Teachers' Practices and Students' Preferences for Feedback on Second Language Writing: A Case Study of Adult ESL Learners

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The first part of this study investigated the fit between teachers' practices and students' preferences for feedback and the students' strategies for handling feedback on their written work. The second part of this study focused on students' perception of "thinking prompts" for their writing, an innovative approach used in their ESL writing classes, following Bereiter and Scardamalia's idea of "procedural facilitation" (1987). Thirty-nine students in ESL intensive courses and an ESL Engineering writing class were asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning feedback and thinking prompts. In addition, three classes were observed to see how each teacher used feedback and thinking prompts in their classes and for responding to students' writings. The results show that students preferred teacher feedback (teacher correction, teacher correction with comments, error identification, commentary, teacher-students conferencing) to non-teacher feedback (peer correction and self correction), though the three teachers used non-teacher feedback frequently in their classes. These students' strategies for handling feedback varied depending on the type of feedback each teacher gave on the student's paper. Among the thinking prompts, students found the *rule* prompt most useful and the *L1/L2 comparison* prompt least useful. The results suggest that the extent to which the thinking prompts are integrated in the class and students conceptualize them is reflected in their attitudes toward thinking prompts.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, studies of language education have given considerable attention to the issue of how to provide feedback to students' writing. However, there are still questions of what would be the most effective approach to improve students' writing skill and what approach would fit with the needs of particular students. The available literature shows that there are various ways of providing feedback that are commonly practised in both L1 and L2 situations: teacher correction (with comments), error identification, commentary, teacher-student conference, peer correction, and self correction.

Teacher correction of actual errors in students' writing is often practised by second language teachers. However, the approach is less favoured by many ESL teachers because it takes hours to correct papers; moreover, some researchers have criticized the inconsistency of direct error correction (Semke, 1984; Robb, Ross &

Shortreed, 1986; Takashima, 1987). However, as Radecki and Swales' (1988) and Cathcart and Olsen's (1976) studies show, students may prefer teachers to correct all surface errors at least to the extent that it is possible. In addition, it may be that advanced adult ESL students who are literate and well-educated can benefit most from error correction (Celce-Murcia, 1985).

Error identification, or locating students' errors by circling or underlining them, may be the most widely used technique for responding to the writing of second language learners (Cumming, 1985). Indeed findings of research by Cardelle & Corno (1981), Lalande (1982), and Robb *et al.* (1986) suggest that systematically identifying L2 students' grammar errors can increase their writing accuracy and improve their overall level of writing performance. Cardelle and Corno (1981) reasoned this stating, "Specific feedback on errors draws attention to material not adequately learned, allowing the students to focus there and not be distracted by too much re-examination of work done well" (p. 260). Other researchers have also advocated the use of error identification along with self-correction and revision (Wingfield, 1975; Hendrickson, 1980; Fathman and Whalley, 1990).

Teachers appear less likely to employ extended commentary on ESL students' writing, at least as discussed in the literature on ESL teaching practices. Among the small amount of research that exists on this approach, Zamel (1985) revealed that ESL teachers' comment tended to ignore the content or ideas in students' writing in favour of attention to grammatical errors. Other researchers have suggested that positive written comments along with specific comments on errors may be an effective way to motivate students to improve their revisions of their writing (Cardelle and Corno, 1981).

Teacher-student conferences, where a teacher and a student talk individually about the students' writing, have become increasingly popular tools in writing instruction in L1 settings (Jacobs & Karliner, 1977; Murray, 1979, 1985; Carnicelli, 1980; Rose, 1982; Simmons, 1984; Zamel, 1985; Sokmen, 1988; Wong, 1988; Sperling, 1990), and recently, this approach has started to become popular in L2 situations as well (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). In an L1 study, Carnicelli (1980) reviewed students' opinions towards writing conferences and found that two-way communication in a writing conference appeared more effective than written comments because it allowed students to explain their opinions and needs, and to clarify the teacher's comments. In considering second language learners, Zamel (1985) suggested the importance of writing conferences: "We should set up collaborative sessions and

conferences during which important discoveries can be made by both reader and writer" (p. 97).

Peer and self correction have been discussed more in first language settings (George, 1984; Jacobs, 1987; McKendy, 1990; Herrington & Cadman, 1991). Witbeck (1976) argues the advantages of peer correction and outlines four techniques for peer editing. He concludes that peer correction results in a "greater concern for achieving accuracy in written expression in individual students and creates a better classroom atmosphere for teaching the correctional aspects of composition" (p. 325). Two recent ESL studies showed that peer response techniques seemed to work well with upper intermediate and advanced ESL students in a college setting (Rothschild & Klingenberg, 1990; Bell, 1991). As for self-correction, Semke's study of foreign language learners (1984) indicated that this was the least effective approach in terms of both achievement and attitudes compared to other ways of error treatment such as teacher commentary, teacher correction, and correction with comments.

