Ten mismatches between teachers’ beliefs and written feedback practice

Icy Lee

Research on teachers’ beliefs has demonstrated that beliefs have an important impact on teachers’ practice. In teacher feedback research, however, not much is known about teachers’ beliefs and the extent to which they influence practice. This article reports on the findings from a study that investigated teachers’ beliefs and practice in written feedback from two sources: (1) feedback analysis based on 174 texts collected from 26 teachers and follow-up interviews with seven of them; (2) a survey comprising a questionnaire administered to 206 secondary teachers and follow-up interviews with 19 of them. While the first data source investigated teachers’ actual written feedback, the second source focused on teachers’ beliefs and reported practice, both followed up by interviews that probed teachers’ beliefs and practice. The article presents the salient findings in terms of ten mismatches between teacher beliefs and practice in written feedback and concludes with implications arising from the study.

Introduction

Although responding to student writing is an important and meaningful area of teachers’ work, it is often described in negative terms, referred to as frustrating (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti 1997), gruelling and anxiety-ridden (Stern and Solomon 2006), tedious and unrewarding (Hyland 1990). Teachers, despite their efforts, are described in disparaging terms—as composition slaves (Hairston 1986) and as paternalistic figures who appropriate student writing (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982). Although there is research that shows students value teacher feedback and find it useful to help them improve their writing (Leki 1991), negative effects of teacher feedback have been reported in the literature, such as frustration and confusion (Mantello 1997), and student under-achievement and under-expectation through unfocused marking (OFSTED 1996). Since Truscott (1996) sparked a heated debate on the efficacy of error correction by proposing its abolition, the topic of written corrective feedback has received increasing attention from researchers in different parts of the world.

The majority of feedback studies address the act of teacher feedback per se, and not much is known about teachers’ beliefs and the extent to which their beliefs translate into practice. Research on teachers’ beliefs has demonstrated that beliefs have an important impact on teachers’ practices (Borg 2001; Burns 1992), as teachers are thinking beings who ‘construct their own personal and workable theories of teaching’ (Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis 2004: 244). Teachers’ beliefs and practices play a pivotal
role in the classroom, since they have a direct bearing on the teaching and learning process (Griffiths 2007). Given that giving feedback is such an arduous and yet important task for teachers, uncovering the beliefs that underlie teachers’ practices can help identify the factors that contribute to effective feedback. This provides the rationale of the present study.

This article reports on one section of a larger study that investigates teachers’ feedback practices from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives, focusing specifically on the written feedback teachers give to student writing and the extent to which their beliefs are manifested in their practice. Unlike the majority of feedback research which addresses the ESL college/university context, this study focuses on the secondary EFL context (in Hong Kong) and thus contributes to the current research base on feedback.

The study

Data collection

Data for the study were gathered from two sources: (1) feedback analysis based on 174 texts collected from 26 secondary teachers and follow-up interviews with seven of them; and (2) a survey comprising a questionnaire (see Appendix A) administered to 206 secondary teachers and follow-up interviews with 19 of them. Although convenience sampling was adopted, effort was made to include teachers and students from all three bandings (i.e. Band 1, 2, and 3—with Band 1 having the most able and Band 3 the least able students) of secondary schools in Hong Kong. The students were aged between 12 and 17 (i.e. Grades 7–11), and the teachers had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years. The first data source aimed to investigate teachers’ written feedback practice, while the purpose of the second source was to explore teachers’ beliefs and reported practice, with a specific focus on error correction as the feedback analysis showed that teachers predominantly focused on language errors in their written feedback. The first data collection source involved teachers in providing five to six student texts randomly selected from three different abilities—high, average, and low to make sure that the feedback provided was representative of their responding behavior. The second source involved administration of the questionnaire to 139 teachers studying part-time English language education courses at four Hong Kong universities and 67 teachers who responded to the questionnaire through a contact teacher in their schools. Both sources were followed up by interviews that probed teachers’ beliefs and practice—see Appendices B and C. The research question that guided the study was: To what extent do teachers’ written feedback practices correspond with their beliefs?

Data analysis

Written feedback analysis involved identification, categorization, and counting of feedback points. A feedback point can be an error corrected/underlined, or a written comment that constitutes a meaningful unit (a written comment comprising one sentence can consist of more than one feedback point, if it deals with more than one issue). The questionnaire data were subjected to statistical analysis, yielding mainly descriptive data. The interview data were transcribed, coded, and summarized.
This section summarizes the findings in terms of ten mismatches between teachers’ beliefs and their written feedback practice. Each mismatch is first described, and is then illustrated by teachers’ practice and beliefs, both supported by data from written feedback, questionnaire survey, and/or follow-up interviews. Lastly attempts are made to explain the mismatch based on the data collected.

