Feedback revolution: what gets in the way?

Icy Lee

Feedback in writing has in recent years attracted the attention of an increasing number of writing researchers. While much feedback research focuses on the act of feedback per se, little attention has been paid to the issue of teacher readiness to implement change in feedback. Using data gathered from Hong Kong secondary teachers attending a teacher education seminar on feedback in writing, this article investigates teachers’ readiness to implement change in feedback as well as their perceptions of the factors that may facilitate or inhibit change. The findings show that while teachers may be cognitively aware of the need for a feedback revolution, there are obstacles that get in the way of innovation. The article concludes that if teachers are to start a feedback revolution a number of issues have to be addressed, including enhancing teacher training and empowering teachers.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a surge of interest in research on feedback in writing (Ferris 2003; Hyland and Hyland 2006; Stern and Solomon 2006; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, and Takashima 2008), and as a result there is no lack of advice on how to give feedback in the literature. Such feedback advice (for example feedback on intermediate drafts is more effective than that given to terminal drafts), which primarily emanates from process-oriented writing research in US college contexts (for example Ferris ibid.), has failed to permeate contexts within which EFL writing teachers work. In EFL school contexts in particular, it is common to find writing teachers adopting conventional feedback practices, collecting single drafts from students, marking student writing laboriously with little student involvement, and finding themselves burnt out through engaging in this gruelling and exhausting aspect of their work.

Despite teachers’ reticence about such day-in-and-day-out chores that eat into their time, there is a tacit awareness that their efforts in feedback do not really pay off. Students continue to make the same mistakes, become more and more reliant on the teacher, and their writing does not necessarily improve as a result of teacher feedback. With a paradigm shift in assessment that places more emphasis on the relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment (Davison and Cummins 2006)—and hence assessment for learning (i.e. using assessment to promote learning) rather than assessment of learning (i.e. using assessment for primarily administrative purposes)—a revolution in conventional feedback practices seems imperative. However, are teachers ready for a feedback revolution?
The present study is motivated by a lack of attention to the issue of teacher readiness to implement change in feedback. In spite of espoused feedback principles, it is not certain if teachers support these principles and are ready to introduce innovation to their current feedback practices. While much existing research focuses on the act of feedback per se, little attention has been paid to whether teachers are prepared to innovate in terms of feedback. Zeroing in on the teachers themselves is of paramount importance since they are the deliverers of feedback and agents of change in the classroom. Using questionnaire data gathered from Hong Kong secondary teachers attending a teacher education seminar on feedback in writing, this article investigates teachers’ readiness to implement change in feedback as well as their perceptions of the factors that may facilitate or inhibit change. The present study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. Are secondary teachers in Hong Kong ready to introduce innovation to their feedback practices?
2. What factors may facilitate or inhibit change in teachers’ feedback practices?

The study

Context

To contextualize the study, it is important to first take stock of Hong Kong secondary teachers’ existing feedback practices. Lee’s (2008) study (based on feedback analysis of 174 student texts collected from 26 secondary teachers and in-depth interviews with six of them) revealed the following:

- teachers focus predominantly on the language form in responding to student writing
- they require single drafts from students
- they mark errors comprehensively, i.e. they mark all errors
- the most common error feedback techniques they adopt are direct feedback (i.e. providing correct answers for students) and coded feedback (i.e. using error codes like ‘T’ for ‘tense’)
- some teachers tend to use a large number of error codes
- they give scores to student compositions, which are used mainly for summative purposes (as the scores contribute to students’ final grades)
- they use broad assessment criteria such as content, language, and organization in marking student writing
- self-/peer evaluation and conferencing are rarely used
- writing assessment has little impact on teaching and learning.

