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Writing conference feedback as moment-to-moment affiliative relationship building

Elena Shvidko

Utah State University, 0715 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT, 84322, USA

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, a substantial amount of research has been done on interaction in writing conferences. However, most previous studies have focused on the cognitive aspects of conference discourse, neglecting its affective components. Yet conferences are by no means emotionally neutral, as they inherently involve evaluation of student work, correction, directions for improvement, and even criticism—that is, they involve potentially face-threatening acts. Therefore, it is important for teachers to know how to conference with students in non-threatening and affiliative ways. The study presented here examines on a turn-by-turn basis how a writing instructor used a wide range of affiliative interactional resources, including talk and embodied behavior, in two potentially face-threatening moments in writing conferences: providing critical feedback and uttering a directive. The analysis suggests that the use of affiliative interactional resources during feedback activities allows writing teachers to maintain positive relationships with students without deviating from their instructional objectives. Drawing on these findings, the article discusses the implications of this study for second language (L2) writing pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

Responding to student writing during writing conferences is a powerful means of providing feedback. The benefits of writing conferences are widely addressed in the first- and second-language writing feedback literature. One benefit is the negotiation that takes place in conferences, which gives both the teacher and the student the opportunity for better understanding and learning (e.g., Carnicelli, 1980; Conrad and Goldstein, 1999). Martin and Mottet (2011), for example, noted that, “Fewer errors in perception occur because students have the opportunity to ask for clarification or further exploration” (p. 5). Conferences also allow students to exercise their agency by negotiating teacher feedback and standing up for their ideas (Eodice, 1998; Gilliland, 2014; Newkirk, 1995). Written comments, in contrast, deprive students of this opportunity, providing only what Carnicelli (1980) called “one-way communication” (p. 108).

While responding to student writing during conferences may be pedagogically beneficial, such feedback is “not emotionally neutral” (Witt and Kerssen-Griep, 2011, p. 78). Instead, face-to-face encounters regarding students’ work may be considered “emotionally charged interactions” (Tees et al., 2009, pp. 397–398) and become an obstacle to the development of positive teacher-student relationships. This may happen, first, because as a pedagogical practice, providing feedback enacts power relations wherein teacher and student perform asymmetrical roles, primarily due to unequal access to knowledge and institutionalized rights to this knowledge (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Second, responding to student writing involves

E-mail address: elenashvidko@gmail.com.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.01.004>

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evaluation and assessment of student work, correction, and directions for improvement, all of which often involve criticism. As [Trees et al. \(2009\)](#) put it, “Even when combined with glowing comments about strong aspects of the students’ work, suggestions about improvement inherently contain the message that students did not do as well as they could—and perhaps *should*–have” (p. 398, emphasis in original). This may induce negative reactions from students, which can undermine the effectiveness and value of teacher feedback ([Värlander, 2008](#); [Witt and Kerssen-Griep, 2011](#)).

It goes without saying that instructors are expected to evaluate student performance; nevertheless, because of the inherent face-threatening nature of criticism, feedback is likely to “heighten emotional tension” ([Kerssen-Griep and Witt, 2012](#), p. 499). Therefore, even the most delicately and tactfully formulated comments can easily be taken wrongly, and be destructive to learner identity ([Carnicelli, 1980](#)). In some cases, they may even impact students’ self-esteem, motivation, and emotional well-being ([Värlander, 2008](#)). Finally, criticism may also negatively impact students’ perceptions of the teacher ([Lee and Schallert, 2008](#)), which may become an obstacle to the development of positive teacher-student relationships.

Considering the importance of the affective component of writing conferences, it is crucial for writing teachers to understand how to conference with students in non-threatening and affiliative ways. As [Chen \(2005\)](#) rightly noticed, “Since feelings and emotions intrinsically pervade conversations, the affective dimension of conferencing cannot be ignored” (p. 19). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine writing conference discourse from an interpersonal, or relational, angle. What follows is a review of the relevant literature on the importance of relational aspects of writing conferences and teacher use of interactional resources to manage such relations.

1.1. Importance of relational aspects of writing conferences

The potentially damaging influence of feedback on positive teacher-student relationships appears to contradict the idea in the literature that writing conferences should provide a venue for creating and maintaining rapport between participants. According to [Wilcox \(1997\)](#), for instance, a writing conference cannot be productive if the teacher does not have trusting relationships with students. The link between positive interactional atmosphere and effectiveness of conferences was also addressed by [Consalvo \(2011\)](#), who asserted that a friendly conversation between teacher and student promotes their productivity in writing conferences. Along the same lines, [Kaufman \(2000\)](#) suggested that positive conference interaction between teacher and student facilitates further learning: “Rapport usually results in a productive conference in which the student leaves with new perspectives, a clarified direction for further work, and a renewed enthusiasm” (p. 92). [Martin and Mottet \(2011\)](#) argued that due to rapport, students are more likely to trust teachers’ suggestions. Finally, [Chen \(2005\)](#) pointed out the importance of embracing the emotional layer ingrained in conference interaction: “[F]eelings of being welcomed or rejected, encouraged or humiliated, valued or threatened remain strong in learners long after the conference is over” ([Chen, 2005](#), p. 19).

The significance of a positive and supportive conference atmosphere is also documented in the literature from the students’ perspective. Thus, [Liu \(2009\)](#) examined students’ expectations of conferences and found that about half of those he studied viewed conferences as an opportunity to strengthen “a close personal relationship” (p. 110) with their instructor, as well as places where they could feel safer and more confident. One of [Qureshi’s \(2013\)](#) participants also commented on a similar feeling of safety and confidence: “[I]t is easy I think [to ask questions] ... the teacher is friendly ... you didn’t get nervous” (p. 29). [Black \(1998\)](#) also found that students’ assessment of writing conference effectiveness was influenced by the emotional factor. She likewise referred to her own conferencing experience as a learner, which resembled those of her students: “What makes certain memories of conferencing so strong for me is not whether I got the advice to rewrite a particular paper and get a good grade, but whether I felt welcomed or humiliated or valued or threatened” (pp. 123–134). As seen from these statements, students indeed expect writing conferences to be relationship-enhancing activities.

Considering the importance of a positive conference atmosphere and teacher-student relationships on the one hand, and the existence of a potentially face-threatening component in teacher feedback on the other, conference feedback stands as a highly complex phenomenon that contains two seemingly contradictory objectives: to deliver evaluative and sometimes corrective information and to minimize the face-threatening effect of this activity. It is not surprising therefore that writing teachers sometimes may feel, in [Kerssen-Griep and Witt \(2012\)](#)’s words, “torn between directing students’ learning or maintaining productive rapport with them” (p. 498).

1.2. Managing relational aspects of feedback

How, then, can instructors find a balance between instructional and relational goals? Previous research has demonstrated that teachers can take advantage of the very nature of oral feedback–face-to-face interaction–and use its various interactional resources to maximize affiliation and establish solidarity with students in potentially face-threatening moments of instruction. Below is a brief review of studies that examined teacher interactional resources during feedback encounters (both in the classroom and in one-on-one interaction) implemented in order to minimize face-threatening effects of the feedback act, level power differences, and soften error correction.

1.2.1. Minimizing face-threatening effects of feedback

Various interactional strategies that help to minimize face threat of instructional feedback were examined by [Kerssen-Griep and Witt \(e.g., Kerssen-Griep and Witt, 2012; Witt and Kerssen-Griep, 2011\)](#) in a series of experiments conducted

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