The present research aimed to investigate teachers' preferences for feedback, students' attitudes toward different types of feedback, and their strategies for handling feedback after getting back their written work. This research was done with two writing classes in an intensive English course for adult ESL students in Toronto, and one Engineering writing class for first year university students in Toronto, with different teachers in each class. These classes were unique in their approach to writing instruction, as the teachers used five thinking prompts (Cumming, forthcoming, p. 6 & Appendix A) as a focus of their classes.

The following research questions were asked:

1. What kinds of feedback do these teachers give on students' written compositions?
2. What are the students' preferences for various types of feedback?
3. How do students handle the feedback they receive?
4. What are students' attitudes toward each type of thinking prompt?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Context

Participants in the research were three experienced ESL writing teachers (Teacher A, B and C), and 24 of their students (in classes I will call A and B), and 15 students in class C, an ESL writing class

for Engineering students at the same university. Teachers A, B and C are teachers of classes A, B and C respectively. Among the 10 different levels of writing classes in the Intensive ESL course, classes A and B were considered as the "intermediate" and "high-intermediate" levels of ESL proficiency. Class C represented a more "advanced" level of ESL proficiency. All three teachers were female and native speakers of English. Informal observations of their classes showed each teacher to use a relatively different approach to teaching writing in terms of their emphasis on rhetorical forms, composing processes, and content (Cumming, forthcoming). Classes A and B met 3 hours per week over 8 weeks. Class C was about 3 months long and met 4 hours per week in periods of 2 hours.

Class A had 13 students from 5 different first language backgrounds: 1 Arabic, 2 Japanese, 2 Farsi, 3 Korean, and 5 Chinese speakers. In class B, there were 11 students from 6 different L1 backgrounds: 1 French, 1 Swedish, 1 Korean, 2 Japanese, 2 Chinese, and 4 Farsi speakers. These classes not only differed in their L1 backgrounds but were also mixed in ages, educational backgrounds, and students' reasons for taking the class. Some were university students who were taking the class to improve their second language writing, and others were taking the class to meet the English proficiency level for admission to graduate programs. Most of the students were recent arrivals to Canada.

Class C had 15 students from at least 9 different L1 backgrounds: 5 Chinese, 2 Spanish, 1 Russian, 1 Persian, 1 Arabic, 1 Croatian, 1 Singhalese, 1 Tingringa, 1 Vietnamese, and 1 unidentified. This class was a university credit course for first year Engineering students whose first language is not English and who did not do well on English proficiency tests. These students' attitudes and motivations probably differed from the other two classes because they were in a credit course and required to take the class, whereas the other two intensive classes were non-credit courses which students had voluntarily chosen to take. Most of the students in class C had lived in Canada for 3 to 6 years, but there were a few recent arrivals as well.

Since these three classes participated in a larger research project on thinking prompts (Cumming, forthcoming), tutoring sessions were provided by research assistants to the students who had volunteered to participate in the project. About half the students of each class had volunteered to receive tutoring sessions in small groups outside of the class. During the tutoring sessions, students produced compositions related to their assignments, revised the

drafts which they had produced in class, and did peer corrections, while a tutor provided verbal feedback on their compositions.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Compositions

A sample of student compositions was collected in each class. Teacher feedback on these samples was given (without intervention from the researcher) on the first draft of writing or on revised versions, or both, depending on the teacher. Each teacher had different ways of providing feedback.

In class A, students had to produce at least three compositions on different topics. The collected writing samples were on various topics such as 'New York', 'Watching TV', and 'Computers'. First and second drafts with feedback were collected. The compositions ranged in length from about 100 to 200 words.

In class B, each student produced at least three compositions on different topics and the compositions were revised at least once. The collected writing samples were on the topics 'Friendship' and 'Violence in Movies'. The compositions ranged in length from about 200 to 400 words.

In class C, students produced writing of differing rhetorical types, such as definition writing (making meaning clear; describing something in detail), classification writing (describing things by dividing into subcategories), and process writing (describing the process of doing something). For example, for the process writing, all students wrote about 'How to play chess'. These tasks were designed to prepare students for the kinds of writing they would be doing in real Engineering classes. The writing samples collected were on definition topics, and these compositions ranged in length from about 300 to 500 words.

