What does it take to make a change? Teacher feedback and student revisions

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>*ABSTRACT: This study investigates the effects of teacher written feedback on students' writing in the Singapore primary school context. We discuss different types of teacher feedback – advice, criticism, and praise – and how successful each is in encouraging revisions by Primary 4 children. Quality of revision is discussed in terms of length and overall improvement in the revised compositions. Student attitudes are also explored through a questionnaire. The questionnaire responses provide some insight into why some types of teacher feedback encouraged more revision than others.*

>*KEYWORDS: Composition, teacher feedback, revision, narrative writing, second language writing, primary school English education.*

INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of research has been conducted to study teacher feedback and students' revision process in both first and second-language writing (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006, for an overview). Hedgcock and Lefkowitz have noted, "L2 educators are particularly interested in how teacher intervention in writing instruction influences the composing process, and more specifically, in how apprentice writers react to the feedback they receive on their immediate and final products" (1994, p. 142). This interest continues more than a decade later (see, for example, Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In this study, we investigate how teacher feedback influences the revision process and final product for children in Primary 4 English language (EL) classes in Singapore. We consider the drafting-feedback-revising cycle as it is commonly used in this context, examine the teacher feedback types which encourage revision, and evaluate the children's final compositions. We also examine student reactions to teacher feedback in terms of stated preferences. Since success in the writing process is crucially connected to how students respond to feedback, we begin by addressing that topic.

Student reactions to feedback

There has been a growing literature on students' preferences, reactions and perceptions regarding teacher feedback (for example, Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Hayes & Daiker, 1984; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Some students may disregard feedback given to their written efforts, as they view the teacher as an evaluator rather than a genuinely interested reader (Ziv,

1984). These students may feel hostility towards their teachers as they want to maintain authority over their own texts (Dohrer, 1991; Leki, 1990). Those students who are not favoured by their teachers for their writing ability may develop defences to protect their self-esteem (Cleary, 1990), and students with poor self-perception as language learners and with poor proficiency in the language may find feedback less useful than other students (Cohen, 1987).

Ferris (1997) has argued that students who do not revise based on teacher feedback might not be lazy but, instead, might be thinking independently and creatively. This may be related to their proficiency in writing. Proficient students tend to take more responsibility for their work. They dare to take risks with their language and make more of their own revisions (Hyland, 1998). More skilled writers are able to change whole chunks of discourse and focus on meaning in revisions (Sommers, 1980). On the other hand, in a case study of two student writers, Hyland (1998) found that the less proficient student lost self-confidence and was unwilling to revise on her own initiative, preferring to rely on teacher feedback.

Characteristics of teacher written feedback might also influence students' willingness and ability to revise. Straub, for example, used a survey to determine student reactions to characteristics of teacher feedback. Responses from student-writers showed that they were able to distinguish among different feedback types and that they were more affected by characteristics of teacher feedback than the focus of the feedback. "They preferred and found most useful comments framed in moderate modes – comments that provided direction, did not insist on a certain path for revision, and came across to them as helpful" (1997, p. 103). The students also appreciated feedback that was specific and elaborate.

Other studies have found that students appreciate feedback which includes praise (for example, Reed & Burton, 1985; Daiker, 1989). But student reactions to both praise and criticism can be quite mixed. The same feedback to different students can elicit different reactions: while some students prefer constructive criticism that indicates where there are problems in the writing, others prefer positive feedback (Enginarlar, 1993; Radecki & Swales, 1988). In general, students dislike feedback that dwells only on the negative aspects of their writing. Burkland and Grimm (1984) have suggested that a mixture of both praise and criticism may be most beneficial. Briefly, prior research suggests that student characteristics (for example confidence, proficiency) as well as characteristics of teacher feedback (for example, criticism, praise, authority, specificity) influence whether and how well students utilize teacher feedback.

Characteristics of teacher feedback and revision success

What are the characteristics that lead to success or failure in revision? First and second-language researchers as well as teachers generally agree that comments of praise or encouragement are important to develop writers (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Connors & Lunsford 1993; Ferris, 1995, 1997). However, other researchers have recognized that praise needs to be credible and informative to be effective and

that insincere praise is unlikely to encourage successful revisions (Brophy, 1981; Hitz & Driscoll, 1989). Cleary (1990) believes that the key to positive feedback is clear communication in which the teacher genuinely communicates her belief in the students' ability to do good work. Her research showed that prolonged negative feedback had a detrimental effect on writers' confidence and motivation, but that praise could lead to "A-grade junkies" (p. 25,) who found writing to be a chore because they only pursued teacher's responses.

Different aspects of writing might be differentially affected by feedback as well. Advice on giving examples and increasing cohesion was likely to be implemented by students (Goldstein & Conrad, 1999). Improvement in the overall quality and language accuracy was found when feedback was given on content and form (Fathman & Whalley, 1990), and students were able to make use of written teacher feedback pertaining to form and structure to effect a positive change (Leki, 1990; Yagelski, 1995; Ziv, 1984). On the other hand, students had little revision success when tackling suggestions related to explanation, explicitness and analysis. Thus, the types of problems that students are asked to resolve can also influence student revision.

In addition to the factors already mentioned, there is a need to recognize that feedback and creating written texts do not exist independently of wider course contexts and interpersonal interactions. Researchers point out that many studies fail to consider the larger context of the writing classroom and teacher-student relationship including the constraints of individual assignments, the point in the term when feedback was given, and the evolving relationship between the teacher and students (for example, Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994). The sociocultural and educational context might also play a role. This point brings us to some important considerations in respect of the teaching/learning context of Singapore, where the data for this study were collected.

