Student-Teacher Conferencing:
ESL Learners' Perspectives Explored

Nouf Alqahtani
University of Idaho

Caroline Payant
University of Idaho

Within the field of second language (L2) writing research, a growing amount of work has focused on the practices of providing learners with written corrective feedback (CF). While the debate regarding the optimal practices for providing CF persists, there is a general consensus that students do indeed desire written CF from their teachers (Chandler, 2003; Diab, 2005). Nevertheless, few studies have examined students' beliefs and needs in relation to L2 written CF during student-teacher conferences. This paper investigates the beliefs of five upper-intermediate and advanced level students of English about writing conferences in one intensive English program. Student-teacher conferencing sessions were video-recorded and each learner participated in two stimulated recall interviews. Findings suggest that student-teacher conferences provided each learner with individual opportunities to negotiate their writing and question their language use. Furthermore, findings indicate the learners saw immediate benefits for engaging in dialogues with their teachers. Pedagogical implications for L2 writing teachers are provided.

Nouf Alqahtani (noufalqahtani_ui@hotmail.com) is an MA student in the University of Idaho's TESL program. Her research interests include L2 writing and L2 teacher development.

Dr. Caroline Payant (cpayant@uidaho.edu) is an assistant professor in the MA TESL program at the University of Idaho. Her interests include cognitive and sociocultural aspects of second language acquisition and teacher education. Her work can be found in the Canadian Modern Language Review, TESL Canada Journal, and Journal of L2 Writing.

Within the field of second language (L2) writing, a growing amount of research has focused on the practices of providing learners with written corrective feedback (CF). While the debate regarding the optimal practices for providing CF persists, there is a general consensus that students desire CF from their teachers (Chandler, 2003; Diab, 2005). The CF is often provided in writing, directly on the students' work; however, in many L2 settings, students and teachers meet to discuss the paper, the feedback, and any additional concerns about the writing (Ferris, 1995). These student-teacher conferences have become popular in L2 writing classrooms over the last two decades, which has led to a number of studies reporting on the teachers' roles and practices during student-teacher conferences (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Eckstein, 2013; Ewert, 2009). However, what actually unfolds during these one-on-one meetings from the students' side and how students perceive this practice remains largely under-researched. The present case study research aimed to fill this gap and examined five English as a second language (ESL) students' perceptions towards student-teacher conferences. To situate the current study, we first provide a brief overview of previous work in the field of L2 writing.

Student-Teacher Writing Conferences

Student-teacher writing conferences have been found to be instrumental in developing student's L2 writing. Bitchener et al. (2005) examined the effect of providing varying types of CF during student-teacher conferences with 53 ESL adult learners. The CF under investigation targeted three forms: prepositions, simple past tense, and the definite article. In their experimental design, three groups were formed: Group 1 received written and oral CF, Group 2 received written CF only, and Group 3 received limited written CF on other non-target forms. They found that the combination of both written feedback and oral CF during conferencing benefited the students the most. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) studied the process of student-teacher negotiations on early drafts with ESL students and their impact on subsequent drafts. They found that students involved in the negotiation process revised their drafts and ultimately produced better revised drafts. However, they did not find significant student contributions during these interactions. In other words, asymmetrical interactional patterns were identified between the teachers and their students.

The interactional patterns between participants have been the object of some recent studies. Ewert (2009) examined the talk of two writing teachers during student-teacher conferences. The results revealed that both teachers negotiated with their students their drafts and used different features of scaffolding. The amount of negotiation and scaffolding, however, differed as teachers were sensitive to the students' proficiency levels. In addition, differences among the two teachers were identified: for example, one of the teachers focused more on content and rhetorical features of students' drafts and the other teacher focused on sentence-level mistakes. Qureshi (2011) examined teacher and student talk during writing conferences with one ESL composition teacher and two ESL students. The findings again reflected asymmetrical patterns in that the teachers dominated the interactions in the amount of talking and turn-taking. These findings appear to be symptomatic of power differences often present in educational settings (Fairclough, 2001).

To date, a small number of studies have included the learners' perspectives on these conferences. Eckstein (2013) examined the relationship between learners' proficiency levels and their preferences in feedback. In total, 546 ESL students completed a brief, semester-end written evaluation reporting on their writing program. The author found that unlike low-level students, upper-level students liked to learn in more collaborative contexts with teachers and the latter group preferred to focus on global mistakes. In contrast, low-level students were less interactive than upper-level students and these less proficient learners focused on lower-order feedback. Recently, Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, and Williamson (2015) examined how ESL students' perceived several approaches to feedback including student-teacher conferencing. Drawing on data from focus group interviews, they found that learners held strikingly positive attitudes towards one-on-one student-teacher conferences as it enabled them to clarify teachers' comments and provided a space for them to explain their ideas.