Student questionnaire

A questionnaire (Appendix B) was given to all the students in all three classes at the end of their respective courses. This instrument was constructed to inquire about the usefulness of different kinds of feedback (i.e., teacher correction, commentary, teacher correction with comments, error identification, peer correction, self correction, teacher-student conferencing, correction using prompts) with which the students were familiar. Students were to rate each type of feedback on a 5 point-scale and to provide some brief comments. The questionnaire also asked about the students' strategies for handling feedback and their preferences for feedback. In addition, students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the five thinking prompts being used in the larger research project. All 39 students

filled out the questionnaire which also indicated their class and native language.

Thinking prompts

Thinking prompts were introduced to these two classes to demonstrate and practice the kinds of thinking processes that experienced writers use and to guide students' thinking in expert-like ways while they compose (Cumming, forthcoming). This concept was derived from earlier analyses of the thinking processes that skilled ESL students often use when they write in their second language (Cumming, 1989; 1990) as well as Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) model of "procedural facilitation" to enhance cognitive activities while composing. Five prompts were selected to help ESL students to monitor their thinking while they composed or revised their writing: Goal, Fit, Word, Rule, L1/L2 (See Appendix A for details). Students were instructed by teachers and tutors to refer to all of these prompts while they wrote, and the participating teachers used them for feedback and evaluation.

Teacher interview and observations

Each teacher was interviewed once a week mainly concerning her uses of the thinking prompts. Documentation was made through written notes of classroom events, significant verbal exchanges between teachers and students, and other relevant observations. All three classes were observed once a week by research assistants to document how the thinking prompts were used.

Definitions

1. Teacher correction: The teacher corrects all the surface (mainly grammatical) errors by crossing out perceived errors and providing correct answers.
2. Commentary: The teacher provides feedback by making written comments or questions on the margin or in between sentences. No error corrections are made.
3. Error identification: The teacher indicates the place where a perceived error occurs by underlying or circling it. But no corrections are made.
4. Peer-correction: Students evaluate each other's work in pairs or with a whole class.
5. Self-correction: Students evaluate their own work by using a checklist, computers, etc.
6. Teacher-student conferencing: The teacher and student discuss a piece of student writing individually during the writing of a composition, and after it is finished.

7. Feedback using prompts: Teacher or another student provides feedback on a piece of writing by referring to one or several of the five thinking prompts (Fit, Goal, Word, L1/L2, Rule). Teacher or a student either indicates the place where a perceived error occurs and refers to the relevant thinking prompts or comments more globally on the overall composition by using each of the prompts.

RESULTS

1) Research Question: *What kinds of feedback do these teachers give?*

Teacher A

The class observation reports showed that Teacher A focused on facilitating rhetorical development throughout particular stages of students' writing process: planning, writing and revising. The students brainstormed as a whole class or in small groups both prior to the actual writing and after getting back their papers with teacher corrections. Her main concern in these sessions seemed to be the *Goal* prompt and *Fit* prompt particularly for students to make logical developments in their compositions, rather than focus on grammar or usage. Teacher-student conferencing focused on the content or organization of the composition at hand.

The feedback that Teacher A actually gave on the compositions (see Fig. 1) was mostly based on the five thinking prompts. For grammatical and other surface errors, she either circled or underlined to indicate the error and wrote *Rule* or *Word* or *L1/L2*, but no other correction was made. She also provided feedback on organization and content as well by using the prompts *Fit* and *Goal* with some comments. Revisions were required once or twice after students received back their papers.

Teacher B

Teacher B focused on the content and organization of compositions. From the first session, how to identify and develop topic sentences or thesis statements became the key issue for her students. In terms of feedback, students were involved mostly in peer evaluation using the five thinking prompts before receiving any teacher feedback. Teacher B provided both oral and written feedback to individual students while they were producing the compositions, especially on their thesis statements and some surface errors.

FIGURE 1

I think watching television is a poor way of utilizing leisure time, because watching television has the most disadvantageous especial for children.

First, watching television will make children who are lazy. They will also spend a lot of time by television. Secondly, television programmes is an especially important for the children, because heavy television viewers who are strongly influenced. Many programs show violence-for example, fighting, shooting and murder. The children become aggressive in their place and are willing to hurt people, they leisure the violence television. Finally, I believe watching television will waste the time to children.

Rule Rule Why? Goal - what do people do . . . . Goal - What else could they be? You don't convince me. word? Rule Rule Fit? - Is this a reason or does it support the 2nd reason? Rule 4/12

Fit - don't you say the above / say it only once, either above or here, and tell us why it's a waste of time - what else could they be?

FIGURE 2

Sentence1 Recently violence in movies is extremely increasing. Sentence 2 The actors in movies are killed very easily and cruelly. I think we have to make restrictions for three reasons; violence in movies is not necessary, it gives people bad influences and people get used to violence. In Japan, there was a bad murder case, in few years ago. A man commited murder of a little girl by imitating movie. He got a hint of crime from movies.

has been ① ② ③ negatively ④ ed a the

Put the thesis statement at the end of this paragraph, please.

