

Content Teachers and Writing Teachers Responding to Student Essays: A Commentary Analysis of Praise and Criticism

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The following study was conducted in order to explore the differences in how writing teachers and content teachers respond to student essays. Through the analysis of six teacher commentaries on each of three essays, one major difference that emerged between the two groups of readers is in how they chose to express their feedback: Praise was employed more often by writing teachers, and even though much of this praise was used to mitigate criticism, their overall response to the texts was consistently more positive than it was for the content teachers. On the other hand, praise had a relatively small role in the content teachers' remarks, particularly since a great majority of the positive remarks were made to soften negative feedback. As a result, criticism was more prevalent and more direct. Reasons for the distribution of praise, criticism, and mitigation are discussed in terms of possible influential factors.

Introduction

Responding to student writing is a time-consuming and challenging task for any teacher and one that requires considerable negotiation between the teacher and student to guide improvement. Beyond the writing classroom, however, there are typically few opportunities for this give-and-take. Instead, teachers assess a final product only and rely on their own assumptions about the text in order to justify an assigned score. These assumptions may differ, of course, from person-to-person and/or from discipline-to-discipline, which in turn will influence the text's final evaluation.

These differences in reader standards can become an issue when students are entering mainstream content courses after studying in an EAP language program. Writing courses situated within an EAP curriculum prepare students to enter core content courses in which they will be required to submit various discipline-specific assignments in English. Transitioning from the ESL/EFL classroom to their respective content courses is typically difficult for students to manage, particularly in terms of reaching course expectations and meeting the teacher-established writing standard. For this reason, the following study was undertaken to investigate variability in reader response in the hopes of revealing patterns in response style and in reader expectations.

What follows is a text analysis of teacher commentary collected from two groups of essay readers (writing teachers and content teachers) who evaluated the same student essays and justified their assessments. The reader justifications were then transcribed and analyzed in order to identify trends in the commentary that differed across reader groups.

Although several patterns emerged from this analysis of teacher commentary, this paper reports on a particularly salient one: the use of praise, criticism and mitigation. Early on in the commentary analysis it became apparent that there were distinct differences between the groups of readers in terms of whether they expressed their justifications in a positive or negative manner. Very little research has investigated the distribution of praise and criticism in teacher feedback, while no studies have examined this distribution across two types of reader groups. By looking more closely at how and why praise and criticism are employed by each group we can hopefully reach a better understanding of how teacher feedback is shaped and what factors lead readers to present their commentaries in different ways.

Methodology

Context and Participants

Three students, three writing teachers and three content teachers participated in this study conducted within one department of a Japanese university. The students and writing teachers were part of an integrated skills, content-based EAP program, while the content teachers were tenured faculty in the department. The overall goal of the English language program (ELP) at this institution is to prepare students for study in their mainstream content courses, many of which are taught by English-speaking faculty. Aside from developing students' language skills and basic content knowledge, the curriculum also emphasizes academic study skills.

The writing teachers (WTs) all have M.A.'s in TESOL/Applied Linguistics and regularly teach writing courses in the ELP. Two of the teachers had over five years of teaching experience at this institution, while the third teacher had been there for one year at the time of the study, although she had several years of experience prior to this position. Teachers were recruited based on their willingness to participate.

The essays were written by second-year students enrolled in the author's Business Topics elective course. Once the essays were chosen (see selection process below), the student writers were notified in order to confirm permission to use their texts in the study and to complete a questionnaire on their writing background. According to the questionnaires, prior to entering university the three students had studied English writing conventions as part of their entrance examination preparation. At the university

level, they had all completed a four-semester writing sequence which began with a review of paragraph writing and basic essay structure and culminated in a course on research essay writing.

Data Collection

The essays used in this study were written during class and were assigned as part of the course's final exam. The prompt was based on a business management unit completed during the course, so all students were familiar with the subject and had adequately developed vocabulary to respond to the prompt successfully. The prompt was the following:

What do you think motivates people to succeed professionally? What factors do you think push people to work hard at their jobs? Explain your ideas using specific examples and details.