Teacher education seminar on feedback

To problematize teachers’ conventional approaches to feedback and to challenge them to consider more innovative feedback practices, I organized a teacher education seminar titled ‘Marking student writing: do we need a revolution?’ for English department heads and principals of secondary schools. The seminar was targeted at these two groups of participants in particular because in the Hong Kong school context, innovation may only be possible with the sanction of these school leaders. (The promotional flyer for the seminar purposefully highlighted the important role principals and English department heads play in effecting change in the writing classroom.) The seminar was attended by 54 participants (reduced from over 200 registered participants due to a typhoon on the day of the seminar). It started with a 45-minute presentation by the author, mainly summarizing
relevant research findings, both local and international, and revealing inadequacies in conventional feedback practices. Then, three guest speakers, all secondary teachers of English, were interviewed informally about their attempt to introduce alternative feedback strategies in their own teaching context, highlighting issues and concerns through their experience sharing.

**Data collection and analysis**

To find out the participants’ reaction to the idea of a feedback revolution and specifically their readiness to implement innovative feedback practices, they completed a questionnaire (see Appendix) at the end of the seminar, yielding both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected from a question that asked the participants to indicate their response to ten feedback practices recommended in the seminar, mainly to find out if they were already using the strategies, and if not, their attitudes to the strategies after the seminar. These ten feedback practices were derived from feedback and assessment principles in the literature, for example selective error feedback, sparing use of error codes, downplaying scores/grades, integrating teaching, learning, and assessment by using task-specific assessment criteria (Black and Wiliam 2005; Ferris 2003). The qualitative data were gathered from an open-ended question on the participants’ concerns about the topic of feedback, if any. Data were also gathered from the three guest speakers’ experience sharing, yielding additional qualitative data about the frontline teachers’ concerns over the issue of feedback. While the quantitative questionnaire data were collated and qualitative data summarized and categorized, the experience sharing data were transcribed and categorized, both to provide information on teachers’ readiness for and concerns about the implementation of change in feedback.

**Participants**

Forty-eight participants completed the questionnaire, comprising 26 English department heads (54 per cent), 19 English teachers (40 per cent), one principal (two per cent), one teacher educator (two per cent), and one curriculum co-ordinator (two per cent). Twenty-five (52 per cent) of them had teaching experience of over ten years, 16 (33 per cent) had 6–10 years, and seven (15 per cent) had less than five years. The secondary teachers came from all the three bandings of secondary school, i.e. Band 1, 2, and 3, with Band 1 schools attended by the most able students. All the three guest speakers, referred to as Teachers A, B, and C in the paper, taught in Band 1 schools, with teaching experience of 5, 20, and 15 years, respectively.

**Teachers’ readiness for innovation in feedback**

Are teachers ready to bring innovation to their feedback practices? For the sake of convenience, I use ‘teachers’ to refer to the participants of the study though one of them was a principal. Data for this question were collected from the questionnaire.