Sentence 3+4

FIGURE 3

word Finally, money not only can bring you personal needs but enable you to help the less fortunate people by donating a small amount of money.

Rule Even though the amount may be small, but it means a lot to the less fortunate people because for example, that small amount can bring them food for a long time. As a result, you can save thousand of lives and it

Rule make you feel good because you have make a difference for them.

Rule On the other hand, money can lure you to evil deeds. For example,

word people get lured of working so hard that they cannot save any money,

word therefore they lend to find a better rontes to make money. These rontes

Fit include robbing banks and others. In addition, it might lead to the death of the victim, because people would do anything for money.

For the actual feedback on student writing, Teacher B used a mixture of teacher correction with commentary and error identification (see Fig. 2). But most of the time, she corrected surface errors and wrote comments about their organization and content. She did not use the prompts for feedback. She only used them for peer evaluation. Revisions were required at least once after students received back their writing with teacher feedback, but second and third revisions were not usually required by the teacher. Revision was usually done at home as homework.

Teacher C

Compared with Teacher A and B, Teacher C was unique in that her focus was on revision, and that written teacher feedback would not be given until the first rewriting was done. Students were advised to first do free writing focused only on brainstorming ideas. As Teacher C put it, "While you do free writing, stop criticizing. . . It is only when you edit it that the critical side of your mind starts to work" (observation 1). Then students were instructed to edit the free writing for a specific audience (self correction) and rewrite it. While they were doing this editing, the teacher went around the room and gave feedback to individual students. (But she didn't give any feedback while they were doing the free writing.) Usually peer correction or editing would follow after the first revision was done. Peer correction was also conducted after receiving back a paper with teacher feedback.

The kind of written feedback Teacher C gave on students' papers was a mixture of correction with reference to the thinking prompts, error identification, and commentary. All feedback was usually written in the margins (see Fig. 3).

TABLE 1
Students' Preferences for Various Types of Feedback

	Class A			Class B			Class C		
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	R	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	R	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	R
1. Teacher correction	4.7	0.5	13	4.6	0.5	11	4.0	0.8	15
2. Commentary	4.3	1.1	12	4.3	0.8	11	3.5	1.0	15
3. T.C. with comments	4.3	0.6	12	4.7	0.5	11	4.4	0.7	15
4. Error identification	4.6	0.5	12	4.5	0.5	11	4.5	0.6	15
5. Peer correction	3.7	1.2	12	3.0	1.5	11	3.9	0.6	15
6. Self-correction	4.2	0.6	13	2.7	1.2	11	3.5	0.9	15
7. T-student conferencing	4.4	1.0	13	4.4	0.7	11	4.3	0.8	15
8. Correction with prompts	4.5	0.7	13	4.0	1.0	11	3.7	0.6	15

R=Responses
1=Totally useless 5=Very useful
Number of students in Class A=13, Class B=11, Class C=15.

2) **Research Question:** ***What are the students' preferences for various types of feedback?***

Responses to the first item in the questionnaire were analyzed to find out students' attitudes to different types of feedback. The means and standard deviations were calculated from the 5-point scale provided for each kind of feedback in each class (Table 1). The same data was also used to categorize students' attitudes to each kind of feedback as positive, neutral, or negative (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Students' Attitudes to Different Types of Feedback

	Class	Negative (1-2) %	Neutral (3) %	Positive (4-5) %
1. Teacher correction	A			100
	B			100
	C		26.7	78.3
2. Commentary	A	8.3		91.7
	B		18.2	81.8
	C	6.7	40.0	53.3
3. Teacher correction with comments	A		8.3	91.7
	B			100
	C		13.3	86.7
4. Error identification	A			100
	B			100
	C		6.7	93.3
5. Peer correction	A	15.4	15.4	69.2
	B	45.5	9.0	45.5
	C		20.0	80
6. Self correction	A		7.7	92.3
	B	27.3	45.4	27.3
	C	13.3	33.3	53.3
7. Teacher-student conferencing	A	7.7	7.7	84.6
	B		18.2	81.8
	C		20.0	80.0
8. Feedback with prompts	A		7.7	92.3
	B	9.1	18.2	72.7
	C		33.3	66.7