The educational context of Singapore

Since 1991, the primary education structure has adopted a two-pronged approach with a four-year "foundation stage", Primary 1 to 4, and a two-year orientation stage, Primary 5 to 6. All students at the foundation stage follow a common curriculum which provides them with a firm foundation in English Language, Mother Tongue, and Mathematics. "Mother Tongue" in Singapore refers to the official language (Chinese, Malay, Tamil) which is most closely associated with the child's ethnicity. "English Language" in this context covers not only development of English language (grammar, vocabulary, and so on) but also of language arts and literacy. Also included in the curriculum are subjects such as Music, Art & Crafts, Civics and Moral Education, Health Education, Social Studies, Physical Education, and Science. All except Mother Tongue are taught in English (see Silver, 2005, for details).

In years past, students sat for a "streaming examination" in Primary 4 (P4). This assessed their performance in English Language, Mother Tongue, and Mathematics.

Based on this assessment, the school would recommend the "stream" which the student should attend during P5 and P6. As of 2005, this national examination was eliminated. However, primary schools still stream their students internally, based on assessment results from P1-P5. National examinations are still used at different stages of education. Most importantly for primary school students, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) at P6 influences the secondary schools in which they can enroll. Due to the influence of the PSLE and the term-by-term examinations which are prevalent in the Singapore educational system, there is a heavy emphasis on exam preparation throughout primary and secondary, including an emphasis on preparing for English language (EL) composition examinations.

While process writing as part of classroom teaching is espoused, the pressure to produce written products and to prepare for writing in examinations means that the interpretation of process writing is quite specific to this educational context. Ideally, process writing would have at least five stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. Prewriting is the planning and idea-gathering stage. Drafting refers to time spent composing a rough draft. Revising is the process of improving the draft. Students reread their work and share it with a partner or small group; they then make changes in the writing based on feedback from their peers. Editing is the process of correcting mechanical errors. Publishing, or sharing, is accomplished in a wide variety of ways when the work is in final form. Student of all ages move back and forth among these stages while writing; the stages are not lockstep or sequential (Gardner & Johnson, 1997). At least, that is the ideal.

In reality, in Singapore, students usually produce only two drafts: the original and one revised version based on teacher feedback to the first draft. The so-called "drafts" are treated as final products that need "fixing" (see Zamel, 1985). The recursive element of process writing is lost. As Cheah has noted: "…the writing of drafts in process writing was…curtailed because of a lack of time, and in many schools, process writing was quietly dropped because teachers could not find time to assign four essays a term and still use the process approach" (2003, p. 362). In addition, with the emphasis on examinations and results, students are constantly given practice in the examination format. One required type of writing at the primary level is the "picture composition". This is usually a narrative based on a picture stimulus. Generally at the P4 level, this is done with four pictures: three provide images which tell the story and a fourth has a question mark to encourage the students to end the story with a suitable and relevant conclusion. Prior to 2005, when the streaming examination was still in place and data for this study was collected, this was one of the main ways for the students to develop their writing skills. Thus, the perception of what constitutes "good writing" is also influenced by the examination system. Currently the PSLE format is somewhat different; however, the use of picture compositions in middle primary and the emphasis on examination practice have not changed. Therefore, some of the same issues continue to influence the implementation of process writing in Singapore primary schools.

In terms of addressing student compositions, teachers in Singapore schools tend to highlight grammatical surface errors rather than content and organization of the story. They also "fall back on the same vague or negative comments 'awkward', 'clumsy expression', 'neat work', 'good' and so on, none of which informs the writers in any precise way about their strengths and weaknesses or offers strategies for improvement" (Foley, 1998, p. 265). Students are then required to make the necessary corrections by rewriting the sentences containing the errors which have been highlighted. The emphases on grammar and correction are driven not only by the examination system but also by Singapore's language and education policies, which emphasize the teaching of "internationally accepted English" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2001, p. 3).

According to the latest Singapore population census, the language most frequently spoken at home for all three races is the Mother Tongue: Chinese, Malay, or Tamil. English use at home is on the rise (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000) and use of two or more language varieties (usually Mother Tongue plus English) is increasing (Aman & Bokhorst-Heng, 2006; Vaish, 2007). This means that while many of the primary school children speak some English, English may not be their home language or their dominant language, and some are clearly ESL learners who begin studying English in kindergarten or primary school. Thus, the Singapore context presents a rather complicated scenario, where English is considered a "First Language" at school and on a national level, but it may not be the L1 of the children. With this in mind, the writings of the participating children are investigated within the framework of second-language writing.

This study is spurred by three motivations. Firstly, the study considers classroom learners in Singapore's "bilingual" education system, which differs from both ESL and EFL environments previously investigated. Secondly, it is our desire to discover how best to respond to student writing in this educational context in a way that results in student revision and improved drafts. Thirdly, whereas most previous research was done with adolescents and adults, this study extends research on teacher feedback and revision to child writers.

Based on all of these considerations, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What characteristics of teacher feedback encourage student revision?
2. Do the revisions lead to substantive and effective changes?
3. How does teacher feedback align with student preference?

METHODOLOGY

To find out the characteristics of teacher feedback which influence students' revision as well as their revision success, data were obtained from three sources: corrected compositions of students, teacher written feedback and a student questionnaire. Data were obtained from an intact class by the classroom teacher, the second author of this

article. Data collection was done at the end of the school year, after the students' final assessments, during a two-week period when teachers could select learning material they deemed to be appropriate for the students.