Three essays were chosen with the goal of achieving a variety of samples in terms of content and linguistic and rhetorical competency. For example, Essay 1 was stronger in content and weaker in linguistic accuracy; Essay 2 was the opposite — stronger linguistically but weaker in content; while Essay 3 had strong content but was weak in terms of rhetorical organization. In this way, it was hoped that the essays would elicit interesting and varied responses from the readers.

The three essays were then passed on to the readers along with evaluation materials. For each essay, readers were guided by a basic scoring rubric that required them to score the essays for content, organization, and language on a scale of 1-4 followed by a justification of their grade assignments. The purpose of the rubric was to ensure that at a minimum, all readers addressed these three basic aspects of the text. The evaluation categories were left intentionally general to avoid leading responses and so they could discuss each aspect of the text however they liked.

The essay commentary was audiotaped by the readers themselves as part of a think-aloud protocol. This procedure allowed greater insight into the reactions of the readers, as it captured their immediate impressions, their strength (or weakness) of conviction to a judgment, as well as any change of mind they had on evaluative decisions.

Finally, readers completed a questionnaire in which they described their approach to essay evaluation, explained the writing requirements of their own courses, and ranked a list of textual features according to how they viewed their importance.

Data Analysis Procedure

The audiotaped commentary was transcribed and coded by "feedback point," a

system employed by Hyland and Hyland (2001) in their study of teacher written commentary. A feedback point is a single “intervention” in which one particular aspect of the text is discussed. For instance, a reader might begin by discussing the impact of the opening sentence, followed by the organization of the introduction, which then leads into a discussion of how well the writer set up audience expectations at the start of the essay. This progression of comments would constitute three feedback points. Once the total feedback points were tallied for each essay, they were categorized as acts of praise, criticism or “other” and then further categorized as mitigated or unmitigated. Definitions for each of these categories are below.

Results and Discussion

Overall, it was found that WTs used more praise than criticism in their evaluations of the student essays, while for the CTs, the opposite is true. Table 1 shows the breakdown of total feedback points into acts of praise and criticism.

Table 1: Distribution of praise and criticism across teacher group

| Teacher group | Praise | Criticism | Other | Total Feedback Points |
|----------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------------------|
| WT group Total | 74 (49%) | 59 (39%) | 17 (11%) | 150 |
| Essay 1 | 31 (55%) | 18 (32%) | 7 (13%) | 56 |
| Essay 2 | 25 (53%) | 17 (36%) | 5 (11%) | 47 |
| Essay 3 | 18 (38%) | 24 (51%) | 5 (11%) | 47 |
| CT group Total | 34 (32%) | 59 (56%) | 13 (12%) | 106 |
| Essay 1 | 14 (40%) | 17 (49%) | 4 (11%) | 35 |
| Essay 2 | 10 (31%) | 18 (56%) | 4 (13%) | 32 |
| Essay 3 | 10 (26%) | 24 (62%) | 5 (13%) | 39 |

*Other = statements that did not serve an evaluative purpose

The tendency for WTs to use more praise and for CTs to use more criticism is consistent with all papers except for Essay 3. However, although Essay 3 had more instances of criticism for both rater groups, the WTs still expressed more praise than the CTs did in their evaluations. These results are consistent with Hyland and Hyland’s study (2001) in which acts of praise occurred more frequently in final product essays. Similar to this case, they performed a detailed analysis of written teacher feedback and found that 44% of the teachers’ comments were praise-related and 31% were criticisms.

On the other hand, for the WT group, these findings contradict earlier studies in which praise was used sparingly and teacher commentaries tended to be quite negative

overall (Zamel 1985, Dragga 1986 cited in Hyland and Hyland, Cohen and Cavalcanti 1990). For instance, in Zamel's frequently cited study, she analyzed the responses given by 15 teachers on a total of 105 student texts and found that teacher feedback tended to be quite negative overall, excessively concerned with language-specific errors and often confusing and inconsistent. Similarly, Cohen and Cavalcanti found hardly any instances of praise in the teacher commentary they analyzed. As they note, this absence of positive feedback did not go unnoticed by the student writers — several commented that they wanted to hear something positive from the teacher about their work. This desire to receive positive feedback is also expressed in Ferris' (1995) study where students discussed how important it was for them to receive encouragement on their work.