TABLE 3
Comparison of Those Who had Tutoring Session and Those Who did not

Class A

	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Teacher correction	5.0	0.0	4.5	0.5
2. Commentary	4.8	0.4	3.9	1.3
3. T.C. with comments	4.2	0.8	4.3	0.5
4. Error identification	5.0	0.0	4.3	0.5
5. Peer correction	3.4	1.3	3.9	1.2
6. Self correction	4.4	0.5	4.1	0.6
7. T-S conferencing	3.8	1.1	4.8	0.7
8. Feed. with prompts	4.6	0.5	4.5	0.8

Class B

	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Teacher correction	4.4	0.5	4.8	0.4
2. Commentary	4.6	0.5	4.0	0.9
3. T.C. with comments	4.8	0.4	4.7	0.5
4. Error identification	4.6	0.5	4.3	0.5
5. Peer correction	3.0	1.4	3.0	1.7
6. Self correction	2.8	1.6	2.7	0.8
7. T-S conferencing	4.6	0.5	4.2	0.8
8. Feed. with prompts	4.8	0.4	3.3	0.8

Class C

	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Teacher correction	4.1	0.9	3.8	0.4
2. Commentary	3.8	0.8	3.2	1.2
3. T.C. with commenting	4.4	0.7	4.3	0.8
4. Error identification	4.4	0.7	4.5	0.5
5. Peer correction	3.9	0.6	4.0	0.6
6. Self correction	3.7	0.7	3.2	1.2
7. T-S conferencing	4.3	0.8	4.2	0.8
8. Feed. with prompts	3.9	0.6	3.3	0.5

Class A

Analysis of the responses to the questionnaire from class A revealed that the means for each kind of feedback tended to be high and to differ very little. Table 1 shows that most responses were 4 or higher, except for *peer correction* (3.7). In addition, Table 2 shows that the percentage of positive answers were mostly above 80%, except for *peer correction*, which scored only 69.2%. Thus it seems that these students preferred the teacher to correct their papers, rather than leaving this task to their fellow students. The means for *error identification* and *feedback with prompts* were almost as high as for *teacher correction*, which suggests that these students did not feel 100% dependent on a teacher but were also willing to make corrections by themselves as long as they knew where errors were located.

Students' attitudes toward *feedback with prompts* were quite positive in this class. Since teacher A used this method most frequently, it seems appropriate to say that there was a close fit between the teacher's practices and students' preferences for this type of feedback. The comparison between those who had tutoring sessions and those who did not shows that both groups rated *feedback with prompts* quite high and differences between them appear very small. It is noteworthy that the mean rating of self-correction is much higher than in other two classes. That is probably because self-correction usually followed after receiving feedback on their writing using prompts.

Class B

The reactions of students in class B toward each type of feedback were similar to the reactions of students in class A. They found teacher feedback such as *teacher correction*, *error identification*, *teacher-student conferencing*, more useful than *peer correction* or *self correction*.

Although Teacher B used peer correction and feedback quite frequently in the class, students did not seem to appreciate it. One student mentioned, "All of us are students, not teachers", and another student suggested, "Reading other students' paper is good, but not correction". This suggests that this student sees 'correction' as only a teacher's function. Other students made statements which showed negative feeling toward their colleagues like: "I can't trust other students."; "It depends on the partner, someone who has more knowledge than you or not". In fact, as table 2 shows, there were as many people in this class who had negative reactions toward *peer correction* as those who had positive reactions. These attitudes apparently varied with each student.

Teacher B used *teacher-student conferencing* while student were writing and providing *teacher correction with comments* to evaluate their written products very frequently. In this case, the teacher and students' preferences for feedback seemed to have matched closely. As Table 2 shows, 80% of those students expressed positive attitudes toward *teacher-student conferencing* and 100% for *teacher correction with comments*. Students commented that *teacher-student conferencing* was effective: "It helped me a lot to understand the unclear points about my writing"; "It's good for shy students". Some students found *teacher correction with comments* very useful for learning; "We'll know how to improve our writing".

These students' attitudes toward *feedback with prompts* was not as positive (4.0) as the attitudes of students in class A (4.5). However, Table 3 shows that those who participated in the tutoring sessions rated uses of the thinking prompts very highly (4.8) compared to those who did not (3.3). One student who participated in the tutoring session mentioned the positive effect of thinking prompts: "By using thinking prompts, I can categorize my thinking focused on the activities which I must do".

Class C

Results of the questionnaire in class C seemed to be somewhat different from the other two classes, perhaps because of the different context of this course. The means for each type of feedback were slightly lower than that of the other classes except for *peer correction* (3.9).

Table 2 shows that there was no negative reaction toward *peer correction* and in fact, a high percentage of people (80%) had a positive attitude toward *peer correction.* In this class, Teacher C focused on revisions, and *peer correction* was used extensively, before the revision of first drafts and after students received their papers back with teacher feedback. Thus students seemed to be satisfied with this type of feedback: "It's helpful to correct my own errors later"; "Some students know what the others do not know"; "It's helpful especially among peers who have same L1 background".