While there is support for including conferencing in L2 writing programs, we continue to have a narrow understanding of how ESL learners perceive conferencing and how they understand their roles. Therefore, it seems that ESL learners' perception of student-teacher conferences is a research gap in the field of L2 writing. This gap led us to the following three research questions:

1. What are students' beliefs toward student-teacher conferences?

2. How do student-teacher conferences raise students' awareness of L2 academic writing conventions?

3. How do student-teacher conferences impact students' future practices? The goal of the present study is to explore what upper-intermediate level and advanced ESL students gain from engaging in one-on-one conversations with their teachers.

Methodology

Participants
The participants for this multiple-case study were five ESL students from one intensive English program located in the Pacific Northwest. The two learners from the upper-intermediate level were Myra (from China) and Mather (from Saudi Arabia). At the time of the study, Myra had studied English for three years in China and had been studying English in the United States (US) for eight months. Mather reported not having English language education in his home country and had been studying English in the US for one year. The three learners from the advanced group included Abdullah (from Libya), Hussam (from Saudi Arabia), and Shin (from China). Abdullah had studied English in middle and high school in Libya and had been studying English in the US for one year. Hussam had a bachelor's degree in English from his home country and was the most experienced English language learner. Shin had studied English for nine years in her home country, China, and she had been studying English in the US for four months. Despite having a range of experiences, based on in-house placement examinations, these three learners were considered advanced learners. Both the upper-intermediate level group and the advanced level group experienced student-teacher conferences for the first time in their current intensive English program.

Setting

The study took place in an intensive English program over a six-week period during a summer session. The study was conducted with learners of ESL writing courses from two proficiency levels: upper-intermediate and advanced. The writing assignments for the upper-intermediate level learners were cause and effect essays and summary and evaluation essays. The assignments for the advanced learners were synthesis and problem-solving essays. In both levels, there were three drafts of each assignment. The teachers held a writing conference with each student after providing them with written CF on their first or second drafts as well as assigning a grade on the draft giving learners the opportunity to improve their writing and their grades.

Procedure

The participants were involved in two student-teacher conferences over the course of the semester. Each conference with upper-intermediate (Level 5) learners was approximately 15 minutes long and each conference with the advanced learners (Level 6) was 30 minutes long. These conferences were video-recorded. Following each session, the focal participants engaged in a stimulated recall interview. Stimulated recall is a verbal reporting by the participants after the task has been completed in response to a stimulus; the stimulus in this study being the recorded videos of the student-teacher conferences. At the onset of the stimulated recall interview, learners were instructed to stop the recording at any moment to comment on their thoughts. In addition, they were informed that the primary researcher would select segments of the conference and would be asked to comment on it. Their stimulated recall interviews were transcribed verbatim which allowed us, the researchers, to have a deeper exploration of the collected data (Gass & Mackey, 2000).

Data Coding

This study adopted qualitative data coding methods. We coded the transcripts of the students' stimulated recall interviews following three steps. First, both authors read the students' interviews separately and underlined any ideas that were repeated or insightful. Second, the authors together discussed each student transcript in turn. Third, the authors identified overlapping themes, to be discussed below, and ideas for the five focal participants.

Findings

The first research question concerned ESL learners' beliefs towards student-teacher conferences in L2 writing classrooms. In this study, learners used the conferences as an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. Throughout the data, student-oriented clarifications and teacher-oriented clarifications were prevalent. Student-oriented clarifications were operationalized as instances where learners discussed doubts about the written CF and task expectations. For example, during the second stimulated recall interview, Hussam, a Level 6 student, explained that, "I think before I come to the conference, I was a little bit confused about the issue here. And, when I met with her, she explained very well to me how to fix this problem and be organized." In this example, we see how Hussam used this opportunity to ask his teacher to explain her comments more clearly thus helping him better edit his paper.

Conferencing also provided opportunities for students to clarify task demands, the second type of student-oriented clarifications. Shin explained that, "When I finished writing my article, I wasn't quite sure if is this what the teacher wants. Does it meet the requirement? Is this

understandable? After the conference, this can be improve." In other words, when introduced to new assignments and academic genres, students are not always confident that they truly understand what is expected of them and conferencing opens an avenue for these discussions. Moreover, it affords learners the opportunity to pursue unfinished conversations. For example, Abdullah had approached his teacher about the use of charts and had not reached a clear understanding in class:

> Actually, I have asked her before if I can use charts and graphs or some tables to explain more my three solutions . . . so, actually, she didn't answer me. She told me that "I will tell you later" . . . because she told us from three to four pages. . . . If I put charts and graphs, the paper will be maybe six or seven pages. Now, after the conference, she told me it is OK.

