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Practical Suggestions on Providing Feedback on Students' Writing

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Providing feedback on the students' L2 writing has always been an important aspect of language teaching. However, the number and types of comments to be given on the learners' paper has been discussed extensively and explored in many studies. The following article will provide some explanation and general suggestions on several issues in feedback giving.

First, language teachers should understand that focusing on the meaning rather than form in students' written papers is crucial. Writing is considered a productive skill, and learners should be able to communicate the message in a clear and concise way. Another important aspect is that in most cases, university learners produce quite a long written piece, e.g. a formal email, a cover letter, an essay, or a report, which varies from 200 to 2000 words. Thus, paying attention to each mistake in grammar structure, word choice, spelling and punctuation can become very time-consuming for a teacher, and frustrating for students, who might be discouraged from seeing a great number of mistakes in their written paper. Parrish [2020] believes that language teachers should first provide comments on the content clarity in the students' L2 writing, and then based on the assessment rubrics give suggestions on other errors in the written piece.

Second, language teachers should stop correcting every error they see in learners' L2 writing. As there are both proponents and opponents of the use of corrective feedback, there has been a lot of debate regarding it. It is recommended to focus a lot on different language aspects when the students are novice writers or they make the first steps in developing writing skills. In academia, the learners have at least pre-intermediate or B1 (according to CEFR) level of English, which means they are able to produce much longer than two or three logically connected sentences. Mentioning or indicating the repeated mistakes once and then referring to them in the written paper can be helpful for students. McCarter and Jakes [2009] also advise teachers to "create a hierarchy" and choose three-four main areas for improvement in students' L2 writing, rather than focus on minor mistakes. Such strategies can make the feedback process more effective and students less confused.

Third, language teachers might recommend learners to use a number of available tools for improving their L2 writing quality. Some educators do not approve of these platforms as they cannot be helpful only to correct grammar and word choice, but not to develop writing skills. Nevertheless, others believe that these online tools might be applied on a regular basis because they provide some useful suggestions for students. For example, the majority of learners type their papers in Word document, which can be helpful in correcting spelling, subject-verb agreement, punctuation, word order and some other linguistic features. Working in the Google document can also be supportive as some additional functions (e.g. sentence structures and writing style) are incorporated into this online platform. Hughes and Hughes [2020] suggest students should use a free online service, Cambridge English Write & Improve that allows assigning a written piece at the level of proficiency (A1 to C2) and receiving immediate feedback. All the technological opportunities are helpful for students at a certain stage, but teacher's comments are still appreciated.

Next, language teachers should choose the way to provide feedback that is convenient for both teachers and students. In the era of technology, giving comments in online document might be quite relevant. However, some educators and learners might not have an access to the Internet on a regular basis, which can prevent them from providing and responding to feedback in a timely manner. Oral comments are valued when immediate feedback is needed, but they might be forgotten quite fast, and students will not be able to incorporate any improvement into the paper. Written feedback is still the most applicable as it allows focusing on both meaning and form, and learners can refer to it whenever they need it if it is not lost. A combination of different ways of feedback giving is also recommended as it might increase students' interest and involvement in the process.

Finally, language teachers should tailor the feedback to learners' needs, knowledge and skills. Although the university entrance requirements are the same for all applicants, the students in the classroom are usually of mixed abilities. Murray and Christison [2011] therefore suggest using different phrases in the feedback provided to different students, so that they become meaningful to them. It is also good to avoid using a lot of clichés and subject-specific terms in the teachers' comments, which might not be clear to every learner. Customizing the feedback is valued by students as they might consider it personalized.

To conclude, language teachers might apply different approaches to providing feedback on students' L2 writing. Depending on various reasons, some of them choose to give many comments and correct all the errors they see, whereas others prefer focusing on the content and recommend online tools for grammar and spellcheck. Nonetheless, it is important to take into consideration the students' abilities and respond to their writing so that feedback is accessible and encouraging.

References

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