On the other hand, the percentage of those who had positive reactions toward *correction with prompts* was lower than that of the other two classes (3.7). Although this type of feedback was used along with other types of feedback such as *teacher correction with comments*, not many students found it useful. However, those who had the tutoring session rated this kind of feedback higher than those who did not have tutoring sessions.

Overall, the results of the questionnaire in these classes showed that these students tended to favour teacher feedback over peer

feedback or self correction. Table 1 shows that the mean ratings of *teacher correction, teacher correction with comments, error identification,* and *teacher student conferencing* are high in all three classes. Table 2 revealed that most of the students in those classes showed positive attitudes toward these four types of 'teacher feedback' related to surface/grammatical errors. Therefore, students seem to have found teacher feedback on surface errors more useful than other kinds of feedback.

Students' attitudes toward other kinds of teacher feedback such as *commentary* and *feedback with prompts* seem to be rather positive as well. Students in classes A and B found *commentary* more useful than those in class C. Those who had negative or neutral reactions commented on the lack of feedback on their errors. As for *feedback with prompts*, students in class A rated highest (4.5). A comparison of students who participated in the tutoring session and those who did not showed that tutored groups rated *feedback with prompts* higher than non-tutored groups, especially students in class B and C where teachers did not use thinking prompts as much as the teacher in class A.

Non-teacher feedback, such as peer correction and self-correction, seem to be the type of feedback these students favoured least. All three teachers integrated *peer correction* in their classroom activities. Teacher A used it after providing teacher feedback, and Teacher B did it before giving teacher feedback. Teacher C used *peer correction* both before and after giving teacher feedback. However, her students' reactions were not always positive, although class C produced a slightly higher percentage of positive responses to this technique than the other classes: C (80%), A (69.2%), B (45.5%). One student in class B mentioned the difficulty of doing peer correction in the mixed age class: "I think it's my age problem (in his 40's), too. It's difficult for me to have 18 year old student to identify my errors." Students' attitudes toward *self correction* appear to vary depending on the class and individual students: class A was generally positive ($\bar{X}$=4.2); class B was rather negative ($\bar{X}$=2.7); and class C was neutral ($\bar{X}$=3.5).

3) Research Question: ***How do students handle the feedback they receive?***

For classes A and B, the second item in the questionnaire asked students to make comments about their strategies for handling feedback on their writing. Their answers were placed into three categories: 1) Read again 2) Make a mental note 3) Error

correction/Rewrite (following Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Results from the two classes are compared in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Students' Strategies for Handling Feedback in Classes A & B

	Class A Raw number	Class B Raw number
Read again	2	9
Make a mental note	5	3
Error correc./Rewrite	9	5

Students in class A said they would mostly correct their errors or rewrite their compositions. In class B, most students said they would read their compositions again, but only sometimes make a mental note of errors indicated by feedback. These differences indicate that students' strategies for handling feedback may differ depending on the way their teacher provides feedback. Teacher A gave feedback on students' writing in reference to the five thinking prompts. So students were more or less forced to correct their errors or rewrite the paper; otherwise, the feedback given by the teacher would not have much significance. In contrast, Teacher B corrected nearly all the errors in students' compositions, enabling students to get information about their errors by just reading through their marked papers. Thus rewriting or error correction would not have been as necessary in class A as for class B.

In class C, students were asked to evaluate themselves about their strategies for handling feedback by circling one response (Frequently, Sometimes, Rarely) for the full range of strategies listed in Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990).

Students in class C reported that the majority of them would make a mental note and identify points to be explained, but many students would rarely write down points. These responses correspond closely to the results of Cohen and Cavalcanti's study (1990) of one EFL writing class at a university in Brazil. Surprisingly, not many students said they would rewrite their compositions frequently even though Teacher C's instructional focus was revision. Nevertheless, most of these students said they would do something after getting their papers back with feedback, but each student seemed to have relatively unique strategies for handling feedback on their writing.

TABLE 5
Student Strategies for Handling Feedback

Strategy	Class C (N=15) F	S	R	*University EFL (N=13) F	S	R
1. Making a mental note	7	7	1	7	4	1
2. Writing down points by type	1	7	7	1	2	8
3. Identifying points to be explained	7	7	1	9	3	1
4. Asking for teacher explanation	3	8	4	10	3	-
5. Referring to previous compositions.	1	9	5	1	7	5
6. Consulting a grammar book	4	6	5	-	4	8
7. Rewriting a) only incorporating teacher's comments	4	6	3	2	1	8
b) revising and expanding	2	8	5	1	3	5
8. Not doing anything	-	2	12	2	3	7

F = frequently, S = sometimes, R = rarely. * The questionnaire items and the results of University EFL study were from Cohen and Cavalcanti's study (1990).