Certainly, praise has an important role in fostering motivation and building student confidence. Despite research that emphasizes the importance of balanced feedback (Cardelle and Corno 1981, Bates et. al. 1993), it is surprising that so little evidence exists of teachers providing positive reinforcement. Probably many teachers recognize the importance of encouragement in the development of novice writers and, contrary to such findings, do search for ways to praise their students' work when possible.

One possible reason why WTs praised more than they criticized may be that the essays reviewed in this study were all final products rather than developmental, or in-progress texts. In Hyland and Hyland's study, praise became the prominent feedback feature for the final essays (74%), whereas criticism was more prevalent at the draft stage (54%). One teacher in their study commented that she felt criticism was more appropriately used on drafts rather than on the final essay so that students would have the opportunity to improve their weaknesses. In this way, draft comments served the purpose of guiding students through revision. Then, once an essay was submitted as a final version, the purpose for giving feedback shifted from direction-oriented commentary to justification-related remarks. Similarly, the praise given by the WTs in this study may have followed this same line of thought: given that the essays are final products, the WTs may have felt that excessive criticism was unnecessary.

If this is true, then why does this pattern of praise not hold true for CTs? The roles and responsibilities of CTs versus WTs are quite different, which may affect how they respond to student texts. As opposed to WTs, CTs typically do not guide students through a multi-stage writing process and may not consider themselves responsible for developing students' writing skills. This sentiment is expressed in Zhu's (2004) discussion of faculty perspectives on responding to writing in discipline courses, in which content instructors' interview comments indicated that when providing feedback, their focus was on content and accuracy of information rather than on effective writing skills. One business professor from Zhu's study expresses this view below.

“I read [the text] for content first. I don’t read for grammar or punctuation ... I am not going to critique the writing skills of the project ... I’ll draw lines of logic flow, saying basically there is a gap in the logic here or your understanding is not clear in this part of the paper. Now, once I give it back to them, I sort of leave it up to them as to whether they want to come back and say, “help me do that better” (Zhu 2004:39-40).

Based on ten interviews with Business and Engineering faculty at U.S. universities, Zhu explains that feedback in content courses was primarily summative rather than formative and opportunities for students to revise their papers based on teacher feedback were not common.

These circumstances hold true for the CTs’ classroom practices here as well: according to questionnaire responses, opportunities for revision in content courses are rare. Understanding and retaining course material appears to be a more important goal than developing students’ writing skills. For example, one faculty member explained,

“I focus on the quality of the argument in terms of a clearly stated question, an answer (hypothesis), an effective marshalling of facts to support the hypothesis and consideration of alternative hypotheses.”

Two content teachers even said that they minimized second language difficulties by allowing students to submit written assignments in Japanese — even though it was difficult for the teachers themselves to read the texts in Japanese — because the purpose was to facilitate learning of course concepts which was better accomplished through the students’ L1. Once an understanding of the content was achieved, writing about the information in English was assigned. This illustrates the importance of content over writing and emphasizes the secondary role writing skills can have in the mainstream curriculum.

Thus, given that writing in content courses is product-oriented and assessment tends to be summative, CTs are likely to be taking on a purely evaluative role and providing feedback for justification — rather than for developmental — purposes. With typically one opportunity to communicate their appraisal of a paper to the student writer, CTs may use criticism more readily in order to adequately address the paper’s shortcomings, whereas WTs, whose role it is to support developing student writers, are more conscious of using praise for encouragement and make a concerted effort to note successful aspects of a text.

Analysis of Praise

However, further investigation into the positive response data shows that all praise acts do not necessarily intend to commend; rather, praise is often used to soften a critical remark. To examine more specifically how praise functions within the feedback, Table 2 shows a breakdown of the total praise acts into two categories: “direct praise,” or positive remarks given solely to highlight a particularly successful aspect of a text, and “softeners,” praise comments that introduce or follow a criticism and serve to buffer the negative feedback.