Mismatch 1: Teachers pay most attention to language form but they believe there’s more to good writing than accuracy

Of the 5,353 feedback points identified (4,891 items of error feedback marked on student texts, plus 462 written comments), the feedback analysis shows that teachers focus inordinately on language form in their response to student writing, with 94.1 per cent of the teacher feedback addressing form (3.8 per cent on content, 0.4 per cent on organizational issues, and 1.7 per cent on other aspects such as general comments on student writing). When interviewed, however, all the teachers said that good writing depends not only on accuracy but also on development of ideas and organization. One teacher said, ‘I think we should not just focus on language. We should look at the whole essay including the organization and content’. A possible reason why teachers focus mainly on language errors is provided by a teacher as follows: ‘As the students have too many language problems, there is not enough room to respond to content . . . Ideally, I think we should also emphasize content’. Teachers’ form-focused approach in feedback is also attributed to the policy of the English panel (comprising English teachers and panel chairperson): ‘We have to follow the policy which requires comprehensive error feedback’. A further reason appears to relate to the exam culture in schools. One teacher remarked, ‘We think writing practice is for examinations. So we simply focus on accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary to prepare students for public exams’. The importance attached to exam preparation was emphasized by another teacher teaching in a school with less proficient students: ‘We should focus on the accuracy of some basic elements so that in public exams, the markers can at least understand what students are saying so they may get a pass’. The results show that teachers are caught in a conflict between their form-focused approach to feedback and their awareness that there is more to good writing than accuracy.

Mismatch 2: Teachers mark errors comprehensively although selective marking is preferred

In the feedback analysis, all the 26 teachers claimed that comprehensive error feedback was performed in the 174 student texts submitted from a random selection of typical writing done by students. The actual feedback analysis indicates that there is an average of one error feedback in every seven words in the student texts, thus rather detailed and intensive feedback on errors. In the questionnaire survey, about 70 per cent of the teachers said they usually mark errors comprehensively. Such practice, however, does not seem to be in line with their belief, since the majority of the teachers practising comprehensive marking (12 out of 19) said in the interview that they prefer selective marking. They also expressed the concern that if a large number of errors are indicated, students, especially the weaker ones, will not be able to cope. One teacher said, ‘I do think that if students focus on too
many things at a time they cannot learn as their language foundation is not too good’. When asked why they do not mark errors selectively, the teachers said they are guided by a school policy that requires them to attend to every single student error, and this policy is deeply entrenched. In the words of one teacher, ‘I think the students, parents, and teachers are all used to this way of marking which points out all the errors. It is difficult to change’. The results suggest that although teachers have doubts about comprehensive error feedback, they feel driven by a school policy that requires such a practice.

Mismatch 3: Teachers tend to correct and locate errors for students but believe that through teacher feedback students should learn to correct and locate their own errors
The feedback analysis shows that about 70 per cent of the feedback is direct, i.e. teachers indicate and correct errors for students. However, the questionnaire data suggest that 96 per cent of the teachers believed that students should learn to locate and correct errors. What might explain such a discrepancy? When interviewed, most of the teachers opined that since students are unable to locate and correct errors themselves, teachers have to help them. One teacher said, ‘I tried to ask them to locate errors themselves, but the result was not good . . . I also asked them to correct others’ work but they tended to have many arguments’. The results demonstrate that teachers’ error feedback is not congruent with their beliefs. Although teachers think students should learn to locate and correct errors, their written feedback practice does not often allow this to happen.

Mismatch 4: Teachers use error codes although they think students have a limited ability to decipher the codes
The majority (87 per cent) of the teachers in the questionnaire survey said they use error codes in marking student errors, while the feedback analysis shows that about 20 per cent of the feedback is coded, with codes appearing in almost every marked student text. The interview data, however, reveal that teachers generally believe that students’ ability to decipher error codes is limited, especially the weaker ones. In the words of some teachers: ‘weaker students don’t know how to use the codes’; ‘even though students understand the codes, they don’t know how to correct the errors’; ‘it doesn’t help if students are not motivated’. The reason for such a discrepancy is possibly because teachers think that error codes provide opportunities for students to ‘think about the error types and do self-correction’, which is beneficial to their learning. The results suggest that teachers have mixed attitudes to error codes, utilizing them in their feedback in spite of their doubts about students’ ability to interpret them correctly.

Mismatch 5: Teachers award scores/grades to student writing although they are almost certain that marks/grades draw student attention away from teacher feedback
The feedback analysis shows that all the teachers give student writing a score or grade. Interestingly though, teachers do not seem to have a great deal of faith in grades/scores, as they think these divert student attention away from teacher feedback so much so that some students may even ignore it, especially because they are not required to revise and resubmit drafts for
a better grade. One teacher remarked, ‘The majority of students do not pay attention to the comments’. Another teacher even said, ‘For students, they only look at the scores’. A reason to explain why teachers still award scores/grades is that this is necessary for summative purposes (as these scores/grades count towards the final grade students get). The importance of scores was underlined by one teacher at the interview, ‘I think compositions serve two functions: one is for teachers to hand over the score sheet (the other is to find out the difficulties students have)’. Thus, the summative function of feedback has made teachers use scores/grades although they are fully aware of the harm that can be done to students.