4) Research Question: ***What are students' attitudes toward each type of thinking prompt?***

The final item in the questionnaire asked students about their attitudes toward each type of thinking prompt, rating them on a five point scale (1=Totally useless to 5=Very useful). The means and standard deviations are calculated for each prompt in Table 6.

TABLE 6
Students' Attitudes Toward each Thinking Prompt

Thinking Prompts	Class A $\bar{X}$	S.D.	Class B $\bar{X}$	S.D.	Class C $\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Goal	4.6	0.8	3.8	1.4	4.3	0.9
2. Fit	4.5	1.0	3.9	1.2	3.8	1.1
3. L1/L2	4.4	1.0	3.8	1.1	3.4	0.9
4. Word	4.5	1.0	3.8	1.3	4.0	0.8
5. Rule	4.7	0.6	4.3	0.8	4.3	0.7

In general, all of the thinking prompts were rated favourably by all students. These students found the *Rule* prompt most useful and *L1/L2 comparison* prompt least useful in each class. Differences are evident in the ratings of these prompts between classes, with students from class A giving average ratings of 4.5, students in class B rating most of the prompts less than 4, and students in class C giving mixed ratings. This trend may reflect the extent to which each teacher integrated the thinking prompts into her class activities. Teacher A used thinking prompts extensively in her classes, and she consistently used them for feedback on student writing. On the other hand, teacher B did not focus much on thinking prompts in her classes and she did not use them in providing feedback at all. Teacher C, used the thinking prompts in class and for the actual feedback on students' writing, but she was not consistent in using them and therefore, students' rating of them appear inconsistent as well.

To further assess relations between students' perceptions of the usefulness of the thinking prompts and their actual uses of them, comparisons were made between the ratings of those students who participated in tutoring session, and those who did not in three classes. Table 7 shows the resulting means and standard deviations.

The mean ratings of each thinking prompt among the students who had tutoring sessions were generally higher than those of the other students. The average ratings on the five point scale by the tutored students were 4.8 for class A, 4.3 for class B, and 4.2 for class C. On the other hand, non-tutored students from these classes rated the thinking prompts on average as 4.4 (class A), 3.6 (class B), and 3.5 (class C). The tutoring sessions probably helped students to conceptualize and utilize each thinking prompt. In most of the cases, the *L1/L2 comparison* prompt was rated less useful than other prompts, possibly because teachers or tutors themselves do not know how to integrate it into their feedback or students' thinking while writing.

TABLE 7
Students' Attitudes Toward each Type of Thinking Prompt: Comparison of Those With Tutoring Sessions and Those Without

Class A

Thinking Prompts	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Goal	5.0	0.0	4.3	0.9
2. Fit	4.8	0.4	4.4	1.2
3. L1/L2	4.4	0.9	4.4	1.1
4. Word	4.8	0.4	4.4	1.2
5. Rule	5.0	0.0	4.5	0.8

Class B

Thinking Prompts	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Goal	4.4	0.9	3.3	1.6
2. Fit	4.6	0.5	3.3	1.4
3. L1/L2	3.8	1.3	3.8	1.1
4. Word	4.5	1.0	3.3	1.4
5. Rule	4.2	0.8	4.3	0.8

Class C

Thinking Prompts	With tutoring session		Without tutoring session	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1. Goal	4.6	0.7	3.8	1.0
2. Fit	4.2	0.7	3.2	1.3
3. L1/L2	3.6	1.1	3.0	0.6
4. Word	4.2	0.8	3.7	0.5
5. Rule	4.6	0.5	3.8	0.8

DISCUSSION

This study has two sets of results, one concerning feedback on second language writing in general and the other concerning ESL students' and teachers' uses of thinking prompts in writing classes.

The first part of the study focused on feedback on ESL writing. As Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) and Fathman and Whalley (1990) have demonstrated, the present study showed that the fit between teachers' practices for feedback and ESL students' preferences may vary from class to class.

The majority of ESL students in the present study said they found teacher feedback most useful when it focused precisely on grammatical errors. This corresponds with the results in Radecki and Swales's study (1988). But students' attitudes toward non-teacher feedback such as *peer correction* and *self-correction* varied between students and tended generally to be critical of this practice. This result conflicts with the recent pedagogical trend of focusing more on the processes of writing with less teacher feedback on surface errors. If this interpretation is valid, then ESL teachers are faced with a dilemma, whether they should give feedback on grammar or not. Many ESL students feel they need more help on grammatical errors, and they think it is a teacher's role to model these aspects of English. However, few ESL students may realize the importance of peer or self correction of their writing (Witbeck, 1976), and if they knew its benefits, then their attitudes might change. For example, students may be able to use such techniques to develop their communicative competence, skills to criticize their own writing by themselves, and to cope with errors without depending on a teacher.

