited, has demonstrated that the implementation of assessment for learning presents great challenges to local teachers, especially given the exam-oriented culture in Hong Kong secondary schools (Hamp-Lyons, 1999, 2007; HKEAA, 2007). There is research to indicate that Hong Kong teachers are not
enthusiastic about process approaches because the exam-oriented culture does not encourage them to engage students in multiple drafting (Pennington, Brock, & Yue, 1996). Research on feedback has looked specifically at error correction (e.g., Lee, 2003, 2004) and the relationship between teachers’ intentions behind their comments and students’ perceptions (e.g., Chen & Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Pang, 1999). Little is known, however, about the way teacher feedback is used to promote learning in the writing classroom.

3.4. Method of study

To find out the nature of feedback in the classroom writing and how the feedback is utilized, data were gathered from multiple sources: (1) teachers’ written feedback; (2) interviews with teachers; and (3) focus group interviews with students. While the first data source provide information on the nature of teacher feedback, the second and third sources supplement the first source by shedding light on other forms of feedback, if any, and the purposes and usefulness of feedback perceived by teachers and students, so that conclusions can be drawn about the extent to which teacher feedback serves assessment for learning purposes. Data collection took place in the academic year 2005–2006.

3.5. Data collection

Convenience sampling was used in the study. Fig. 1 summarizes the data collection procedure. Twenty-six secondary English teachers working in 15 different schools agreed to participate in the study. The 26 teachers were from the three different bands of secondary school in Hong Kong (banding is used to reflect students’ overall academic performance, band 1 being the best) – 42%
band 1, 38% band 2, and 20% band 3. The teachers were all Cantonese-speaking, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years, and all subject-trained (i.e., with an English subject knowledge qualification recognized by the Hong Kong Government, such as a degree in linguistics). Each of them provided 5–6 student texts they had marked, randomly selected from different abilities to ensure that their feedback was representative of their usual responding behavior. In total, 174 student texts were collected from Secondary 1–5 (i.e., ages 11–16) students, all written in class and represented one-shot writing, according to the teachers. Follow-up interviews were conducted with six volunteer teachers selected across the range of experience (i.e., with 3–15 years of teaching experience), two from each of the three bands of secondary school. Individual face-to-face interviews (lasting about 45 min each) were first conducted to ascertain teachers’ feedback practices and their context of work, followed up by email interviews that aimed to clarify the nature and functions of teachers’ feedback practices. Focus group interviews (lasting about 45 min each) were also conducted with 18 students taught by three of the teachers in a band 1, band 2 and band 3 school, with 6 students in each group (selected by the teachers from different abilities). The face-to-face interviews with teachers and students were semi-structured, conducted in Cantonese and audio-taped.

3.6. Data analysis

Data analysis mainly involved (1) analysis of teachers’ written feedback, (2) translation, transcription and coding of face-to-face interview data, and (3) coding and summary of email interview data. The first step in the written feedback analysis involved reading through all the student texts to find out the general characteristics of the teacher feedback, which was found to comprise mainly markings on student texts (pertaining to language errors), some written comments, grades/scores, and assessment criteria used to evaluate the writing. Based on such a preliminary analysis, it was decided that the feedback analysis should cover the following: (1) the overall focuses of feedback (e.g., form, content, organization); (2) the strategies used in error feedback; (3) functions of the written comments; and (4) criteria used in the grading/scoring. The error feedback analysis is based on Lee’s (2004) analytic framework (see Appendix A) while the comment analysis is adapted from Ferris (2003) (see Appendix B). Face-to-face interview data were translated and transcribed. Data analysis then involved preliminary reading of data, writing of notes in margins, and data reduction (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001) by sorting the information into categories based on the six characteristics of feedback that serves assessment for learning purposes summarized in Section 2.3.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Teacher feedback analysis