Participants

The subjects for this study were 33, primary 4 students, all approximately 10 years old, who had their EL class together. The students were from a "neighborhood school", which indicates that it is a government-funded school following the national syllabus with a large percentage of its students draw from the area around the school. Most of these students came from lower or middle-class backgrounds, where English was not the language spoken at home. As indicated by the student questionnaire responses, all but two used their Mother Tongue or other dialects at home. Most of them demonstrated a low to intermediate language proficiency of English, and had below-average or average writing abilities, based on their class work and assessment results. The students varied in terms of gender, race and nationality. Most of the students were Singaporean, but there were also students from the other countries, namely, China, India, Malaysia and the Philippines (Table 1). Tools for data collection, as stated above, included a questionnaire, student compositions and teacher feedback.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was designed to gather information about the background of the students, including race, gender, language spoken at home and their preferred language for speaking and writing. The questionnaire was also used to elicit students' attitudes, feelings and reactions towards composition writing in general and, more specifically, teacher feedback. It was given to the students after the composing and revision steps, described below, were completed. To ensure that the pupils understood each statement in the questionnaire, every statement was read out by the teacher and further explained before the children circled their preferences.

		Boys	%	Girls	%	Total	%
Races	Chinese	11	33.3	14	42.4	25	75.8
	Malay	0	0	5	15.15	5	15.15
	India	3	9.10	0	0	3	9.10
	Total	14	42.4	19	57.6	33	100
Nationality	China	1		2		3	9.09
	India	1		0		1	3.03
	Malaysia	1		1		2	6.06
	Philippines	0		1		1	3.03
	Total	3		4		7	21.21

Table 1. Distribution of students in terms of gender, race and nationality

Students' compositions

Each of the students wrote two, 120-word narrative compositions during class, with 50 minutes to write the first draft and 75 minutes, in another class period, in which to do revisions. Thus 66 compositions and their revisions were examined. The topic for the first composition was "A robbery in a park". The second composition, given one week after the students had completed the first, was "An outing to the kelong"[1]. Each topic had a series of three pictures to closely guide students in their writing. Students were required to come up with their own conclusions. This followed the standard procedure in the school to give students practice in these standard composition exercises and prepare them for their examinations. At the time of data collection (2001), the Streaming Examination was still in place and it used similar pictures as a writing stimulus. As noted above, the Streaming Examination has since been eliminated but similar writing activities are still done in the primary school grades.

After the first drafts were completed, they were collected, and written feedback was given by the classroom teacher. In this case, the types of teacher feedback are central to the investigation. In order to avoid "idiosyncratic" and "arbitrary" teacher responses (Sommers, 1982, p. 149), a simple but systematic framework for teacher feedback was adopted. Three feedback types discussed in prior research and commonly used by the classroom teacher with these students were adopted, thus lending both external and internal validity to the research. The classroom teacher (second author of this paper) attempted to use at least one example of each feedback type across all 66 student compositions (that is, at least three teacher responses per composition). We refer to these feedback types as *praise*, *advice* and *criticism,* following Hyland (1998, 2000c) and Hyland and Hyland (2001).

For the purpose of this study, *praise* is defined as "…an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the person giving feedback. It, therefore, suggests a more intense or detailed response than simple agreement" (Holmes, 1988, cited in Hyland, 2001, p. 186). *Criticism* is defined as "…an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment" (Hyland, 2000a, p. 44). This definition emphasizes feedback which finds fault in aspects of a text. It should be noted that in this pedagogical context, *criticism* is intended to be constructive criticism, which identifies a problem in the writing which, if addressed by the student, has the potential to improve the narrative and help the student develop his/her writing skills. Thus, although criticism can be seen as negative, it is intended to bring out positive outcomes by helping students to understand where and what problems occur in their writing. *Advice* is defined as differing "…from criticisms in containing an explicit recommendation for remediation, a relatively clear and accomplishable action for improvement" (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Thus *advice* might include an element of criticism but is seen as being more extended and perhaps

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[1] A "kelong" is a wooden structure built above the sea by driving wooden poles into the seabed and used for commercial fishing.

as less explicitly critical. Examples of each feedback type are given below, using examples written by the teacher in the course of this project.

Feedback framed as praise
1. You have used some interesting vocabulary words well. Keep it up.
2. I like the way you described how he fell into the water and how everybody reacted to it. Good.
3. You write very well as you have a good command of the language. Keep it up.

Feedback framed as criticism
1. The story is uninteresting.
2. The ending of the story is very abrupt and weak.
3. You are still very weak in your tenses and spelling.

Feedback framed as advice
1. You could describe in further detail what happened to the man after the fight.
2. I am wondering what the man felt/ did when they yelled for help. Perhaps
   you could explain.
3. You could try to describe this scene in detail. What happened to the man after he
   was pushed? Was he hurt? Did he try to do something?

As noted above, these three characteristics were used for each composition to ensure standardization of the types of feedback given to each student.