Students' strategies for handling feedback may depend on the type of feedback they receive in ESL classes. When students receive corrected feedback to their writing, they may simply read through their corrected compositions instead of putting a lot of effort into revising or rewriting. However, if the feedback gives only clues for students to make corrections themselves, students are prompted to correct errors and revise their papers. Hence a teacher's expectations may be reflected in students' attitudes when handling feedback on their writing. Revision or rewriting has become one of the more popular ways of handling feedback, encouraged in the area of first language composition (Hillocks, 1986). However, some students in the present study did not seem to find this approach important, or were unaware of its value, failing to rewrite their compositions even when it was assigned for homework.

ESL teachers may need to state more clearly the purposes of their feedback, the strategies that students should use for handling this feedback, and the benefits that students would potentially derive. At the same time, teachers should pay careful attention to what their students feel toward their instructional methods and find out whether there are any differences in opinion between the teachers and the students in this regard, attempting to resolve such discrepancies appropriately.

The second part of the study focused on ESL students' perceptions of thinking prompts for their writing. First, a comparison of the results from the three classes showed that students' perception toward thinking prompts varied, possibly depending on the extent to which the teacher had integrated or used thinking prompts in her classroom activities. Students whose teachers used the thinking prompts more extensively in classroom instruction, feedback on writing, and peer evaluation seem to have perceived them to be most useful. Similarly, a comparison of students who participated in tutoring sessions with the thinking prompts and those who did not shows distinct differences in students' perception of the thinking prompts. On the 5-point scale of the present questionnaire, students who had tutoring sessions rated the usefulness of thinking prompts as about 4.4 on average, whereas, those who did not participate in tutoring sessions rated them as about 3.8 on average. Tutoring sessions may be the optimal environment for students to develop their writing expertise in this way. However, those who had tutoring sessions also had more intensive and longer exposure to thinking prompts, factors which may have influenced their more favourable opinions of this approach to teacher feedback. Future research will need to assess more precisely how thinking prompts are introduced to students, how they are used or integrated in the classroom, how much emphasis is put on them, and how they are used in giving feedback that actually affects ESL writing skills.

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APPENDIX A

Thinking Prompts for ESL Writing Students

Word—Is this the right word or expression? Possible words are. . . .
L1/L2—How do I say it in my language? Does it make sense in English?
Goals—Will people understand this? What do I want to tell my reader?
Fit?—Does this part fit with the other parts?
Rules—Do I know a grammar or spelling rule for this? The rule is. . . .

APPENDIX B

Student Questionnaire
Class: _____
Native language: _____
How long have you been in Canada? _____

I. Feedback

There are different ways to provide feedback on student writing. Please circle one choice that best describes the usefulness of each type of feedback and please write down reasons.

	Totally useless	Useless	Neither useless nor useful	Quite useful	Very useful
1. Teacher correction (The teacher corrects all the grammatical errors)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
2. Commentary (The teacher gives feedback by making comments. No error correction)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
3. Teacher correction with comments	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
4. Error identification (The teacher indicates the place where the error occurs by underlying or circling it.)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
5. Peer correction (Students evaluate each other's work in pairs or with a whole class)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
6. Self correction (Students evaluate their own work)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
7. Teacher-student conferencing (The teacher discusses the writing of students)	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					
8. Correction using prompts	1	2	3	4	5
Comment _____					

II. Student strategies for handling feedback.

(a). What do you usually do when you get your paper back? (For classes A & B)

(b). What do you usually do when you get your paper back? (For class C)

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely
1. Making a mental note	F	S	R
2. Writing down points by type	F	S	R
3. Identifying points to be explained	F	S	R
4. Asking for teacher explanation	F	S	R
5. Referring back to previous compositions	F	S	R
6. Consult a dictionary/grammar book	F	S	R
7. Rewriting			
a. Only incorporating teacher's comments	F	S	R
b. Revising and expanding	F	S	R
8. Not doing anything	F	S	R

III. Please circle one that best describes the usefulness of each type of thinking prompt and please write comments.

	Totally useless	Useless	Neither useless nor useful	Quite useful	Very useful
1. Goal	1	2	3	4	5
2. Fit	1	2	3	4	5
3. L1/L2	1	2	3	4	5
4. Word	1	2	3	4	5
5. Rule	1	2	3	4	5