The feedback analysis found a total of 5353 feedback points (4,891 markings on student texts plus 462 written comments), with 94.1% of the feedback focusing on form, 3.8% on content, 0.4% on organization, and 1.7% on other aspects such as general comments on student writing (see Table 1). The form-focused feedback consisted of primarily error feedback marked on student texts – a total of 4891, accounting for 91.4% of the total feedback. It can be concluded that teachers’ predominant focus was on students’ weaknesses pertaining to language use. These findings are not surprising, given existing research evidence that ESL teachers pay a great deal of attention to student written errors (Lee, 2004; Zamel, 1985).
Of the 4891 error feedback points marked on the student texts, 71.5% received direct feedback (i.e., with corrections provided), 21.6% coded feedback (i.e., use of correction symbols), and 6.9% uncoded feedback (i.e., errors underlined or circled) (see Table 2). No other indirect error feedback strategy (e.g., indicating an error in the margin and requiring the student to both locate and correct the error) was used. The findings suggest that teachers provided correct answers for the majority of errors and that students’ role in error correction, identification and location was minimal. Moreover, the error feedback appeared to be very detailed. With a total number of 36,433 words in the 174 student texts, there was an average of 1 error feedback in every 7 words. The findings are consistent with those found by Lee (2004) in another study, which showed that comprehensive error feedback was adopted by most teachers, and that direct feedback was used more often than indirect feedback. Lee (2004), however, cautioned that teacher error corrections might not always be accurate and that when teachers mark errors comprehensively, there is a tendency of over-marking.

There were 462 written comments, which served a range of functions. Negative comments (9.3%) and comments on grammar and mechanics (24.6%), which mostly point to students’ limitations, took up a total of 33.9%. There seemed an equal emphasis on students’ strengths in the written comments, as 38.3% of them were positive. Overall, however, the positive comments were negligible in view of the fact that there were only 177 positive comments but 4891 error feedback points that pinpointed student written errors. Given that the major focus of teacher feedback in the study was on errors, the overall feedback was likely to be perceived as more negative than positive.

In addition to the feedback marked on the student texts and the written comments, all the 174 student texts received a grade or score. The assessment criteria (see Table 3) were written on 130 student texts by 22 of the teachers. The majority of the teachers (87.4%) evaluated the student texts using “content” and “accuracy,” with only 9% including “organization” as well. The findings show that none of the teachers used task-specific criteria to evaluate the student writing. These broad criteria are unlikely to give students a clear idea about how their writing performance relates specifically to the learning objectives pertaining to specific writing tasks. It is useful to note that the examinations authority in Hong Kong used “content” and “language” in their assessment of public examination writing before 2007 (i.e., while data were being collected for the study), and
Table 3
Scoring/grading of student writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring criteria</th>
<th>Percentage/number of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content and accuracy/language</td>
<td>87.4% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, accuracy and organization</td>
<td>9.1% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, accuracy and paragraph</td>
<td>4.5% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, language, style and handwriting</td>
<td>4.5% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, language and presentation</td>
<td>4.5% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is plausible that teachers in the study assessed student writing using the same criteria in order to prepare students for public examinations.

4.2. Teacher interviews

The teacher interviews supplement the feedback data and provide first-hand contextual information to shed light on teachers’ feedback practices. From the face-to-face interviews, it was found that there was a consistent policy within all the six schools requiring English teachers to perform “detailed marking” of student writing, i.e., responding to every single error, which explains the heavy emphasis of the written feedback on errors. This comprehensive, detailed marking/correction policy is typical across Hong Kong secondary schools. The teachers reported that a product-centred approach was adopted, which required students to submit single drafts. Revision was not built into the writing process, and though detailed feedback and comments were written on student texts, students were not required to revise their essays, except to rewrite sentences that contained errors. The product approach might explain why only 8.6% of the feedback was in the form of commentary. The marking criteria (i.e., mainly “content” and “accuracy”) were determined by the English panel (consisting of all the English teachers, headed by the panel chair). It was believed that student writing had to be marked in the way that the examinations authority marked student writing in public examinations, which according to the teachers, focused mainly on language accuracy. One teacher said,

The Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (public exam at the end of Secondary 5/Grade 11) gives grades by looking at the accuracy and vocabulary.

Another teacher said,

We think students’ writing practice is for examinations. So we simply focus on accuracy, fluency and vocabulary as we have to prepare students for the public exams.

The grading/scoring function of the writing was important for all the six teachers. Each school year, students were required to write a range of 8–10 essays on different topics (mostly involving different text types), mainly single drafts with marks counting towards the final writing scores students obtained for the school year. Apparently, students’ writing served a primarily summative purpose, with teacher feedback being used to evaluate student performance retrospectively (rather than prospectively) without opportunities for students to act on teacher feedback by revising their drafts to close their gaps in writing.