Table 2: Breakdown of Praise Acts: direct praise and praise softeners

| Teacher group | Direct Praise | Softeners | Total Acts of Praise |
|----------------|---------------|-----------|----------------------|
| WT group Total | 36 (49%) | 38 (51%) | 74 |
| CT group Total | 9 (26%) | 25 (74%) | 34 |

By breaking down the praise category we can see that much of the praise is not truly intended to point out the text’s strengths, but rather to support a criticism. In 51% and 74% of the praise acts, WTs and CTs respectively were using praise in conjunction with a negative comment, and in so doing, buffering the criticism. These instances of praise occurred in all possible combinations: in pre-criticism position (praise + critical comment); in post-criticism position (critical comment + praise); and in both pre- and post-position (praise + critical comment + praise). Examples taken from the teacher commentaries are below.

I could see the writer’s effort to try to write something clear, something logical. However, the problem of this essay is the writer is inserting irrelevant arguments in quite an ineffective way.

This [essay] is interesting because the writer tries to use his imagination as well as the context of the Japanese economy, but the key issue is missing in the discussion.

Starting in Line 15, the writer suddenly brings in something that is not connected to the second factor ... Was this an example of family being a big factor or was it just something she wanted to add? *Nonetheless, it’s a nice attempt.*

The writer is clearly making an effort to develop his/her ideas and to explain fully for the reader. However, at the end of the intro the writer focuses on the word “enthusiasm”, but I think enthusiasm ... ahhh ... I’m not really sure how to explain what I’m thinking, but ... enthusiasm may come from motivation, but I think this

writer is treating these words as the same. *Nevertheless, I think this writer's content is somewhat developed.*

By looking at these positive comments, it becomes clear that the purpose here is not to praise a skillfully written passage, but to reduce the impact of the adjacent negative comment. In fact, the praise that is stated often has no direct connection to the negative message, the real focus of that particular feedback point. In these instances, praise is secondary to criticism indicating that a significant difference exists between the two types of praise: A direct praise act truly commends the writer for effectively accomplishing some aspect of the essay, whereas a softener is praise made to lessen the impact of a negative evaluation.

Despite that half of the WT's positive comments are made to soften criticisms, this group still gave more direct positive feedback than did the CTs. Thus, the tendency cited above of WT's praising more often than CTs still holds true, although from Table 2 it is clear that the frequency of direct praise is much less for both groups. The number of praise acts for WT's decreased by about half once direct praise comments and softeners were separated, while for CTs praise was relatively rare (26%) since the vast majority of positive comments (74%) were in fact mitigating criticisms. This shows that CTs are considerably more critical of student writing than WT's, a trend that leads to a closer examination of how criticism is distributed in the teacher commentaries.

Analysis of Criticism

Feedback points that were counted as mitigated criticisms are those comments that contain hedges (i.e. *maybe, perhaps, seems, might, could, etc.*), personal attribution (i.e. *I think ..., I feel ..., It seems to me that ...*), and adjoining softeners (defined above). Responses that do not employ softeners, hedges or personal attribution were counted as unmitigated acts of criticism.

Table 3: Mitigated and Unmitigated Criticism

| Teacher group | Mitigated | Unmitigated | Total Acts of Criticism |
|----------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------------|
| WT group Total | 37 (63%) | 22 (37%) | 59 |
| CT group Total | 25 (42%) | 34 (58%) | 59 |

The majority of the WT's critical comments were mitigated, which when considered in terms of total essay feedback overall, resulted in a low percentage of direct criticisms. CTs, on the other hand, expressed their negative feedback more directly with 58% of their criticisms being unmitigated. As in the data reported in the previous two tables as well, WT's still prove to be consistently more positive in their responses than

CTs. Not only did the WT group praise more often, but they also expressed their critical comments more softly through the use of mitigation strategies. In comparison, CTs had a tendency to praise less, criticize more, and convey this criticism more directly.

