Effects of Conferencing on Revision in EFL Writing: 
A Case Study of Japanese Junior High School Students

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Abstract: The purpose of the present research is to examine the effects of conferencing as a form of teacher feedback on revision in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) free writing in junior high school. Twenty Japanese third-year junior high school students in a supplemental English course participated in this research. The students first wrote free compositions about a topic given by the teacher: whether or not students need school uniforms. After that, the teacher and each of the students had a conference based on written feedback prepared by the teacher. During the conferences, the teacher asked questions about unclear points in the drafts; the students asked about problems in their writing and took notes. The teacher provided mainly content-oriented suggestions for each of the students. The students revised their compositions referring to the feedback obtained through these teacher-student conferences. Two native speakers of English evaluated the content and grammar of each composition. As a result, the students averaged higher scores on their rewrites, though we have yet to prove that the difference between the two drafts is statistically significant. It seems, however, that conferencing plays a role in improving the drafts.

Key Words: conferencing, revision, feedback

1. Introduction

To promote students’ writing abilities, it is assumed that teachers’ feedback is crucial. As for novice writers at the junior high school level, it is assumed that teachers need to provide them with individual and direct help, for they have their own specific problems and some might have serious problems. In ESL (English as a Second Language) settings, in fact, many researchers and teachers have discovered the advantages of using conferencing as a method of teacher feedback and have recommended introducing it to their classes. Even in EFL settings such as those in Japan, it would be considered useful if it were adopted appropriately. However, not much research has been documented on the actual use of conferencing in Japanese classrooms. In Japan, the determining factor in question of conferencing is whether it is efficient and time-saving because of the large class size. If teachers find that conferencing is one of the effective types of feedback, it might be widely implemented even in Japan.

2. Review

In ESL settings, most of the research which has examined the effects of conferencing on writing has shown its advantages. Teachers are in favor of conferencing because it is interactive, immediate and individual. Ferris and Hedgecock (1998) mentioned reasons for the popularity of conferences to include “the immediacy and potential for interaction and negotiation that the conferencing event offers.” Moreover, conferences show individual support that each student is eager to receive. Jacobs and Karliner (1977) found that even low-achieving students show progress after conferences with the teacher.

There are still some concerns to be considered if conferencing is to be implemented. During the conferences, teachers must adjust to students’ individual communication styles. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) found that the students who negotiate meaning in the conferences improve their texts. They concluded that teachers must persuade students to speak out in order to bring out their ideas or feelings during conferences. Teachers should combat the tendency for their comments or corrections to be incorporated verbatim into students’ texts. This is

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likely to occur, because of teachers’ superior knowledge and authority (Ferris and Hedgcock, 1998).

Moreover, conferencing is thought to take a prohibitive amount of time. Atwell (1987) proposed a possible solution: Teacher-student conferences can occur during class. The teacher calls on each of the students and holds a brief conference with them while the rest of the students work on a writing activity individually.

3. Methods

3.1. Purpose

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effects of writing conferences on the process of revision by junior high school students. The following research hypothesis was addressed: Teacher-student conferences have positive effects on revision of foreign language compositions in terms of length, content, and grammar.

3.2. Subjects

The subjects of this research were 20 third-year students in a public junior high school in Kishiwada, Japan. Enrolled in a supplemental English class, they had a writing class once a week, totally eight times, for half a year. (April-September, 2002) Concurrently, they received a third year of formal English education.

3.3. Procedures

The supplemental English class proceeded according to the following schedule. Each period had 50 minutes.

1st Period: The teacher taught writing purposes, procedures, and introduced works that were written by former students.

2nd Period: The students learned various pre-writing skills and techniques such as listing and mapping.

3rd Period: The teacher gave instruction in basics of essay writing such as the use of topic sentences and the importance of organization and revision.

4th Period: The students started to write on the topic of whether or not they should be required to wear a school uniform. For the first ten minutes, they brainstormed ideas on their own using a form of mapping or listing that they had learned previously.

After that, they started to write.

5th Period: They were given fifty minutes to freely write. They were allowed to use English-Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries, but they were instructed not to consult the teacher about words, phrases, or sentences.

6th Period: The teacher-student conferences were held in class with the help of written feedback. During the conferences, the students were encouraged to ask questions and take notes of what was discussed there. Conferencing lasted for five to ten minutes for each student. Once the students had finished the conferences, they began to rewrite their compositions by referring to their individual feedback.

7th Period: While the teacher held conferences with the remainder of the students, those students who had finished their conferences continued to rewrite their works.

8th Period: The students read and checked their compositions by themselves.