The follow-up email interviews shed further light on the nature and functions of teacher feedback. For all the teachers, the goals for teaching and learning writing were construed largely in
terms of development of language accuracy, which can explain why error feedback received the greatest attention. One teacher wrote:

Our school requires teachers to draft a task description list on which vocabulary and grammar items are specified. Sometimes, common patterns may be provided.

Although one teacher put down “improving organization of writing” and “enhancing creativity, logical and analytical thinking of students” as the learning goals, these were seen as less important than “practicing using vocabulary and sentence structures learnt.” The language-focused goal was reflected in the assessment criteria, which were expressed mainly in terms of content and language accuracy (feedback on content was found to be minimal though, as shown in the written feedback analysis above). The potential of such form-focused assessment for student learning, however, was found to be limited, as the majority of errors were corrected by teachers. Conferences were seldom held, except occasionally with weaker students and those who failed. Peer and self-evaluation was rarely used, though one teacher said she sometimes encouraged students to exchange their writing for comments. Involvement of students in assessment, therefore, was minimal.

The relationship between assessment, teaching and learning was narrowly conceived, mainly in terms of students’ development of written accuracy. For example, teachers held oral feedback sessions on common error patterns students made in their writing, and gave students follow-up sentence writing practice. One teacher wrote:

More practice will be given to students if their performance of the writing task is not satisfactory. A certain grammar item will be revised if many students made mistakes using it in their writing task . . . If students are less able, we may have more basic sentence writing practice, i.e., drilling.

Another teacher wrote:

I get a general impression on what mistakes students may make based on their previous writings and I fine-tune my teaching from time to time, but not every time after marking the writing.

As for the effects of feedback on student learning, the teachers did not think that students benefited a lot. One teacher wrote,

They depend very much on their teacher and expect their teacher to correct all mistakes for them.

Despite the time and effort they invested in responding to student writing, the teachers thought that it was not cost-effective:

Students do not show great improvement in grammatical proficiency as they have not internalized what they have learned.

What’s worse, they felt that student motivation was rather low:

Most of them do not like writing . . . they think they can get little improvement despite great effort.

and that teacher feedback had little positive impact on student motivation, except for competent students:
Students don’t have much satisfaction after receiving my feedback, except a few of them who are very capable.

While feedback serving AfL purposes can enhance motivation and self-esteem (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), the findings of the study show that as a result of teacher feedback most students, except for the more proficient ones, became less interested in writing.

On the whole, the teacher interview data show that feedback served primarily summative purposes. The teaching and learning functions it served, if any, related mainly to grammar and appeared to be limited, as teachers focused on common errors in follow-up oral feedback and occasional grammar reinforcement practice. Students’ attention was drawn to grammatical errors rather than broader issues in writing (such as content and organization), with reference to general criteria (“content” and “accuracy”) rather than concrete ‘good’ writing criteria specific to the writing tasks. The feedback process was dominated by teachers, with students playing a primarily passive role.

4.3. Student interviews

Although teachers themselves did not think their feedback was particularly useful, all the students interviewed said that teacher feedback was helpful in the sense that it pointed out their errors in writing, so that students knew what errors they had made. Apparently, students appreciated direct error feedback, which was the most frequent strategy used by teachers in the study. However, when asked if teacher feedback was useful for their writing improvement, doubts were expressed:

I will forget after reading teacher’s feedback so I will make the same mistakes in the next composition.

They confessed that when they were asked to rewrite sentences that contained mistakes, often they did not think:

Sometimes I don’t understand what the teacher has corrected, so I will just copy the answers as corrections.

The result suggests that correcting errors for students does not necessarily help students gain a better understanding of their own errors. Some students pointed out that teacher feedback was not specific enough to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses (the quantitative data show that only 8.6% of the total feedback was written commentary):

I did not know very well what I was good at and weak in after reading my teacher’s feedback.

Overall, the ‘learning’ achieved by students seemed to be mainly in terms of knowing what errors had been made (but forgetting them easily afterwards) but not necessarily improvement of written accuracy as a result of teacher feedback.

Students also pointed out that written feedback alone was not very useful. They felt they would benefit more if written feedback was supported with oral feedback, in-class discussion and follow-up practice:

It is easy for us to forget the feedback if it is just written on the paper . . . I think the more effective way for us to remember the things we did wrong is to discuss them in class and to do some exercises to consolidate our knowledge and understanding.
The usefulness of teachers’ oral feedback was supported by all students interviewed:

I think it’s useful. The teacher will show some good examples to us. If I think the sentences are good, I will copy them. The teacher will also tell us why the sentences are good. I quite like this idea.