After these one-on-one conversations, students appeared to be in a better position to succeed in completing the task.

The stimulated recall interviews further led to the identification of teacher-oriented clarifications. These are defined as instances where students, feeling they had been misunderstood, clarified their ideas to the teacher. For example, the feedback that Hussam had received suggested that perhaps the teacher did not understand his point; however, he explained, "When my instructor explained that to me, I think she didn't understand what I mean by my writing. But, after I explain it in person, she understands me very well." This opportunity for clarifying their ideas is most important for developing writers as it gives them their own scholarly voice and helps them create their identity as L2 writers. Through discussions about writing, these students express their views and position themselves in new discourse communities (Hyland, 2008). L2 writing research shows that L2 writers seek their teachers' feedback and may value their teachers' feedback more highly than their peers' feedback (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002). In this context, learners did not have an opportunity to engage in peer editing. However, interestingly, we found that students in this setting tended to weigh their current teachers' feedback as more valuable than their previous teachers' input. For example, Abdullah recalls having studied how to cite differently in the past, but after discussing the topic with his current teacher, he believes that he was mistaken, based on a previous teachers' feedback, and takes his current teachers' input as the correct approach:

> I asked my teacher about this one because the way that I had studied before is that in the first time, I should put the first name and the last name of the author. And then if I mention the author again in my writing, I should put just the last name. . . . She reminded me the example should put the last name. So, I remember my mistake.

Myra was surprised to learn, from her current teacher, that the use of the first person pronoun is not a desirable voice in academic papers. She explains that her previous teachers never brought this to her attention and thus she found this advice quite helpful:

> Um, before I wrote my conclusions, always I think like this. My teacher told me you cannot use the pronoun (I), but other teachers will not. Maybe I'm wrong or maybe my previous teachers didn't pay attention to this word. So, I need to change it and I know how to write my suggestions in my conclusion without the pronoun (I). It is very helpful.

What is fascinating about these examples is that both students walk away believing that their current teacher had the correct knowledge in contrast with prior instruction. In the first instance, rather than deciding that both techniques may be acceptable, the student determined that the last name-only approach was the acceptable technique, and in the second instance, the student believed that the use of the first person pronoun was not acceptable in concluding paragraphs. These appear to be missed opportunities for teachers and learners to discuss the variety of philosophies that exist regarding what good writing practices are.

The second research question focused on the benefits of student-teacher conferences for raising learners' L2 writing awareness. In the data, there was recurring evidence that learners saw this as an opportunity for them to notice gaps in their use of academic genres and grammar. Through conferencing, students are able to visualize that both breadth and specificity in lexical use can benefit their writing:

> I think before I just write the word "human" a lot. And maybe I think this is correct, so I did not think it is a problem. But when teacher said you need to change the word and your essay will look academic if you just use more words. (Myra)

> Actually, I didn't notice this kind of thing before. I just think this idea is important, so I use "important" there. I didn't notice this word can be biased. The teacher mentioned that and I started thinking that maybe this word is biased. Maybe the words "useful" or "effective" are more academic in that way. (Shin)

> I didn't notice this before. This is my paper and I know what I'm talking about. As a reader, maybe he or she will find this sentence maybe unclear. (Shin)

These surface-level errors became very salient for the learners. However, throughout the stimulated recall interviews, the discussion of explicit rhetorical moves and genres was limited. Only one student discussed thesis statements and another discussed the manipulation of tense for the particular genre they were working on:

> I thought the thesis statement with this phrase will be a strong and make my thesis statement more powerful. So, when my teacher told me, I should remove this phrase and put it at the end. . . . So, when I read my thesis statement again with this phrase at the end, I convinced that this phrase is better to be at the end. It's strong more than before. (Abdullah)

> We have academic research now. In academic research, the teacher tells me it is not a report, it is a research. You have to tell something we should do. But, this paper (problem-solution) is a report and actually the verb tense maybe the same from the beginning to the end. (Shin)

In other words, even though the sessions included discussions pertaining to language and rhetoric, the learners appeared to notice the surface-level errors almost exclusively.

The final research question focused on how student-teacher conferences impacted learners' future writing practices. Two time frames were identified in terms of reported activities: the immediate future and long-term future practices. Every learner discussed using the obtained information in the immediate future. In some cases, learners claimed that they would revisit their actual sources to improve their writing whereas others mentioned they would consult their textbook to help them improve their writing:

> But my teacher told me that I can go back to *A Pocket Style Manual* book by Hacker and find the information that I need. So, when I read the book, I found that I have to organize my sources alphabetically. (Mather)

The goal of the student-teacher conference can be envisioned as having an impact on the students' immediate writing practices (i.e., revisions of the paper); however, teachers would hope that information shared during the conferences would also impact their long-term practices. Yet, only Myra made an explicit connection between the conferences and her future practices:

> I was thinking that this is very helpful because before I don't know I need to explain my topic. So, I don't explain it, maybe if I go to the university, my professor maybe will take a lot of my points because of this.