Data analysis

Analysis of the compositions consisted of the following. First and second drafts were compared to identify whether revisions were made. In some cases, despite teacher feedback, student did not make any form of revision in the second draft. Secondly, errors or other stimuli for teacher responses in the original drafts were identified. Thirdly, teacher feedback to the original compositions in the form of praise, criticism and advice was identified, based on the definitions given above. During this identification, it was noted that even though there was an attempt to be systematic, there were differences within the feedback, for example, the use of questions or statements, use of hedges, degree of specificity, and length and content of teacher responses (Hyland, 2000b). Example 3 for *criticism*, as above, is more specific than either of the other examples of *criticism*. In terms of content, Example 3 refers to language form ("tenses" and "spelling") rather than story structure (as in the 2nd example) or the narrative more broadly (interesting/uninteresting). Similar sorts of variations within each feedback type can be seen in the examples for *praise* and *advice* given above. Therefore, these differences within teacher feedback were also identified and recorded. Fourthly, the second drafts which had been revised were examined for types of changes (those which had not already been excluded as not

having any revision) and these were compared with the errors made in the first drafts and the feedback types in the teacher comments.

Subsequently, revisions were analyzed using a six-point rating scale based on Ferris (1997), which indicated the extent (minimal or substantive) to which the writer had addressed the comments and whether or not those revisions improved the text (Figure 1).

0	No discernible change made by student in response to this comment
1	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally negative or negligible
2	Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect generally negative or negligible
3	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect mixed
4	Substantive change(s) made by student in response to comment, effect mixed
5	Minimal attempt by student to address the comment, effect generally positive
6	Substantive changes made by student to comment, effect generally positive

Figure 1. Rating scale for amount of change

Using the scale above, it was found that judgements were based largely on quantitative changes. Therefore, revisions were evaluated further as *successful*, *unsuccessful* or *mixed*. The definitions of *successful* and *unsuccessful revisions* were taken from Goldstein and Conrad (1990). *Successful revisions* were defined "…as those solving a problem or improving upon a problem area discussed in the feedback, while being consistent with the writer's purpose, main points and audience" (p. 154). *Unsuccessful revisions* were defined "…as those that did not improve the text or that actually further weakened the text" (p. 154). *Mixed revisions* were defined as those that only partially improved the text but may not have successfully elaborated or solved the problem enough to strengthen the text. Thus, all compositions with revisions were analyzed to determine whether revisions were minimal/substantive (quantitative change) and whether the changes were successful/unsuccessful (qualitative change).

To ensure that the rating of the revisions was consistent, three raters (all primary school teachers in Singapore) rated five compositions using the rating scales given above. These five scripts were randomly selected from the first set of composition scripts, "A Robbery in the Park". After having read and rated these composition scripts, the raters came together to share their rating scores and opinions and to see if there was any discrepancy in the ratings of these scripts. They then discussed and justified their points of view until there was a consensus on the descriptors and on how to rate the compositions. The same procedure was followed for five randomly selected compositions from the second set, "An outing to the kelong" to confirm consistent rating across composition types.

Subsequently, the second author analyzed all of the remaining compositions: 28 compositions from the first set ("A robbery in the park") and another 28 compositions

from the second set ("An outing to the kelong"). The other two raters divided the compositions equally between them, that is, each of them analyzed 14 compositions from "A robbery in the park" and another 14 scripts from "An outing to the kelong". After all the compositions and revisions were coded, the ratings of each composition were compared among the raters. Any discrepancies in the ratings were reconciled through discussion.

FINDINGS

In our analysis, we examined the related issues of whether a teacher's feedback helped the pupils to revise effectively, and whether certain types of feedback appeared to be more or less influential in students' revision processes. The results of the analysis were compared with the pupils' stated preferences from the questionnaire to examine links between the teacher feedback, student revisions and student preferences. In this section, we present the findings from the analysis of student revisions. Subsequently, we discuss the findings from the questionnaires.

Characteristics of teacher feedback that encouraged student revision

As explained above, the methodology required that each composition receive all three types of teacher written feedback (praise, advice, criticism) in order to be consistent in terms of feedback given and to allow for comparison across student revisions. The types of feedback were analyzed and rated in terms of the extent to which they motivated and encouraged student revision. Before considering the extent and success of student revision, it must first be noted that not all students revised based on the feedback given. There were 66 compositions in total, each with three feedback types; thus, there were 198 examples of teacher feedback and 198 possibilities for revision. Out of these 198 possibilities, 86 (43.43%) revisions were made by 58 students (87%). To summarise, less than half of the teacher feedback resulted in revision, even though most, but not all, of the students did some revision.

To determine which feedback types were most likely to encourage revision, the total number of revisions per feedback type was calculated (Table 2). For example, there were 66 teacher responses with advice; of these 66, a total of 53 teacher-advice comments generated revision by students. Thus 80.3% of advice feedback resulted in student revision.

	Advice		Criticism		Praise		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total	53	80.30	32	48.48	1	1.51	86	43.43
Possible	66		66		66		198	

Table 2. Revisions as prompted by feedback type

Advice feedback was most likely to encourage revision (80.30%) while criticism as feedback encouraged revision in less than half of the feedback instances (48.48%). Only one example of praise as feedback (1.51%) encouraged revision. Lastly, 9.09% of the feedback did not encourage any change in the second drafts for either topic (Table 3).

	Advice		Criticism		Praise		No Revision	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A robbery	29/33	87.87	14/33	42.42	1/33	3.03	1/33	3.03
Kelong	24/33	72.72	18/33	54.54	0/33	0	5/33	15.15
Total	53/66	80.30	32/66	48.48	1/66	1.51	6/66	9.09

Table 3. Revisions by composition topic and feedback type

Thus, in answer to the first research question, "What characteristics of teacher feedback encouraged student revision?", the findings confirm that advice encouraged the most revision. Criticism also encouraged some revision, though less than advice. In general, praise did not encourage students to make changes in their second drafts. The next section delves into the several key question of this study, that is, whether the revisions led to substantive and effective changes in the students' compositions.