Mismatch 6: Teachers respond mainly to weaknesses in student writing although they know that feedback should cover both strengths and weaknesses

The feedback analysis shows that 91.4 per cent of the written feedback is in the form of error feedback marked in student texts, with 8.6 per cent written comments addressing different areas including praise and criticism. Although 38 per cent of the total written comments comprise praise, these positive comments constitute only 3.3 per cent of the total written feedback. Thus, the predominant focus of teacher feedback is on students’ weaknesses pertaining to language form. Teachers do not seem to practise what they believe, since the interview data suggest that they are aware of the importance to offer a good balance of positive and negative comments: ‘Students should know their strengths and weaknesses concerning both content and grammar’. The reason for such a mismatch can be explained by the error-focused approach to written feedback, which inevitably draws teachers’ attention to weaknesses rather than strengths in student writing.

Mismatch 7: Teachers’ written feedback practice allows students little room to take control although teachers think students should learn to take greater responsibility for learning

The questionnaire and feedback data indicate that in teachers’ written feedback practice, they shoulder a great deal of responsibility, marking errors comprehensively, and doing error identification/correction for students. When students receive teachers’ written feedback, as borne out in the interview, ‘all they have to do is just to rewrite the essay by correcting mistakes; they are not required to assess themselves or to assess each other’. Since direct correction is provided to the majority of errors, students’ role in correcting mistakes in their writing is minimal; often they do not even have to think because correct answers have been given by the teachers. Without being asked to perform self-/peer-editing or evaluation, students are not provided with opportunities to develop responsibility for learning. When asked about their beliefs about the student role, however, 99 per cent of the teachers indicated in the questionnaire survey that students should learn to locate and correct their own errors, and 96 per cent believed students should learn to analyse their own errors. When interviewed, the teachers also said that students should learn to take responsibility for their learning. Such a mismatch can be attributed to a number of factors evident in the data—for example, the English panel policy that requires detailed marking, teachers’ predominant use of direct error feedback, and possibly teachers’ infrequent...
use of alternative feedback strategies like peer feedback that put the onus of learning on students.

Mismatch 8: Teachers ask students to do one-shot writing although they think process writing is beneficial
According to the teachers, their written feedback was given to single drafts, as all the student texts collected in the study were performed as one-shot writing. However, most teachers seemed to believe in the benefits of process pedagogy, as commented by one teacher, ‘I know process writing is a good practice’. One plausible reason for such a mismatch is that teachers do not have enough time to let students go through multiple drafting, as they need to cover more writing topics/text types to prepare students for examination. As explained by a teacher, ‘Our approach is restricted by public exams as students have to try to write different types of texts to prepare for exams’. The results show that teachers adopt a product-oriented approach although they are aware of the benefits of process pedagogy.

Mismatch 9: Teachers continue to focus on student written errors although they know that mistakes will recur
The data have revealed that teachers’ written feedback is primarily error-focused. However, it does not necessarily suggest that teachers believe such practice is working. Conversely, in the questionnaire survey, only about 8 per cent of the teachers thought that their feedback has led to good progress in students’ written accuracy. The result is borne out in the open-ended responses, where eight (out of 19) teachers expressed their concern about the inefficacy of their feedback: ‘The effectiveness of marking written errors seems not satisfactory enough. I hope to find a better method to improve students’ awareness of language structures’. All of the teachers interviewed felt that despite their feedback, many students would make the same mistakes again. One teacher said, ‘Students cannot learn from the mistakes. For example, I told them they should use the past tense for story writing, but they would make the same mistakes again and again’. One teacher said rather pessimistically, ‘For weaker students, they go back to square one and make the same mistakes again’. Despite such a realization, teachers continue to put a heavy emphasis on student written errors. Although teachers can always blame it on the English panel policy (that requires detailed error feedback), the reason that underlies the mismatch may be more complex than it appears to be.

