

A Pathway to Effective Writing:

Teaching Writing at
Intermediate and
Advanced Levels

Silvia Stagnaro

2006



In all previous modules we dealt with the different aspects involved in the process of writing and concentrated on the kinds of techniques and activities through which we could help students develop as more efficient writers. In this module we shall be dealing with the last problem we confront in the teaching of this complex skill: how can we give feedback to our students. The advice suggested should be approached critically and always bearing in mind the specific circumstances in which you teach.

Before we start dealing with specific strategies for offering feedback to our students it would be worth considering how each of us feels about this issue by responding to the following questionnaire. Take a few minutes to think about how far you agree or disagree with the following statements:

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS WRITING means ...

1. praising their strengths.
2. correcting every single error.
3. providing correct answers.
4. asking students to rewrite after teacher has corrected them.
5. correcting some errors, leaving others alone.
6. asking students to give feedback to each other.
7. giving marks for grammatical accuracy.
8. reacting to *what* the student has written (content).
9. reacting to *how* the student expresses himself in writing (form, organization).
10. encouraging the student to experiment with new language (vocabulary).
11. collecting important errors and analyzing them with the whole class.
12. using correction symbols to indicate errors.
13. encouraging students to write enthusiastically.
14. asking students to evaluate their own writing.
15. giving a general mark for content and form.

Once you have considered these statements as a teacher, it would be interesting to think about the following: in your own experience as a learner of English, what kinds of feedback did your teachers give you? How useful did you find it? What kind of feedback did you

consider to be the *ideal* one? Once you have considered these questions, move on to Task 1 where you will read and reflect upon some students' comments on their teachers' corrections.

Independently of your responses, the fifteen statements above can be reduced to five central problems:

1. When should we correct our students' writing?
2. Should our feedback be mainly on language? Content? Organization?
3. Should we correct *all* mistakes?
4. Should our students rewrite incorporating the corrections?
5. Should we let students correct each other's work?

Before we consider each one individually, take a few minutes to think about these questions. How would you answer them?

1. When should we correct our students' writing?

Since correction is the traditional foundation of our educational system, it's only natural that this question comes up as much as it does. Many people feel that if students are not corrected, they will not learn. On the other hand, most adults are aware of the dangers of constant correction. To sort this out, it is important to remember that the source of our quandary is an emotional reaction - on the part of well-meaning adults who care deeply - and not a logical one. One has only to consider how children learn to walk and to talk to realize that correction is not a requisite for mastering complex skills (modeling, criteria, scaffolding, and encouragement are the keys). Correction may seem appropriate in the following circumstances:

- The student has already tried to self-correct but can't.
- The student has not been introduced to a certain point (linguistic, lexical, conventional) or has obviously forgotten about it.
- A relatively incidental problem is keeping him from making progress in another area of writing.

Another aspect to bear in mind relates to the students' frequent complaint that they don't understand our correction. The problem here is crucially one of accountability. We should always be able and ready to offer a rationale for our corrections. If, for any reason, we can't, it would be more reasonable not to make any correction at all.

Finally, the most important point is to emphasise the connections between correction and communication, that is to say to clearly state (and believe) that the reason why we are correcting at all is to make our students' writing easier to read.

2. Should our feedback be mainly on language? Content? Organization?

Most people would agree that the most important thing about anybody's writing is what it says to the reader: whether the ideas or events expressed are significant and interesting. Then, there is the question of whether the ideas are arranged in such a way that the reader can follow them easily, that is whether they are presented and organized in a reader-friendly way. Finally, there is the problem of whether the language used (grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation) is acceptable and accurate enough for the context. It seems, therefore, that the most important thing that we should consider when a student hands in a written piece, is its content, then its organization and only then, its language. However, when correcting written work, most teachers find themselves responding mainly to the students' language use, which inevitably leaves the impression on the learner that this is what really matters. There are various reasons for this:

- language mistakes, be them in grammar or spelling, are very difficult to ignore and seem to call for correction;
- students may feel that we don't know enough or that we don't pay attention to their work if we don't correct language mistakes. They tend to *want* us to correct them;
- language mistakes are more easily diagnosed and quantified and provide a more solid ground for evaluating and eventually marking the written piece.