4. Results and Discussion

The data was collected from forty papers consisting of twenty initial drafts and twenty rewrites. The original compositions and rewrites were read by two native English speakers and assigned separate scores for grammar and for content. The scores in Table 1 represent the average of the two raters’ scores. The content scores are based on a scale of 1 to 10; the grammar scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5. The content scoring guide was developed by Fathman and Whalley (1990), and the grammar scoring guide was developed by Jacobs, et al (1981). The length scores are based upon the number of words in a composition. The effects of conferencing were expected to emerge after comparing the differences in scores in each category between the first drafts and the rewrites.

4.1. Length (Total number of words)

In the first drafts, the mean of length is 24.8 words; the longest essay contained 63 words, but four first drafts did not have any words in English. Three drafts contained less than ten words. The mean length increased to 40 words in the rewrites. Sixteen out of the 20 students made a substantial
Table 1 Comparison of Students’ Scores in Length, Content and Grammar between First Drafts and Rewrites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Length (words)</th>
<th>Content (1-10)</th>
<th>Grammar (1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First draft</td>
<td>Re-write</td>
<td>First draft</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Rounded off to one decimal place)

improvement in length. Three students made their final drafts shorter, and one made her rewrite nearly the same length as the first one.

It is easily assumed that the first drafts with no English words gained a positive difference when rewritten. For example, at the very beginning of the conference the teacher asked Student 3 whether or not he needed school uniforms in order to help him decide what topic sentence should be chosen for his writing, and then asked about the reasons for it. Student 12 wrote her first draft entirely in Japanese. During the conference, the teacher encouraged her to use dictionaries. After the conference, she made great progress. Her rewrite contained 32 English words.

After conferencing, students’ rewrites usually became longer. However, three rewrites became shorter than their first drafts, and one had nearly the same length as its first draft. One of the rewrites (Student 10) became shorter because redundant expressions such as “Very, very...” were omitted. One draft (Student 14) became shorter because the writer’s opinion was asserted clearly and concisely in her rewrite.

First draft: But I think that some of the students like a school uniform. So I want to choose either a school uniform or clothes is the best.

Rewrite: I don’t like I am looked like a girl. And a skirt is turned by the wind on windy day.

4. 2. Content

The mean score for content in the first drafts was 3.9 out of 10 (see Table 1). The mean score of the rewrites was 5.8. The highest was 10 and the lowest was 1. Eighteen students received higher scores on their rewrites than on their first drafts. The rewrites with the greatest increase were the ones that contained no English words in the first drafts.

Four first drafts (Students 3, 8, 12, and 20) did not contain any words in English. One of them (Student 12) was written entirely in Japanese. It had, however, a topic sentence and some supporting sentences in Japanese. Three students presented their ideas in mapping at the prewriting stage, but they could not go on to the next stage. For these students, the conferences were held to assist them in writing their first drafts rather than to help with revision. For instance, the transcript of the conference with Student 3 is the following (the conference was held in Japanese and later translated into English by the teacher for the purpose of this paper):

Teacher: First of all, do you think we need school uniforms?
Student: Yes, I think so.
Teacher: OK. Then write it first. And why do you think so?
Student: It is annoying to choose clothes.
Teacher: You mean that you would have to think about what you should wear every morning if you didn’t have school uniforms?
Student: That’s right.
Teacher: Any other reasons?
Student: It takes time.
Teacher: What takes time?
Student: Putting on clothes takes time.
Teacher: You don’t need any extra time to put on your school uniform, do you?
Student: No. Because I don’t have to choose.

As seen in the transcript, the teacher asked in Japanese some questions in rapid succession to bring out the student’s ideas.

Three students (1, 2, and 4) expressed their preference for plain clothes or for school uniforms in their first drafts, yet they did not mention any reasons to support their ideas. The teacher asked the students questions about their reasons for writing their topic sentences. With longer supporting sentences, the content score of their rewrites became much higher. During the conferences, the teacher mainly asked them about specific reasons for their opinions and brought out clearer ideas from them.

The conference with Student 4 went as follows:

Teacher: You mean that you have to buy new clothes?
Student: I don’t have many clothes.
Teacher: Does that mean that you need to buy new clothes?
Student: Sort of.
Teacher: What is annoying for you?
Student: ...
Teacher: To buy new clothes or to choose what to wear?
Student: Well, it is difficult to choose what to wear.

First draft: I need uniform. Because I don’t have clothes much.
Rewrite: I need school uniform because I don’t have clothes much and troublesome. If there is no uniform, I must buy many clothes. I must think what I wear every day.