Mismatch 10: Teachers continue to mark student writing in the ways they do although they think their effort does not pay off
Finally, as teachers continue with their existing written feedback practice, the interview data reveal that they felt that overall their effort does not pay off—in the words of several teachers: ‘overall it is not cost-effective’; ‘the effectiveness is not too high overall’; ‘teachers are losers in their investment of time and effort’. The explanation for such a mismatch is not directly evident in the data collected, except that the blame can equally (and easily) be put on the English panel policy. Since the study does not aim at investigating the factors that influence teachers’ written feedback practice, the question of why teachers continue with a practice that is perceived as ineffective has remained unanswered.
Conclusion

The study has revealed a number of gaps between teachers’ beliefs and practice in written feedback, which teachers may or may not be aware of. While teachers in the study tend to attribute their practices to constraints imposed by institutional context and values, like exam pressure and a school policy that highly values error feedback, it is not certain whether these are real explanations for the mismatches or mere excuses that teachers use to justify their practices. To probe the underlying reasons for their practices, teachers can be asked to explain, analyse, and unpack the issues pertaining to feedback so as to shed light on the incongruity between their beliefs and practice. An ethnographical approach can be adopted to explore how the institutional and sociocultural context (see Hyland and Hyland 2006), the student factor, the teacher factor, and other factors may impinge on teachers’ feedback practice. It would also be useful to provide opportunities for teachers to gather together in school-based professional development seminars, where they examine their current feedback practice, challenge their assumptions about feedback, and evaluate the effectiveness of their current practice. This article, hopefully, can provide a springboard for discussion and an impetus for teachers’ critical self-inquiry on the topic of written feedback.

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References


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Appendix A: 
Teacher questionnaire

1 In your opinion, what is the main purpose of providing feedback on students' errors in writing?

__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

2 Which of the statements below best describes your existing error feedback practice? Please tick the most appropriate box.

My existing error feedback practice:
A. I don't mark students' errors in writing.
B. I mark ALL students' errors.
C. I mark students' errors selectively.

3 Please circle the appropriate answer for the following questions about the use of marking codes.

A. Do you use a marking code for providing error feedback on student writing? Yes / No
B. Does your school require you to use a marking code? Yes / No

4 Rate the frequency with which you use each of the following error feedback techniques according to the scale below. Please circle the appropriate number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Never or rarely</th>
<th>2 Sometimes</th>
<th>3 Always or often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. I indicate (underline/circle) errors and correct them, e.g., has wentgone.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. I indicate (underline/circle) errors, correct them and categorize them (with the help of a marking code), e.g., has wentgone (verb form).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. I indicate (underline/circle) errors, but I don't correct them, e.g., has went.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. I indicate (underline/circle) errors and categorize them (with the help of a marking code), but I don't correct them, e.g., has went (verb form).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. I hint at the location of errors, e.g., by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. I hint at the location of errors and categorize them (with the help of a marking code), e.g., by writing ‘Prep’ in the margin to indicate a preposition error on a specific line.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Please circle the appropriate answer for the question below.

Does your school prescribe the error feedback technique(s) you indicate you always or often use in Question 4?  
Yes / No

6 How would you evaluate the overall effectiveness of your existing error feedback practice on student progress in grammatical accuracy in writing at the end of one academic year? Please tick the most appropriate box.

My students are making

A. good progress  
B. some progress  
C. little progress  
D. no progress

7 Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements according to the scale below. Please circle the most appropriate box for each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. There is no need for teachers to provide feedback on student errors in writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Teachers should provide feedback on student errors selectively.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. It is the teacher’s job to locate errors and provide corrections for students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Teachers should vary their error feedback techniques according to the type of error.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Coding errors with the help of a marking code is a useful means of helping students correct errors for themselves.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Marking codes should be easy for students to follow and understand.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Students should learn to locate their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Students should learn to locate and correct their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Students should learn to analyse their own errors.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B: Teacher interview guide

(following questionnaire survey)

1 How do you mark student writing? Why do you mark student writing in the ways you do?  
2 What is considered ‘good’ feedback practice by the principal, panel chair, students and parents? Do you agree?
3 What areas do you focus on in your written feedback? Why?
4 Do you mark errors selectively or comprehensively? Why? Can you also describe and explain your preferred error feedback strategies.
5 Do you write comments on student writing? Are you aware of the range of comments you write? How do you see the functions of your comments? What do you expect students to do afterwards?
6 Do you give student writing a grade/score? Why? What criteria is the grade/score based on?
7 Is student writing done in class? Is it timed? How many drafts are collected?
8 What happens after students have received your feedback? What do you ask them to do?
9 Has your previous training given you any idea about how to provide feedback on student writing? What do you know about ‘effective’ feedback? Do you know what the English syllabus recommends?
10 How would you assess the effectiveness of your own feedback practices?

Appendix C: Teacher interview guide

(following feedback analysis)

1 Are you in favour of comprehensive or selective error feedback? Why?
2 What error correction strategies do you use? Why do you choose these strategies?
3 Are your error correction strategies linked to grammar instruction?
4 Do you think it is a good idea to provide corrections for student errors in writing?
5 Do you use error codes? Why or why not? What problems, if any, can you see in using error codes? How can the problems be solved?
6 Is it the teacher’s job to locate and correct errors for students?
7 Who should be responsible for error correction? Why?
8 What concerns or problems, if any, do you have in correcting student errors in writing?
9 In your opinion, what is the best way to go about error correction?