Below are examples of mitigated and unmitigated criticism taken from the teachers' responses to Essay #3, the essay that elicited the most negative response of the three papers. Each example is addressing the essay's poor organization and shows quite a range of expression in terms of how this particular weakness is expressed.

Mitigated criticism:

- *I feel* that it is *really* is *a bit* jumbled in terms of how he puts the arguments together.
- There are ... the writer *seems* to have a problem connecting the ideas from one paragraph to the next paragraph.
- The content is *somewhat* confusing *for me*.
- Paragraphing is *a bit* odd to *me*.
- The organization *might* be *somewhat* complicated by the author's imagination.

Unmitigated criticism:

- Poor organization. The essay doesn't have a clear organization. For example, there is no clear introduction, no clear conclusion, and no clear sections for several important factors.
- The author has the linguistic and organizational inability to highlight upon the key issues.
- This is like stream of consciousness. It doesn't have a clear paragraph structure, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and so on. It's just a lot — a whole lot — of thoughts.
- It's not [expressed] in terms of clear topic sentences and a clear progression from one point to another.

The organization of this essay was a major problem, though as shown above, readers varied considerably in how they chose to articulate this point. Some readers appear to be significantly less tolerant of the text's organizational deficiencies than others.

The WT findings bear some similarity to Hyland and Hyland's (2001) study in which the vast majority of negative comments in teacher commentary were mitigated, leaving only a small percentage (15%) of direct criticisms. Using mitigation strategies to soften the impact of criticism, however, was well apparent to the students in their study, whose reactions to the teachers' comments they also investigated. Overall, the students did not appreciate such "empty remarks" and often questioned the usefulness

of this kind of positive feedback.

On the contrary, Ferris (1997) reports the opposite: teacher feedback in her study displayed few instances of hedging (15%). This particular outcome, however, cannot be generalized to this case as the purpose of her analysis was not to explore mitigation strategies but to investigate how comment type, comment length and text-specific references impact student revision. Furthermore, she looks at the feedback given by only one teacher, which could be to a large degree idiosyncratic. Aside from these two papers, however, there are no other studies that explore the direct relationship between mitigation and criticism in L2 teacher feedback, so it is not possible to draw a conclusion supported by previous research.

Motivations for Mitigation

The analysis presented above shows that mitigation is a major part of teacher feedback and that praise serves a dual function: praise may convey that the reader is satisfied with a particular aspect of the text; alternatively, it can also be used to soften negative feedback, in which case it plays a secondary role to criticism. With such frequent use of mitigation by both groups of readers, why do raters choose to mitigate their criticisms? What do they accomplish with this strategy and why is this preferred over direct criticism?

From a writer's perspective, anyone who has submitted a draft for feedback, as a student or as a professional, knows how it feels to have his/her work criticized. When negative response comes in the form of unmitigated direct criticism, it can be a particularly humbling experience. Blunt criticisms can affect a writer deeply, and for this reason, showing sensitivity and understanding towards a novice writer is very important. However, the degree of sensitivity and understanding a teacher will have is influenced by the role she plays in the making of the text. In the writing classroom, teachers take on a variety of roles — coach, judge, facilitator, evaluator, interested reader or copy editor (Reid 1993) — any of which will vary based on interacting contextual variables between the teacher, student, text and course goals. Leki (1990) explains that an instructor will often find herself in situations where these roles conflict and therefore must adeptly balance how she positions herself in relation to the student writer. Despite the various “personas” a teacher must manage, each contributes to her primary and most basic responsibility: to develop her students into effective writers.

The writing teacher's focus on student development will of course influence how she composes her feedback, as she is aware of the impact her feedback can have on students. In this capacity, the teacher as “coach” carries much importance. Student confidence is fragile and praise is a valuable tool to fostering esteem. Thus, it could be

said that mitigation has a similar purpose as well in that it offers some encouragement to the student writer while reducing the harshness of criticism. In this way, mitigation could be seen as supporting the teacher's role as coach and making efforts to ensure that a balance of both negative and positive comments are offered to the student. However, as Hyland and Hyland conclude based on students' negative reactions to the use of mitigation in their study, teachers should use this type of praise carefully; praise should not function just as a strategy to make criticism less harsh. The purpose of this type of praise is in fact transparent to students. Nevertheless, from the teacher's perspective, frequent use of mitigation may be viewed as an opportunity to offer some encouragement in order to balance a critical remark or, in cases where a text is especially weak, to at least say *something* nice (as a "coach" may feel obliged to do).