Table 1 shows the feedback practices currently adopted by the teachers. Only three of the recommended feedback principles were adopted by more than half of the teachers (see boldface items in Table 1) namely, ‘writing correct answers for students only when necessary’, ‘using error codes sparingly’, and ‘familiarizing students with task-/genre-specific criteria
before writing'. The rest of the strategies were not used by the majority of teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback practices adopted by participants</th>
<th>This is currently used in my school (i.e. used on a regular basis)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Marking errors selectively</td>
<td>20.8% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Writing correct answers for students only when necessary</td>
<td>62.5% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Using error codes sparingly</td>
<td>60.4% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 NOT giving scores/grades to compositions</td>
<td>12.5% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Using task-/genre-specific criteria</td>
<td>39.6% (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Familiarizing students with task-/genre-specific criteria before writing</td>
<td>60.4% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Asking students to conduct self-evaluation</td>
<td>31.3% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Asking students to conduct peer evaluation</td>
<td>27.1% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Holding conferences with students</td>
<td>20.8% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Requiring students to write more than one draft</td>
<td>31.3% (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows a breakdown of the results for the teachers who chose ‘This is not currently used’ and their perspectives at the end of the seminar. The majority chose ‘This is not currently used in my school but I will consider adopting it’, except for ‘not giving scores/grades to compositions’. (This is not surprising given the importance attached to summative assessment in Hong Kong.) There were a few (from 20 to 41.7 per cent) who indicated that they would need to further deliberate on the feasibility of the recommended principles. Those who said they would not consider the principles were only in a small minority. Such results are encouraging, especially because questionnaire respondents generally have a tendency to choose the middle option (i.e. ‘fence sitting’, when such an option is available) unless they feel strongly about the other choices. Also, given that teachers tend to be sceptical of innovation (Bailey 1992; Carless 1997), the choice of ‘I will consider adopting it’ suggests that the seminar had made a positive impact in terms of changing teachers’ attitudes to the feasibility of the recommended principles. At the end of the seminar, over half of the teachers seemed ready for a feedback revolution.
This is NOT currently used in my school but I will consider adopting it
This is NOT currently used in my school and I need to further deliberate on its feasibility
This is NOT currently used in my school and I will NOT consider it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback practice</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marking errors selectively</td>
<td>67.6% (23) 29.4% (10) 2.9% (1) 100% (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing correct answers for students ONLY when NECESSARY</td>
<td>58.3% (7) 41.7% (5) 0% (0) 100% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using error codes sparingly</td>
<td>73.3% (11) 20.0% (3) 6.7% (1) 100% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT giving scores/grades to compositions</td>
<td>42.1% (16) 34.2% (13) 23.7% (9) 100% (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using task-/genre-specific criteria</td>
<td>70.4% (19) 22.2% (6) 7.4% (2) 100% (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarizing students with task-/genre-specific criteria BEFORE writing</td>
<td>66.7% (12) 22.2% (4) 11.1% (2) 100% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking students to conduct self-evaluation</td>
<td>76.7% (23) 20% (6) 3.3% (1) 100% (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking students to conduct peer evaluation</td>
<td>76.7% (23) 20% (6) 3.3% (1) 100% (30)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holding conferences with students</td>
<td>61.3% (19) 29.0% (9) 9.7% (3) 100% (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring students to write more than one draft</td>
<td>65.5% (19) 31% (9) 3.4% (1) 100% (29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2** Feedback practices not adopted by participants and their perspectives at the end of the seminar

Specifically, ‘asking students to conduct self- and peer evaluation’ are strategies that the teachers found most likely to adopt, whereas the strategy that appealed to them least was not giving scores/grades for compositions (see boldface items in Table 2). There is local research that demonstrated the benefits of peer feedback (for example Lee 1997; Tsui and Ng 2000), which might explain why self-/peer feedback appealed to the teachers most. On the other hand, due to a culture in Hong Kong classrooms that places a lot of weight on the assessment of learning (Hamp-Lyons 2006), it is
understandable that the teachers seemed least receptive to ‘not giving scores/grades to compositions’. (In fact, not giving scores/grades was recommended as an option, and there are other options like scoring selected essays, delayed evaluation, etc.)

Factors facilitating or inhibiting change in feedback practices

Even though a large number of teachers responded to the seminar by indicating that they would consider adopting the recommended feedback principles, it is not certain if they would really go back to their school to implement the strategies. What factors may facilitate or inhibit implementation of change in feedback? Data for this question were drawn from the qualitative responses in the questionnaire, as well as the guest speakers’ experience sharing.

Teacher training

The findings show that one of the major stumbling blocks for innovation in feedback is the lack of professional training, as there were 11 open-ended questionnaire responses, out of 30, regarding the need for teacher training. Teachers can only be ready to innovate when they are adequately equipped, as shown in the comments below:

I reckon some marking innovations can be feasible in Hong Kong secondary classrooms provided that teachers have sufficient support and proper training.

If possible, give more workshops/training to teachers on how to give specific and constructive feedback on student writing.

There should be a bank of resources, scaffolds, rubrics, evaluation forms for self, peer, and teacher evaluation. A forum would also be good to have.

Teacher A, one of the three guest speakers, also underlined the pivotal role played by teacher education. She admitted her change from a ‘vending machine’ to a ‘writing teacher’ after taking a teacher education course on teaching and assessment of writing, which encouraged her to use peer feedback and genre pedagogy:

Before I took the teacher education course, I considered myself as a vending machine. What I mean is my students inserted a composition so I marked it and my students got the end product and they were not really involved in the process of assessment... After taking the teacher education course, ... I would not consider myself as a vending machine but rather I would consider myself as a writing teacher by adopting genre approach in the writing classroom. I was seriously considering restructuring the writing syllabus for my Form 4 and Form 5 students (i.e. Grades 10 and 11) so as to give them more time on peer feedback.