Substantive and effective revisions

Based on the revisions described above, further analysis was undertaken to determine whether students made minimal or substantive changes in their second drafts. In this case, substantive refers to quantitative rather than qualitative revision. Of the 58 revisions, only a handful were substantive. The majority of the revisions were judged to be minimal. The topic of the composition did not impact whether students made substantive or minimal changes. Details are shown in Table 4.

	Minimal Change		Substantive Change	
	No.	%	No.	%
A Robbery	25/32	78.13%	6/32	18.75%
Kelong	22/27	81.48%	5/27	18.52%
Total	47/59	79.66%	11/59	18.64%

Table 4. Comparison of minimal and substantive change

Overall, revision was most likely to occur based on advice from the teacher. Similarly, although substantive change was infrequent, it was most likely to occur when teacher feedback was given in the form of advice. Of all revisions based on advice, 16.67% were judged to be substantive while 63.64% were judged to be minimal. Of revisions based on criticism, 10.61% were judged to be substantive while 34.85% were judged to be minimal. The one change based on praise was judged to be minimal change. Table 5 summarizes the details.

	Minimal Change		Substantive Change	
	No.	%	No.	%
Advice	42/66	63.64%	11/66	16.67%
Criticism	23/66	34.85%	7/66	10.61%
Praise	1/66	1.52%	0/66	0%

Table 5. Minimal and substantive changes by feedback type

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Although quantitative changes indicate which feedback types were most likely to encourage revision, it is qualitative change that we seek as teachers. Qualitatively, only 10.61% of the revisions were judged to be successful while an overwhelming 48.48% were judged to be unsuccessful (Table 6).

	Unsuccessful		Mixed Impact		Successful	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A robbery	14/33	42.42	14/33	42.42	5/33	15.15
Kelong	18/33	54.55	13/33	39.39	2/33	6.06
Total	32/66	48.48	27/66	40.91	7/66	10.61

Table 6. Ratings for revision success by composition topic

Given the striking findings regarding the students' lack of success in revising, the different characteristics of feedback were reconsidered in terms of revisions judged to be successful or unsuccessful. Out of the 53 scripts that had revisions based on advice, only 6 (11.32%) resulted in successful changes. Of the 66 scripts which received criticism, only 32 had revisions. Of these 32, 3 (9.38%) had successful changes (Table 7). Praise, as noted above, resulted in only one change and that was judged to be unsuccessful.

	Unsuccessful		Mixed Impact		Successful	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Advice	22/53	41.51	25/53	47.17	6/53	11.32
Criticism	16/32	50	13/32	40.63	3/32	9.38

Table 7. Ratings for revision success by feedback type

The following examples shows successful revisions based on the different feedback types.

. **Original 1**
When Alvin, the monitor of the class, was walking around, he heard a big splash and quickly ran towards the place where the sound came from and saw one of his classmates was drowning. He shouted at the top of his voice for help. Mr Lim heard

> *Alvin and quickly ran to him and jumped into the water without a care in the world and saved the boy. The boy thanked Mr. Lim and Alvin.*
> **Feedback: Advice**
> *You may like to describe in detail how Alvin was rescued, whether he was hurt and if so, how badly. You may also like to describe how Mr. Lim and Alvin felt during the whole ordeal.*
>
> **Successful Revision 1**
> *When Alvin, the class monitor was walking around, he saw one of his classmates, called Peter, fall into the water. Alvin was like a cat on hot bricks, he stood rooted to the ground and did not know what to do. Alvin shouted at the top of his voice for help and when Mr. Lim heard Alvin's voice, he knew that someone was in trouble. He quickly ran to Alvin*
> *and saw one of his students drowning. Mr. Lim was stunned and his face turned white with fear. Mr. Lim took off his shirt and jumped into the water without a second thought. He swam to Peter and held his hand and brought him back to shore. He then quickly did a mouth to mouth resuscitation on Peter. Not long after, Peter woke up.*

In this case, the revisions was judged to be successful, based on the definition given above, because the writer maintained his main points while solving the problem the teacher noted – the lack of detail in how the rescue was undertaken and in how the characters (Alvin and Mr Lim) felt.

> **Original 2**
> *Mike was shocked when he heard someone yelling. He quickly followed to the yelling voice. When he was on his way to the place, he passed by a patrolling policeman so he told the policeman to follow him to the place. When they reached the place, the policeman quickly arrested the man.*
>
> **Feedback: Criticism**
> *Some of the expressions you used in the story are incorrect, for example, "yelling voice" and "patrolling policeman". Sentence structure is very weak.*
>
> **Successful Revision 2**
> *Mike was shocked when he heard someone yelling. He quickly went to the site of the incident. When he reached the place, he was shocked to see the man. Without a thought, Mike immediately took out his cellular phone and called the police. A few minutes later, the sirens of the police cars could be heard tearing down the street.*

In this case, the teacher feedback was actually a bit misleading in that it noted problems with two "expressions". In reality, "yelling voice" is not exactly "wrong" but is rather imprecise – a revision that the student made successful by using the verb "yelling" in the second draft. "Patrolling policeman," while not incorrect as an expression, was factually incorrect based on the pictures used for the story – there was no policeman in evidence. When student writing is assessed on examinations, factual accuracy is one consideration that can influence their final scores. In this case, although the teacher criticism could have been confusing, the student was able to build on it by referring to the man (shown in the picture) and re-stating the idea about

the police to develop a plausible storyline: "…took out his cellular phone and called the police".