Though nine students (5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17, and 18) wrote their topic sentences and supporting sentences, they did not provide enough information to sufficiently explain their opinions. To confirm what they wanted to write, the teacher asked for details. For example, during the conference, Student 17 added a new reason why she thought that it was very irritating to wear school uniform: “I feel hot when I wear school uniform.”

There are some cautions that teachers should keep in mind in implementing conferences. For instance, teachers should avoid forcing their ideas on students during conferences. After reading the first draft of Student 5, the teacher thought that he had a preference toward school uniforms. His first topic sentence was that we needed school uniforms because they become good memories. The teacher should have considered the writer’s intention and respected the opinion that he expressed in the first draft:

Teacher: You mean that it would be a good memory because you can remember that you were scolded by the teachers for not wearing your uniform properly?
Student: Yes.
Teacher: But do you really think that you need school uniforms?
Student: No, not now.
Teacher: Then you might think that you do not need school uniforms.
Student: But it would be a good memory because I can remember being scolded by the teachers some day.
Teacher: How about now?
Student: I don’t think that we need school uniforms now.
Teacher: Then why don’t you start writing with this topic sentence?

Topic sentence in the First draft: I think school uniform is needed by me because it’ll become my many memories.
Topic sentence in the Rewrite: I think I don’t need school uniforms.

Though the student repeated the phrase “a good memory” in the conference, the teacher excessively pursued the writer’s logic in his argument about uniforms and might have altered the writer’s intentions and feelings.
4.3. Grammar

The mean grammar score of individual students’ compositions on their first drafts and rewrites are also tabulated in Table 1. It shows that the mean scores of the rewrites (3.6) are higher than that of their first drafts (2.4). Though three rewrites received the same grammar scores as their first drafts, 17 rewrites made higher scores than their first drafts. The students’ English proficiency in grammar, which was supposedly acquired in regular English lessons, was not always strong enough for free writing. In free writing, they made a variety of errors and mistakes. They omitted subjects of sentences, ignored basic English sentence structures, and misspelled words frequently.

As for the grammatical points, the teacher tried to provide minimal advice to the students and encouraged them to use dictionaries. Contrary to the teacher’s expectation, 17 students asked whether or not their English was correct. The teacher suggested that they use their dictionaries, but some students continued to ask for grammatical advice from the teacher. As Ilatori (1990) mentioned, some comments about grammar will give students satisfaction. If students’ motivation for writing is enhanced by responding to their grammatical questions, teachers should give some grammatical advice to students.

The three students who did not ask about any grammatical questions solved their problems by themselves. They received better scores in grammar on their rewrites than on their first drafts. High-achieving students seem to make their writing better even if they do not receive any grammatical feedback from teachers. Though most of the students still had some errors in their rewrites, the teacher left some of them as they were because of the self-correction policy and time limitation. More investigation should be carried out focusing on grammatical correction.

5. Conclusion

For students who do not know how to begin, conferencing plays the role of jump-starts. It can help the students decide on topic sentences and make their ideas take shape. Students who cannot write a single word in English require conferencing for intensive and complete support from teachers.

Some students share similar patterns of errors in their writing. It seems appropriate for teachers to point them out to the whole class. However, some students may not apply the teacher’s advice to their own problems. The important thing is to ensure that students understand what teachers mean by their feedback. Conferencing helps students understand clearly what the teacher is aiming to point out.

As Goldstein and Conrad (1990) pointed out, teachers must encourage students to participate in conferences, with careful consideration of students’ individual communication styles. In the early stages of learning English, however, students tend to rely on teachers’ comments. Consequently, teachers tend to control the conferenceing and even the content of drafts as they like. Under these conditions, conferencing fails and the writer’s intentions are thwarted if there is too much control from teachers. In the conference with Student 5, for example, the teacher imposed her opinion on the student. Consequently, the writer’s feelings were probably ruined. It is difficult for teachers to ascertain how much contribution they should make to students’ drafts.

In this research, grammar feedback from the teacher was kept to a minimum in conferencing. However, 17 students asked about the grammatical points. Teachers need to give some grammatical advice to students if they require.

The EFL students in a Japanese junior high school were able to write their final drafts with improved content and grammatical structures after teacher-student conferences. The problem is, however, that we have yet to prove that the difference in mean scores between the first drafts and the rewrites is statistically significant.

Besides, it is uncertain that taking the mean scores of two raters is appropriate to grade the students’ works. More research is necessary regarding how conferencing should be held and its effects on students of different age and skill levels. Moreover, we should research its effects on student writing when the topic is changed. However, this study certainly shows that conferencing has the potential to improve students’ writing.

6. References