Although all the teachers interviewed said they gave oral feedback, some students said that such feedback was not frequently given and they would like teachers to lay more emphasis on oral feedback. In particular, they hoped there could be more in-class discussions about their writing, instead of teachers relying largely on written feedback to help them learn. Specifically, students said they generally welcomed opportunities for peer feedback and conferences with teachers, which were activities seldom used by teachers. Regarding peer evaluation, students were mostly positive. One student said,

When reading others’ compositions, we are able to understand why others have higher marks than ourselves, so I can learn from others to improve my writing.

Slight reservations were made about peer feedback, which mainly relate to the ability of students to provide accurate comments. One student said,

I am afraid sometimes we don’t notice the mistakes we have made, and other classmates cannot spot the mistakes either. At the same times, they may think they are correct and make the same mistakes, and hence the outcome is not desirable.

Conferencing with teachers received more mixed responses. Since individual conferences were normally held only occasionally and only with weak students, students did not like to have conferences that were perceived negatively:

Individual conferences make students feel stressed because it seems that the mistakes you have made are very serious.

Instead, students suggested “informal chatting with teachers in a more relaxing atmosphere.” They felt it is a good idea to have opportunities to talk to teachers, one-on-one, about their writing, but they emphasized the importance of not being labeled as ‘weak’ students and an environment that is relaxing and supportive. Despite the positive value students attached to activities like peer feedback and conferences, the students all said they were rarely used as teachers did not have enough time to conduct the activities:

We have lots of things to learn. Teachers are busy preparing teaching materials. So there may not be enough time . . .

While the feedback and interview data suggest that teachers invested mostly in written feedback, requiring minimal student involvement in the process, students wished that there could be a greater variety of feedback, such as oral feedback and face-to-face discussions with teachers, during which they could have a more active role to play.

When asked if they would prefer re-writing their texts instead of focusing almost exclusively on errors in their ‘corrections,’ many students said they would welcome the idea, since this gave them a chance to improve their writing:

It’s helpful because I can think of new things to add to my composition even after I have finished writing.

In revision, students could also think about their own writing:
I don’t prefer directly copying teachers’ amendments when handing in my corrections. I think it is less boring to re-write the whole composition because we can think more.

The findings, however, show that students were not given the opportunity to revise their texts, since only single drafts were submitted. Even with correcting errors in rewriting their texts, they did not have to think as a large proportion of errors were already corrected by the teachers. Although they welcomed opportunities to participate more actively in the feedback process, teachers’ existing feedback practices tended to reduce them to passive recipients.

For most students, teacher feedback had either a positive or negative effect on their motivation in writing – simply, they felt good when the feedback was positive and vice versa. One student said,

Teachers’ feedback can boost our interest in writing because sometimes teachers appreciate our writing so we are more confident and proud of ourselves.

For some students, however, the effect was just the opposite, especially when the marks received were unsatisfactory:

Now my marks decline and sometimes even fail, so I am not interested in writing.

The student comment below can perhaps summarize students’ general response:

If teachers value our compositions, then we will be confident to write, but if they criticize our compositions, then we will be demotivated to write again.

With detailed error feedback and the use of scores/grades in the study, it can be imagined that teacher feedback could have a damaging psychological impact on student learning.

Finally, when students were asked to evaluate teachers’ feedback practices, their comments all point to the disconnection between assessment and teaching/learning. First, students thought that teachers should consider how feedback could serve better purposes by fostering continuity between composition topics. One student said,

The topic of composition should not change too often; it’s quite confusing. For example, teachers can set the topic of composition as ‘letter writing’ for the whole month so that students can focus on letter writing.

Students hoped that after receiving feedback on a letter they had written, for instance, they would have a chance to write another letter instead of being asked to write an essay of a different nature (which was teachers’ normal practice), so that they would be able to incorporate teacher feedback in their next piece of writing. This was perhaps an indirect way to express a wish for an opportunity to apply what they had learnt from teacher feedback – if not by revising their drafts, at least by having a chance to utilize teacher feedback in a similar type of writing. Another interesting comment is about the weak relationship between teaching and assessment. Students felt that writing instruction had to be strengthened to better prepare them for writing assessment:

If teachers can tell us how to write a good composition, as students we can have a clear direction to write and hence we will be less confused when we are writing.