On the other hand, CTs assume a different role towards their students. Their main responsibility is not to develop students as writers, but to increase their knowledge of disciplinary content. Thus, the greater number of direct criticisms given by the CTs may suggest that this group had a lower tolerance towards unskilled writing, which resulted in stronger criticisms than the WT group. Additionally, CTs may be more accustomed to taking on the "evaluator" role as opposed to the writing "coach". Since the CTs in this study typically do not require multiple drafts, most course assignments are reviewed as final products at which time the instructor's responsibility is to assign and justify a grade. The essays reviewed here were likewise responded to as final papers, so in this regard, their feedback may reflect this evaluative-focused approach.

Aside from these differences, all readers mitigated their feedback often — roughly half of the time for each group — suggesting that other variables are influencing this tendency aside from teacher roles. In this study, participants were blind reading essays and did not have to concern themselves with how students would receive their comments. Yet, teacher responses frequently displayed reserve and a sensitivity to the students' authorial position.

One reason for frequent mitigation could be that teachers were hesitant to make assumptions regarding the writers' intentions, and for this reason, avoided making strong, direct assertions. Such reticence could be described as sensitivity to text appropriation. A much debated topic in L1 and L2 writing (Brannon and Knoblauch 1982, Cardelle and Corno 1981, Freedman 1987, Greenhalgh 1992, Reid 1994, Sommers 1982), discussions have expressed concern over the degree of teacher intervention in the writing process and have examined the ways in which ownership of a student's text can be "taken over" by the teacher's feedback. In relation to a draft version of a paper, text appropriation occurs in situations where a student revises his paper based on the teacher's feedback, and then in the process of doing so ends up relinquishing his authority over the text in order to satisfy the teacher's recommendations. Thus, in the

end, the teacher has determined the course of the essay's development rather than the writer himself.

In terms of a final essay, as is the case here, the readers' tentativeness could be considered as an effort to avoid appearing too dominant or too presumptuous in relation to the writer. Readers could have used mitigation in order to weaken their assertions and to avoid appearing as if they were making definitive statements about the writer's intentions. As mitigation allows readers to express reserve and qualify their judgments, ultimately they can avoid appearing as if they are taking authority from the writer. Although such a "fear" of appropriation is in many cases not justified for ESL contexts (Reid 1994), it is still an issue that many teachers consider and that influences how they respond to student writing. In fact, one of the teachers in Hyland and Hyland's study explained that she viewed herself as "a reader rather than a know-it-all teacher" (2001:200), and the authors suggest that she was using mitigation in order to "tone down" seemingly "over-directive" feedback.

With these various perspectives aside, however, it is quite difficult for any teacher to guess at a writer's meaning when she has no established relationship with that student, as is the case here. Although all participants belong to the same department in this study and are familiar with the writing needs of ELP students, no (known) personal relationship exists. If there is at least some knowledge of the writer as an individual (strengths and weaknesses, educational background, interests, etc.), then this information can contribute to a more confident evaluation of the text.

Conclusion

The outcome of this teacher commentary analysis shows that WT's use praise more often than do CT's, although both groups frequently use positive remarks to soften criticisms. In regard to criticism, CT's tend to address essay weaknesses more bluntly, while the WT's prefer mitigation over direct criticism. These outcomes could have been a result of the influence of perceived teacher roles, teacher-student relationships and/or concerns of text appropriation. By conducting this text analysis of teacher feedback across two groups of readers, it is possible to observe how reader reactions to student essays vary and in so doing, move towards achieving a better understanding of the basic features of teacher commentary. With so little research done in this area, descriptive accounts such as this can offer a useful starting point for more in-depth analyses of why teachers respond to student writing in the ways they do.

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