The results suggest that although advice and criticism as feedback did encourage revision in terms of quantity, they rarely inspired revision that demonstrated quality. This leads to the question of why this might be so. In some cases, as seen in the examples above, the teacher feedback varied in specificity and could at times have been confusing. This is consistent with findings from prior research on teacher feedback (for example Sommers, 1984; Zamel, 1985). However, even when teacher feedback was specific, student revisions were not particularly successful. For example:

> **Original 3**
> *Ali cycled as fast as he could and hit the robber. The robber tried to escape but his leg was badly wounded. Ali dashed to the nearest telphone booth and called for the police. Just as the robber was trying to escape, the police came.*
>
> **Feedback: advice**
> *You could describe in detail how the boy and robber felt. You could also describe how badly the robber was injured.*
> **Unsuccessful revision**
> *Ali cycled as fast as he could and knocked down the robber. The robber had a deep cut and was in a pool of blood. Ali dashed to the nearest telphone booth and called for the police. After a short while, the robber was limping away when the police care came.*

In this case, although the student tried to follow the advice given, he was not able to make much of an improvement. Details were added but rather than adding to the development of the story, they seem to jar the reader, interrupting the action in the story.
An examination of whether specific advice or criticism encouraged successful revision revealed that students were no more able to revise successfully with specific feedback than with general feedback: there were only two cases of successful revision based on specific criticism and five cases of successful revision based on specific advice (Table 8).

	Specific Criticism	Specific Advice	Total Successful revision	
	No.	No.	No.	%
A robbery	1/22	3/22	2/22	9.09
Kelong	1/39	2/39	5/39	12.82

Table 8. Successful revision based on specific teacher feedback

Clearly, while specific teacher feedback might have some impact (Straub, 1997), there are other considerations that influenced student revisions. Among these are student attitudes and preferences, the third key issue of the study.

Student opinions on teacher feedback

The fact that students were more likely to revise based on advice seems to indicate a preference on the part of students for this form of feedback. This was confirmed in the questionnaires: 36% of the students ranked advice as their most preferred type of feedback, while about 58% ranked it as their second most preferred type (praise being their first). Examples of reasons given were:

1. *It helps me to improve in my work.*
2. *It makes me want to give my best shot.*
3. *I will learn from that advice.*
4. *It helps me know how to improve in my writing.*
5. *It helps me to correct my mistakes.*

While some revisions were made based on criticism, this type of feedback was not favored by the students in this study. When students were asked to rank their preferences for the different types of feedback given in their compositions, 29 out of the 33 students (88%) ranked criticism as the least favored. The other four students gave it a 2 on a scale of 1 to 3. Some reasons for disliking criticism were:

1. *I do not want to feel lousy about myself.*
2. *It means that I am careless.*
3. *It makes me angry as I do not like people to pick on me.*
4. *It makes me feel bad and ashamed*
5. *I will lose confidence in myself.*

In all of the reasons stated, only 1 out of 33 students indicated a preference for criticism as a type of feedback stating, "*it can help me improve in my writing*".

Finally, the students showed a preference for praise as a feedback type in the questionnaire. Reasons given were:

1. *It makes me feel good about myself.*
2. *It allows me to know where I have improved.*
3. *It gives me more confidence in writing compositions,*
4. *I feel happy and proud of myself.*
5. *I feel encouraged and I want to try harder. I feel encouraged and I want to try harder.*

The questionnaire provided other information about students' opinions on composition writing and teacher feedback. Out of 33 students who participated in this project, only 58% enjoyed writing compositions, but 88% of them appreciated teacher feedback on their writing. Specifically, 69.70% of the students **strongly agreed** that they liked teacher feedback, 18.2% **agreed**, and 12.12%' **disagreed**. In addition, 87.87% of the students professed that they would read the entire composition again after the teacher had marked it and 97% of them said that they would pay very close attention to what the teacher had written on their piece of work. It is interesting to note that 94% of the students stated that the feedback given made them want to try

harder to improve in their writing and 70% of them felt that their writing had generally improved owing to the feedback that had been given in the past. Thus, although this set of compositions did not show improvement based on teacher feedback, the students in general perceived teacher feedback to be helpful.

DISCUSSION

In answer to the question, "What characteristics of teacher feedback encouraged student revision?" the results are clear: students made use of advice to revise their compositions more often than criticism or praise. Praise was not useful for encouraging immediate revision as it was operationalised in this study, but it was appreciated by the students. In fact, the students expressed appreciation for feedback in general although they did not like comments which highlighted problems explicitly (criticism), even when it was intended to be constructive. The preference for advice is not surprising, as advice is the more moderate form of feedback (as compared with criticism). Advice effectively communicates to students the defining role of the teacher as a mentor or a facilitator rather than a critic or an evaluator. It does not exert too much force or control on the students' writing; it gives students a certain amount of freedom to make their own decisions about revisions. In contrast, students implied in their questionnaires that criticism made the teacher come across as judgmental and harsh, made them feel unworthy about themselves and their writing skills, and made them lose their confidence. This may be why students were less likely to attempt to revise based on teacher criticism, even when criticism highlighted problems or errors that could be solved.

One student did like criticism as a feedback type, commenting: "It can help me improve in my writing." This one exception could be attributed to his individual attitude, prior experience and language proficiency. He was a Chinese national who had only been in Singapore for two years. According to him, prior to those two years, he had less contact with the English language. This student was a very self-motivated person. Thus criticism as feedback could have spurred him to want to improve himself. In some cases, then, criticism might be motivational although it is generally not preferred.