Another student said,

I think we can have one to two more lessons per week which are devoted to the teaching of writing.
Specifically, students thought that “content” and “accuracy” were insufficient to help them understand the criteria of good writing. They felt that teachers focused too much on making them conform to their ‘expectations’ so much so that creativity was stifled:

Most of the teachers teach us to write according to a template, i.e., according to some given content and structure. If you do not follow, your writing is considered no good.

Another student said,

I just follow the template or format without writing additional content. I can gain a higher mark. But I am less motivated to write creatively.

Students’ comments indicate that they felt the need to write in a certain way that fulfilled the expectations of teachers at the expense of their interest and development of creativity. More importantly, while trying to meet teachers’ expectations, they were still unsure about the qualities of good writing. The student interview data suggest that teachers could have used more specific assessment criteria (such as task-specific criteria), teach students explicitly about these criteria, and use a greater variety of examples to illustrate how different criteria can be achieved in writing.

To sum up, although students in the study appreciated teacher feedback and found it useful in terms of showing them what written errors they had made, they were not sure about its effectiveness in bringing about their writing improvement in the longer term. With marks/grades given to student writing, and when student writing was awash in red ink, teacher feedback could be discouraging, especially for those who did not fare well. Although students found teachers’ oral feedback given to the whole class useful, the ‘learning’ achieved through assessment was mainly related to acquisition of grammar and vocabulary. Even so, students mostly thought that teacher feedback failed to inform them of their strengths and weaknesses in writing. They were aware of their passive role in the assessment process, and they generally welcomed opportunities to engage in multiple drafting, peer assessment, and individual conferences with teachers. While the written feedback analysis and teacher interviews have demonstrated the great effort teachers put into marking student writing, the student interview data suggest that teachers might have to re-prioritize their feedback practices – e.g., by requiring students to revise their drafts and by placing a greater emphasis on self-/peer evaluation and conferences, so that more productive learning could be achieved. Overall, the student interview data suggest that teacher feedback explored in the study primarily served assessment of learning purposes, as evident in the following quote from a student:

From the grade, you will know your standard. If you have high marks you realize you are performing well. If you have low marks you will be reminded to work harder.

4.4. Assessment for learning vis-à-vis assessment of learning

Below is a brief comparison of the formative purposes teacher feedback can/should serve and the kind of feedback teachers give in the Hong Kong writing classrooms, as revealed in the findings.
Formative nature of teacher feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wiliam, 2001)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback in Hong Kong writing classrooms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Assessment is prospective; students are told about their strengths and what needs to be done in their writing – e.g., areas for improvement (in terms of content, organization, language, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Information is communicated clearly and made intelligible to students in terms of what they have learnt, clarifying what good performance is and also fostering a close link between teaching, learning and assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students are provided with opportunities to act on teacher feedback and to improve their writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students play an active role in managing their own learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Students enhance their motivation and self-esteem in writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Feedback is used to improve teaching.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do the findings tell us about teacher feedback in relation to learning, teaching and assessment? First, the link between teacher feedback and student learning of writing is tenuous. The learning students obtain mostly relates to errors, and the information from teacher feedback pertains to ALL errors they have made, instead of pervasive error patterns or those that are pertinent to the specific writing task. Although summative feedback on errors may still contribute to learning, such learning is limited as students are not necessarily made aware of ways to address the weaknesses in their writing, especially in areas other than accuracy, nor are they provided with opportunities to act upon teacher feedback by revising their writing. As for teaching, evidence to show that teachers make use of feedback to fine-tune and improve their instruction is limited, except for reinforcement of grammar and vocabulary as a result of students’
common errors in writing. Writing is intended mainly to give students practice to prepare for examinations, with no task-specific criteria that help students see the link between teaching and assessment. In terms of assessment, as feedback is offered to one-shot writing, the formative evaluation of work-in-progress is not possible. The orientation is very much towards summative assessment, with teacher feedback used to give students information about the product of writing—mainly in the form of grades/scores. Students’ role is extremely passive, and there is little evidence to suggest that teacher feedback is able to enhance motivation and self-esteem in writing.