Support from department heads, school principals, and parents

Another obstacle to change is resistance from key stakeholders such as department heads, school principals, and parents, as indicated in the three open-ended questionnaire responses below:

I guess that many department heads would believe that if less restrictive (and less grammar-focused) marking methods were used, the students’
performance would suffer. It will be very difficult to convince them otherwise.

Hard to convince administrator to accept reducing the number of writing tasks.

My only concern is how to convince parents the benefits of the implementation of the new writing feedback we are using.

Without garnering support from school leaders like department heads and principals, teachers' hands are tied because in many schools teachers are not given the autonomy to try out new ideas but instead have to adhere to principles stipulated by English departments (see Lee 1997). Parents are seen as another obstacle because without their understanding and support, school administrators and teachers find it hard to change conventional practices. In feedback, strategies like de-emphasizing scores/grades, having students submit multiple drafts but probably on fewer topics, selective error feedback, etc. are unlikely to be welcome by parents, unless they are well informed and convinced of the rationale for the change.

Teacher B’s experience bears testimony to the importance of the support of principals, department heads, and parents. With herself as the English department head being keen on promoting change in feedback, Teacher B acknowledged the significance of the principal's support:

I am really grateful that I have a principal who is very understanding in terms of the pieces of composition that we can turn out a year.

Thanks to the principal's understanding and support, Teacher B was able to implement process pedagogy in her school. She and her colleagues require students to submit multiple drafts, at the same time reducing the total number of compositions students write for one school year (i.e. more drafts for each writing topic but fewer topics). Her experience also shows the importance of obtaining parents' support:

We have a lot of dialogues with parents and we sometimes hold forums with them about how we handle the marking. . . . It's a whole-school approach, and with the backing of the principal, that helps in carrying through our own departmental policies.

Failure to get the principal's support, on the other hand, can be frustrating, as shown in Teacher C’s experience. She had had very positive experience with peer evaluation and teacher–student conferencing in her own classroom, which was not a common practice in her school. When she tried to invite her principal to attend the teacher education seminar on feedback, perhaps with a view to beginning a dialogue on introducing innovation in feedback, she received an indifferent response:

When I invited my principal, she told me that she's busy with meetings so she couldn't come.

Practical constraints

The practical constraints teachers are faced with present another obstacle, for example large classes, heavy workloads, and tight teaching schedules, as noted in five open-ended questionnaire responses, including the following:
Though there are a lot of benefits in the suggested approaches, the time needed in meeting the students individually or rereading the drafts is worrying.

Due to time constraint, it’s very difficult to implement peer checking and writing three drafts.

The large class size and great number of students are still the biggest obstacles in implementing process marking/selective marking.

Such practical constraints have been found, in earlier studies (for example Hamp-Lyons 2006; Pennington, Brock, and Yue 1996), to create enormous obstacles for the implementation of alternative pedagogies in the Hong Kong writing classroom, for example process approach.

Feasibility and outcome of change

Teachers are not sure if changing their current feedback practices will do students and themselves a service or disservice or if some of the recommended principles are entirely feasible. Nine open-ended questionnaire responses expressed such a concern, for instance:

I really wonder how could less proficient learners be able to spot out others’ mistakes if they cannot even write in complete sentences.
I wonder if weak students have the abilities to help each other.

... a large number of my students write incomprehensible structures. Thus, it is difficult for the peers to understand their buddy’s writing.

My major concern is some teachers may abuse the policy of not requiring teachers to mark comprehensively. I have seen teachers not providing any comments/feedback except for a grade at the end of the writing—which is nearly equal to no marking.

I wonder will students do their writing seriously if no scores/grades will be given?

Overall, a feedback revolution is easier said than done. There were two questionnaire responses that alluded to this:

We need to gather forces first before we can change.

The difficulties are well delineated. But there are still hurdles before a desirable solution can be worked out.