As Ferris (1995) rightly noted, "…teachers should not abandon constructive criticism but should place it side-by-side with comments of encouragement" (p. 49). Cardelle and Corno (1981) also concluded from their study that giving a combination of praise and criticism brought about the biggest gains, as did Ashwell: "Criticism of errors alone was not effective as combining criticism and praise" (2002, p. 230). Thus, criticism, which more directly let students know where there are problems or errors, may be useful even though is it not a preferred response type. Combined forms of feedback may be most useful in the long term.

As much as students disliked criticism, they enjoyed receiving praise. Examples of their comments include: "It allows me to know where I have improved," and "It

makes me feel good about myself." This type of feedback boosted their confidence in writing. This preference does not seem to be specific to children; it is in line with findings on older student-writers. Gee (1972), Dragga (1988), and Hayes and Daiker (1984) have suggested that many students are hungry for praise. Ferris (1995) noted that students "…indicated how valuable they found positive comments, remembering many specific examples and expressing some bitterness when they felt they had not received any praise" (p. 49). Although it did not result in immediate revision (other than one example) in this study; it is deemed to be important for developing writers (Bates, Lane, & Lange, 1993; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris, 1995).

Despite students' attempts to revise and their statements that teacher feedback helped them improve their writing, the results concerning effective revision were somewhat alarming. Of the 66 revisions, only 10.61% resulted in successful revisions while an overwhelming 48.48% resulted in unsuccessful revisions and 41% had mixed effects. Indirectness in the teacher feedback might have played a part. As noted above, most of the teacher feedback was rated as specific. However, as seen in the examples of advice feedback given above, the teacher did tend to include hedges such as "You may like to …" or "You could…". These hedges can maintain the position of the teacher as facilitator and guide, but they leave open the option to (incorrectly) interpret the comments to mean that the student has a choice in whether or not to revise and in how to revise.

Finally, despite their negative reaction to criticism as feedback, it sometimes motivated students to revise. Unfortunately, similar to advice feedback, the revisions were usually not successful. In further analysing revisions based on negative feedback, a certain trend emerges. When criticism was given and students were not able to make the necessary revision, many would simply delete the problematic area. For example:

> ### Original script
> *Finally, the man was caught. The man on the bicycle was a policeman in disguise patrolling the park. Fortunately, nobody was injured.*
>
> ### Criticism
> *The person could not possibly be a policeman in disguise because he looked like a relatively young boy in the picture! A bad judgement!*
>
> ### Revised version
> *Finally, the man was caught. The man was badly injured. The robber slashed his shoulder while fighting. The two elderly patients thanked the man and asked him to go to the hospital to bandage the wound.*

The example above indicates that the student might have intended to create a twist to the story by stating that the man was a policeman in disguise. However, this idea was not present in the pictures and the student is not able to develop the idea enough to make it believable with reference to the pictures. One must note again the specifics of this teaching context; for examination purposes students are expected to present an

accurate portrayal of the story in the pictures. If they deviate from that, they must make the story believable and must keep it closely connected to the factual information in the pictures. Therefore, the teacher criticised the student's introduction of "a policeman in disguise" as a factual account of the picture. After the criticism was made, the student deleted not only that particular sentence but the whole idea that he had introduced. He was not able to formulate an explanation for his original intention and so dismissed the possibility of introducing a policeman. In this case, the feedback encouraged revision, but perhaps not in the way the teacher intended. Of course it is possible that the student simply did not understand the teacher's intention. However, Ziv (1984) also found that when students could not follow up on the feedback given and did not have the strategy needed to revise, they would simply delete the sentences in question. This happened even when the nature of the problem was clearly pointed out and the meaning of the feedback was clarified. This suggests that even when students understand the problem, they might not have the necessary skills to improve it.

No matter the feedback type, when students were not able to revise successfully, it was often due to lack of English proficiency and/or lack of appropriate strategies for providing explanations, explicitness or elaboration. Many of the students in this class were of low to average proficiency in English. Frequently, lack of vocabulary hampered their ability to express themselves in their writing. It may be that they did not have the linguistic skills to expand on what they had written originally. Even when the feedback guided them to make amendments to certain problematic areas, they were not successful because they did not have the language which would allow them to do so.

Another reason for the high percentage of unsuccessful revisions could be the lack of strategies for tackling the different characteristics of feedback. As Kroll observed, the students "…did not know enough about what constitutes good writing or about the writing process. Such students would attack every task with the same lack of skill regardless of the conditions they were writing under" (1990, p. 152). Teacher feedback is limited in helping students revise successfully when it merely alerts them to certain inadequacies but fails to offer any strategies for carrying out teacher feedback (Sommers, 1984).