5. Implications and conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that in Hong Kong secondary writing classrooms, summative and formative assessment remain separate. There seems to be a missing link between teaching, learning, and assessment of writing, with teacher feedback used primarily for assessment of learning. Despite the limitations of the study (such as small sample size, making generalizations impossible), a few implications can be drawn, which provide avenues for further research.

First, the study has shown that these teachers’ feedback practices are influenced by institutional context and values, possibly making it hard for them to use feedback to realize the potential of assessment for learning. With a feedback policy mandated by the English panel, attention is focused inordinately on language errors, resulting in by and large negative and discouraging evaluation of student writing, especially for the less proficient learners. Student attention is not drawn to pervasive error patterns or selected grammar items. Instead, feedback is given to all errors with no reference to the specific assessment criteria related to the goals of writing instruction. Such a feedback policy requires teachers to play a dominant role in responding to student writing, and as a result, opportunities for instructive evaluation (Huot, 2002) are not exploited. Future research could look into the problems and constraints teachers face in their work context to implement assessment for learning, so that teacher response can be more meaningfully used to realize the potential of formative assessment.

Second, the study has shown that teacher feedback is not fully utilized to benefit student learning. While students appreciate teachers’ effort in responding to their writing and particularly like teachers’ oral feedback given to the whole class, they think that teachers’ written feedback serves mainly to inform them of their written errors without having a significant impact on their writing. Although they are made to play a passive role in the feedback process, the findings suggest that students are interested in experimenting with a wider range of feedback options, including in-class discussions, peer evaluation, and conferences with teachers. They would like feedback to be delivered to improve their learning without being labeled as ‘weak’ students through the feedback option(s) their teachers use (e.g., conferencing). They also welcome alternative ways to go about responding to teacher written feedback, including opportunities to revise their writing. They express a wish to learn more about the criteria of “good” writing. Indeed, students’ voices need to be heard to help teachers plan their feedback strategies. Future research can investigate feedback from the student perspective so that teacher feedback can better respond to student needs.

Finally, to harness the potential of teacher feedback to improve teaching and learning, there are important implications for teacher education. Teachers can be helped to re-examine the goals of writing instruction, how writing is taught, and how assessment should reflect the instructional goals and link to the pedagogical activities. To implement assessment for learning in the writing classroom, attention needs to be paid not only to teachers’ written feedback but also to other
instructional strategies and activities that support the teaching and learning of writing, such as conferencing, self- and peer evaluation. Research could look into how teachers can be helped to foster a better link between assessment, teaching and learning in the writing classroom, and specifically how they can better use feedback to promote teaching and learning.

Appendix A. Analysis of error feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error feedback strategy</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct error feedback</td>
<td>Locate and correct errors</td>
<td>Has <em>went</em> gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncoded error feedback</td>
<td>Locate errors</td>
<td>Has <em>went</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coded error feedback</td>
<td>Locate errors and identify error types</td>
<td>Has <em>went</em> verb form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect feedback (Indirect location of errors)</td>
<td>Indirectly locate errors</td>
<td>e.g., putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line – e.g. Yesterday I witness a robbery on my way home from school. It was about 5 pm. I am walking along Chater Road when a car stopped right in front of me . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirectly locate errors and identify error types</td>
<td>e.g., by writing “verb form” (or “v”) in the margin to indicate a verb form error on a specific line – e.g. Yesterday I witness a robbery on my way home from school. It was about 5 p.m. I am walking along Chater Road when a car stopped right in front of me . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B. Analysis of comment types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask for information/question</td>
<td><em>What did you think about this robbery?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction/question</td>
<td><em>Before you ask your friend about her classmates, can you tell her yours in HK first?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction/statement</td>
<td><em>You need to offer concrete advice and suggestion that would help Alan to solve his problem.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction/imperative</td>
<td><em>Read the instructions carefully.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give information/statement</td>
<td><em>You don’t know Alan. He’s just writing to a newspaper. It’s unlikely that you would see each other.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive comment/statement or exclamation</td>
<td><em>It’s good that you have a wide variety of vocabularies that you can use in writing, e.g., valuable, malefactor.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar/vocabulary/mechanics comment/question, statement, or imperative/exclamation</td>
<td><em>Please pay attention to tenses.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative comment/statement/exclamation</td>
<td><em>Some of the arguments don’t stand.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized comment</td>
<td><em>Sorry to hear that you had a boring summer holiday!</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Ferris (2003).
References


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