Insights

Need for teacher education

After a 90-minute teacher education seminar that provided teachers with opportunities to challenge their own feedback practices, more than half of the participants had become aware of the need for a change in their feedback practices. Teacher education is needed, especially for teachers with ingrained beliefs about conventional feedback practices as tried and trusted methods of marking student writing, to expose them to alternative feedback strategies, provide them with opportunities to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues about the efficacy of their own feedback, and encourage them to implement change to find out what feedback strategies
work best with their own students. What is more, teachers need to understand how feedback practices are tied to their philosophy of the teaching and learning of writing and that changing their feedback practices would entail a re-examination of their instructional practices. To provide teachers with support during the process of change, ongoing teacher education is necessary. Indeed, teacher education holds the key to helping teachers understand the need to change and improve their feedback practices, as well as equipping them with the knowledge and skills to implement change.

Chasm between the ideal and reality

Being prepared to change feedback practices is one thing, but implementing change quite another. The findings of the study show that there is a chasm between what teachers think they should do in feedback and what they can do to implement change in reality. Change is a complicated process (Kennedy 1988; Lamie 2004). Teachers are not entirely free agents in the process of change: they may be bogged down with heavy workloads, constrained by tight teaching schedules, and have little support from school administrators to affect change. In this age of accountability, teachers are also held responsible for their students’ writing performance. Given the premium placed on public exam results in Hong Kong schools, it is natural that changing the status quo is considered highly risky, as changing existing feedback practices has important ramifications for their work and student learning. While evidence is needed, especially for school administrators, parents, and perhaps teachers themselves, that a feedback revolution will bring benefits to student writing, without changing conventional practices and experimenting with alternative strategies, there is no way teachers can find out the effectiveness of a feedback revolution. Thus, teachers are caught in a catch-22 situation, which is exacerbated further by issues of accountability and lack of autonomy.

Empowering teachers

Given this, a feedback revolution seems possible only when teachers are empowered to play a more autonomous role within the school system (Hamp-Lyons 2006). This is borne out in the findings of the study, as there is a concern that innovation in feedback may not be supported and approved by school leaders. Teacher B’s experience shows that the principal is a key player in a feedback revolution. Given the hierarchical power relationships in schools, it is important to establish a culture of professional trust, where teachers are given autonomy to innovate without having to pander to school leaders. In the study, an invitation to a free teacher education seminar did not get a positive response from the principals. This is not surprising, given that school principals have a hundred and one matters to attend to. In fact, it is not absolutely necessary for principals to take part in seminars on feedback, but it is important that they provide a supportive environment for teachers to experiment with innovative ideas. Teacher empowerment is essential for the success of a feedback revolution.

Conclusion

With only 48 teachers responding to the questionnaire and three secondary teachers sharing their experiences, the findings of the study cannot be

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generalized. Nevertheless, through the study, it is shown that in feedback research, there is a need to look beyond the issue of feedback per se to investigate teachers’ readiness to implement change as well as the factors that might facilitate or inhibit change. Feedback strategies cannot work without teachers’ beliefs that the strategies can work or their readiness to innovate in their own classroom. While teacher education can enhance teachers’ readiness and equip them with knowledge and skills to innovate, the implementation of change also depends on the support and autonomy teachers are given in their own work contexts. School-based ethnographic studies that examine how teachers institute or come to grips with a feedback revolution, how they negotiate with key stakeholders like department heads and principals, and how teacher education can continue to support them during the process of change would provide very interesting avenues for further research.

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References

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Indicate your response to each of the ten feedback practices below by putting a tick in the appropriate space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Current Use</th>
<th>Adoption Decision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>This is currently used in my school (i.e. used on a regular basis)</td>
<td>This is currently used in my school but I will consider adopting it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Writing correct answers for students ONLY when NECESSARY</td>
<td></td>
<td>This is NOT currently used in my school and I need to further deliberate on its feasibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using error codes sparingly</td>
<td></td>
<td>This is NOT currently used in my school and I will NOT consider it</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. NOT giving scores/grades to compositions</td>
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<td>5. Using task-/genre-specific criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Requiring students to write more than one draft</td>
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</table>
Open-ended question

What questions or concerns, if any, do you have on the topic of marking student writing?