Finally, the results showed that teacher feedback aligned fairly well with student preferences in that the students preferred to receive praise and advice, both of which the teacher provided. However, the students did not like to receive criticism which the teacher also provided. Despite students' dislike of negative feedback, they did use it to revise their compositions. This would seem to support the teacher's continued use of this type of feedback.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The narrow focus of this study, together with the small sample size of students and the nature of the methodologies employed make it difficult to generalise the findings. The Singaporean educational and linguistic context is quite different from many settings in which previous research on teacher feedback and student revision has been done. In addition, this study examined written feedback and revision with 10-year-old children rather than adolescents or adults. Despite these differences, the results are in line with findings from previous research, indicating that some conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, students appreciate teacher feedback and attempt to make use of it for revising. Secondly, as a feedback type, advice is quite useful. This may be best used in conjunction with other types of feedback to provide learners with information about what is well done (praise), what needs to be done (criticism) and how it can be done (advice). Although some researchers (for example, Hillocks, 1986; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981) are convinced that teaching by written comments on compositions is generally ineffective, this study affirms that these ESL students do need teacher guidance which points out for revision their strengths and weaknesse. We believe that teacher written feedback is fundamental in assisting students to improve in their writing performance. In the words of Ferris, Pezone, Tade and Tinti, "Written feedback allows for a level of individualized attention and one to one communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of a class, and it plays an important role in motivating and encouraging students" (1997, p. 155). This is especially true in the Singapore context where class enrolment is usually large and the teacher does not have the luxury of time to give individual conferencing sessions to each and every student. However, as the findings indicate, simply providing feedback and having students revise is not sufficient.

For teacher feedback to be successful,clear and full communication is an essential ingredient" (Hyland, 2000c, p. 50). Teachers also need to be fully aware of the manner in which they respond to students' work. Praise is appreciated by students, but it must be sincere and it should be specific (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). While advice is helpful, students need to be taught how to respond appropriately, especially when mitigating devices commonly used in advice may obscure the teachers' intentions. Criticism tends to inhibit rather than motivate and "Prolonged negative response decreased intrinsic motivation for writing for both the successful and unsuccessful students" (Gungle & Taylor, 1989, p. 146). Therefore, criticism must be used in conjunction with other feedback types and never as the sole type of feedback.

Finally, although revision is an essential part of the pedagogy of writing (Dheram, 1995), students may lack the metacognitive knowledge on how to revise successfully (Flavell, 1979). Raising student awareness and providing them with the opportunities to understand the intent of teacher feedback can promote a better understanding of the process of revision and help them to respond to the feedback given in an appropriate manner. Revision alone does not ensure that there will be a definite improvement in the subsequent draft, as is evident in the findings. "Effective revision requires the engagement of the learner, as well as the careful application of feedback practices

which can guide the writer to an awareness of the informational, rhetorical, and linguistic expectations of the intended reader" (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, p. 145). Hence, teaching students strategies that help them to process and interpret the feedback given and to respond more successfully may be necessary.

The findings and the pedagogical implications of this study are suggestive rather than definitive. However, the results do clearly suggest that it is the combination of the type of feedback given with the specific classroom context that encourages revision. In addition, these findings, coupled with previous research, suggest that longitudinal studies of how students cope with teacher feedback and revision are necessary. It is possible, for example, that praise influences revisions over the long term by telling students what they are doing right and should keep doing, or simply by instilling confidence. In addition, training in strategies for understanding teacher feedback and for revising can only take effect over a longer period of time than we have used for our data collection. Similarly, the particular areas in which these students had difficulty – explanations, explicitness or elaboration – require heightened language proficiency as well as enhanced writing skills. Teacher feedback along with assistance for understanding and using that feedback might be seen to have a greater impact on student success in revision.

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APPENDIX

Student Questionnaire

Name: _____

Class: _____   Date:_____

A)   **Background Information**

1.   Race:
2.   Age:
3.   Gender:
4.   Language spoken at home:
5.   Preferred Language (speaking):
6.   Preferred Language (writing):
7.   Nationality:

B)   Please read each of the following statements and then circle a number for each statement. Circle 1 if you strongly agree, 2, if you agree, 3, if you disagree, and 4, if you strongly disagree.

No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I enjoy writing compositions.	1	2	3	4
2	I read the entire composition again after my teacher has marked it.	1	2	3	4
3	I like my teacher to give me feedback on my composition.	1	2	3	4
4	I pay very careful attention to what my teacher wrote on my piece of work.	1	2	3	4
5.	The feedback on my paper makes me feel angry with the teacher.	1	2	3	4
6.	The feedback on my paper makes me feel angry with myself.	1	2	3	4
7.	The feedback given makes me want to try harder to improve in my writing.	1	2	3	4
8.	The feedback given makes me feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4
9.	I do not understand the	1	2	3	4

	<u>meaning</u> of some of the comments made so I ignore them.				
10.	I understand the meaning of the comments made but I do not know how to make the corrections.	1	2	3	4
11.	I ignore <u>most</u> of the feedback given in my composition.	1	2	3	4
12.	I try to revise some parts of my composition even though my teacher did not make any comments on it.	1	2	3	4
13.	I cannot read my teacher's handwriting.	1	2	3	4
14.	I feel that my writing has improved because of the feedback given on my paper.	1	2	3	4
15.	Generally, I like the way my composition is marked.	1	2	3	4
16.	I like my teacher to give detailed and specific comments	1	2	3	4
17.	I like feedback on content (storyline)	1	2	3	4
18.	I like feedback on language (grammar)	1	2	3	4
19.	I like feedback on both content and language.	1	2	3	4
20.	I like the feedback to be short. (fewer than 10 words)	1	2	3	4

C) Please put the numbers 1 to 7 in the space provided to show your preference for the different types of feedback given in your composition. 1 being the most favoured and 7 being the least favoured. (Teacher will explain each of the definitions in detail.)

     a.   Criticism: _____
     b.   Praise: _____
     c.   Advice: _____

D)

1. Which type of feedback do you like best? Why?

_____

2. Which type of feedback do you dislike most? Why?