In sum, the reported impact on students' practices was more likely to be immediate; however, the long-term learning that ideally occurs may not be something learners are conscious of forthwith.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The present study focused on how learners perceived student-teacher conferences in one academic English program in the US. Given the overarching goals of intensive English programs across contexts, the findings of this study may be of interest to teachers working in similar settings. Thus, our discussion focuses on pedagogical implications that have emerged as a result of this study and previous studies on the topic.

Overall, there was some evidence that learners benefited from engaging in these one-on-one conversations with their teachers. Students were able to dispel their doubts as well as clarify any ideas that their teachers may have misunderstood. Language-related discussions were also seen as central to these conferences; however, many of the topics addressed tended to focus on lexical issues, while few examined genre-based or rhetorical matters. Nevertheless, students found the information to be valuable and discussed how they would use this information to improve their practices in the immediate future. The identification of positive attitudes towards student-teacher conferences, from the students' perspectives, is in line with previous research (Best, et al., 2015; Eckstein, 2013).

Since time was spent primarily on addressing linguistic aspects and, in some cases, on clarifying task requirements, we began to reflect on strategies that would ensure that the meetings address additional dimensions of student writing (i.e., rhetorical aspects). One useful strategy that could maximize learning opportunities is to provide learners with ample time and opportunities to reflect on the written CF. Some specific steps include:

1. increasing the time lag between returning an essay and the student-teacher conferences;

2. returning student papers and allocating class time for initial review of the feedback; and

3. creating small groups for students to discuss some feedback.

These three suggestions, while not empirically tested in this context, may encourage learners to address some of the comments before the conference and ultimately create a space for

dialoguing about the content and rhetoric of the paper. Specifically, by allocating time in class for an initial review, surface-level errors, often common to many papers, can be negotiated as a whole group and resolved prior to the individual meetings. An alternative is the creation of small groups to discuss the teachers' feedback. Rather than relying on peer feedback, which learners appear to view negatively (Best, et al., 2015; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Rollinson, 2005), they can work collaboratively on the teachers' comments. We believe that these discussions about the teachers' feedback may increase the students' awareness of shared issues in addition to those that are unique to their writing. Once the in-class review in small groups of the feedback is complete, students could have specific tasks to prepare them for the actual one-on-one meeting. These tasks can include:

1. responding to the comments directly on the paper; and

2. preparing specific questions that are directly related to the comments, and bringing these written questions to the meeting.

The more students prepare prior to the meeting, the more they can engage with their teachers to tackle more complex issues.

The focus of this research was based on the students' perspectives, and we saw that many of our participants felt their teachers helped them; however, there were some cases where learners continued to feel confused. To minimize these communication breakdowns and to again maximize learning opportunities, we would like to propose that a post-conferencing reflection be written by the learners. Immediately after the conference, students can respond, in writing, to reflective questions: (1) what they noticed about their writing; (2) what they think you wanted them to focus on; (3) what questions they still have about their writing (specific points); (4) what they need their teacher to focus on in their future conferences and why. We hope that by having the student engage with the feedback before the one-on-one conference, during the meeting, and immediately following the interaction, students will have a greater ability to recall the information and increase their own potential to notice gaps in their writing (beyond surface-level errors) and focus on these in the future. Finally, the time spent on working with the feedback may lead to greater uptake on the revised draft and give teachers a greater sense of purpose when providing the feedback.

There are some limitations and gaps for future research. With only two writing instructors and five ESL students participating in this study, generalizability is not possible. Similarly, focusing on advanced learners precludes us from understanding how student-teacher conferences benefit learners across proficiency groupings. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies with the same purpose of this study will help to generalize its results. Finally, the study only examined what unfolded during the conference, and the analysis has yet to consider the impact on the students' writing. Despite these limitations, this study uncovered information about the students' perspective.

Conclusion

While there is support for the value of writing conferences in the ESL context (Bitchener et al., 2005), there are ways in which they can be improved. Combining the principles of negotiation and scaffolding in writing conferences encourages learners to participate in

conferences (Ewert, 2009). These principles guarantee that a writing conference will be dialogic. Researchers are highlighting the importance of engaging learners in conversations about their writing such that both the ESL learner and the teacher contribute to the revisions during writing conferences (Ewert, 2009; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Young & Miller, 2004). Young and Miller (2004) reflected that teachers encourage ESL students to have the authority in correcting their errors by holding conversations with their students during writing conferences. We hope that further studies focusing on both the students and the teachers will emerge to help expand our current knowledge base regarding this practice.

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