I personally believe that language mistakes should be corrected, especially so as not to disappoint the students. But at the same time, we should make sure that this does not constitute the sole basis for our evaluation of the student's written piece. One way to solve this problem is to make the language corrections in the body of the text and add comments at the end about its content and organization followed by an evaluation. Even better, especially when we are dealing with process writing, would be to delay the evaluation until the rewritten, polished version has been submitted by the student.

3. Should we correct all mistakes?

Having accepted that language mistakes should be corrected, this next question mainly relates to our roles as teachers. One of our main roles is that of guide and instructor. As such, we are supposed to provide the students with the knowledge they lack, that is to say,

to teach them, and correcting their mistakes is clearly an important part of this role. However, an equally important role we have is that of motivator whereby we are supposed to provide support and encouragement of the learning process, and clearly too much correction can constitute a demotivating factor for most students. The conflict between these two roles requires some kind of compromise which will obviously vary depending on the specific context in which we are teaching. It seems reasonable to decide to ignore the language mistakes that occur as a consequence of the student taking risks to make his writing more interesting and appealing. That is, if the mistake relates to a point we haven't taught yet and the student is making an attempt in which he activates either knowledge of his mother tongue (interference) or of the foreign language (overgeneralization), we should feel happy that he is taking steps to move forward and can ignore the mistake. On the other hand, if the mistake affects meaning and can lead to misunderstanding or confusion, correction might become absolutely necessary. In any case, whichever approach we decide to adopt, the crucial issue is to come to an agreement with the students and make sure that they understand the nature of our corrections (or lack of them) to avoid confusion, demoralization and demotivation on the students' part.

4. Should our students rewrite incorporating the corrections?

In general, students dislike rewriting: they feel its tedious and a waste of time. This attitude seems to be closely related to two factors: a) whether they are really aware of the benefits of following a process writing approach and b) the teacher's attitude to rereading students' drafts.

As we saw in previous modules, rewriting is an integral part of the writing process. However, the students can only fully grasp its importance if we are using this approach systematically and have discussed with them the real value of each of the steps they are required to follow. Besides, rewriting actually reinforces learning. But the students can only appreciate its full value when they see improvement in their work and receive the deserved praise for their effort. This, in turn, relates to the second point made above. If we demand rewriting from our students, they have a right to demand conscientious rereading on our part. This should naturally lead to our valuing their effort and only considering for formal assessment the final version that they decide to hand in. The students' motivation to

rewrite is directly proportional to our decision to delay formal evaluation and consider their drafts as provisional and liable of improvement.

5. *Should we let students correct each other's work?*

We have all experienced the drag of correcting piles of written work: depression, anxiety, boredom, reluctance ... these are just some of the feelings that most teachers report when they are asked how they feel about correction. Having students work cooperatively on their first drafts, giving each other feedback on language, content and organization, editing each other's writing, can be a partial solution to the problem. Besides, this kind of training may help them become more critical readers and eventually be more on the alert for language accuracy, style and content as writers, too. However, peer-correction will never entirely release us from our correction duties. Eventually, we will have to check and evaluate the final versions.

The main problem here, however, is the extent to which the students will feel comfortable giving and receiving "criticism" from their peers. This entirely depends on the kinds of relationships that have been established among the students (and with the teacher) in the group: the feelings of trust and willingness to accept criticism are sensitive points which cannot be solved through the implementation of a specific technique.

Having considered these questions from my point of view, it would be time for you to analyse different situations critically and decide the extent to which you agree with the suggestions made in each different contexts. For this purpose, please turn to Task 2.

The last part of this module (and of this seminar, in fact) will be related to actually correcting and grading students' writing on the basis of your own reactions and analysis of everything that was said here and in previous modules. This will be mainly a practical task in which you will have to make your own decisions and provide a rationale for them.

I sincerely hope that you have found the material in this seminar useful. I, in turn, have learnt a lot from your contributions. Thanks, and see you soon!