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WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN A FRESHMAN WRITING COURSE IN THE U.A.E:
INSTRUCTORS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON GIVING, GETTING AND
USING FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

Instructors' frustration with the feedback/revision cycle in a tertiary setting provided the impetus for this study examining the complex issue of written feedback on L2 writing. Areas of contention considered included the type of feedback offered, when to offer it and how to present it to encourage maximum use by students as well as the actual use students made of the written feedback. An ethnographic approach led to three case studies being conducted in academic writing classes in a university in the United Arab Emirates. The students' and the instructors' perspectives were drawn on as well as those of other interested parties including other instructors in the department and writing center tutors. Interviews, focus groups and email exchanges were the principle sources used to gather participants' views. In addition, students answered questionnaires on instructor and peer feedback procedures. Essays were examined in terms of instructor and peer feedback, and the students' responses to that feedback were examined. The data gathered from these sources exposed contradictions and misunderstandings. It appeared that students had little faith in peer feedback but a strong desire for instructor feedback, which they believed they used when revising; however, instructors doubted that most students made any significant use of feedback or even revised productively. Examination of the essays suggested that: instructors did not always offer the feedback they intended to offer focusing more on grammar than content, and sometimes instructors underestimated how much feedback students attempted to act on. The study identified that key problems for students were: understanding the extent of revisions anticipated, knowing what to concentrate their efforts on and knowing how to act on the feedback, especially if they had exhausted their ideas on a topic. In addition, the difficulty of providing clear, usable feedback suggests that rather than relying extensively on written feedback, other ways of assisting students to revise their writing should be considered. The study suggests that feedback that relates explicitly to classroom instruction, and exposure to revision strategies are two techniques that offer a lot of potential for improving students' responses to written feedback. Instructors should also consider making their feedback strategies and expectations of the students explicit. Finally, individual variables mean that it is unlikely that one approach will work for all students; therefore, instructors need to be flexible and respond according to the needs of the student.

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