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## Studying Learner Strategies : Feedback on Compositions<sup>1</sup>

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The paper begins by calling attention to research on learner strategies and to the significant role that verbal report data have played in such research. It is noted that information on learner strategies has developed from largely intuited lists of strategies to empirically-derived taxonomies which have as their ultimate purpose that of training learners to be more successful at language learning. The three verbal report techniques used to collect data on learner strategies--self-report, self-observation, and self-revelation--are defined and illustrated. The paper then presents two studies which employed these verbal response techniques in an effort to better understand the strategies that teachers use in giving feedback on compositions and the strategies that learners use in handling this feedback in the English-foreign-language and Portuguese-native-language classrooms respectively. The final portion of the paper deals with the strengths and weaknesses of these two studies as examples of language learning research.

### Learner Strategy Research and the Role of Verbal Report Data

Over the last decade, the role of learner strategies in second language learning has gained increasing prominence. What started as lists of strategies intuited to be used by good learners (e.g., Rubin 1975, Stern 1975) has developed into more rigorous, empirically validated taxonomies of strategies (e.g., Oxford-Carpenter 1985) and frameworks for learner training curriculum (Wenden 1987). What began with case-study profiles, classroom observation, and learners' verbal reports (Cohen & Apeh 1979, 1981, Hosenfeld 1979, Naiman et al. 1978, Rubin 1981, Wenden 1986) has grown into studies of as many as 1,200 language learners (Oxford, Nyikos, & Crookall 1987). The work has involved both the identification of learner strategies and the training of learners in the use of these strategies. A major objective of learner training studies has been to determine the benefits of heightening learners' consciousness about their use of strategies in learning a second language (O'Malley, Russo, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, & Kupper 1983, Wenden 1986, Tyacke & Mendelsohn 1986).

The innovation in recent work is that learners do not just receive instructional materials which call for certain learning strategies; the learners are also alerted as to the purpose of these strategies and as to their anticipated effects. The ultimate purpose of such training is to produce learner self-sufficiency. Some recent materials developed for training Peace Corps volunteers, for example, deal with the following areas of learning: general management strategies (e.g., experimenting with the language, recognizing errors, evaluating progress, encouraging self), organizing to learn, building up memory skills, learning with and without an instructor, and ideas for learning while at work (Grala, Oxford, & Schleppegrell 1987).

Throughout this period in which our understanding of learner strategies has grown, verbal report techniques have been used in some of the research studies contributing to this growth.

Numerous insights about the strategies used in language learning have been obtained from learners as they provide verbal report data, before, during, or after performing language learning or language using tasks. Such verbal reports include data that reflect self-report, self-observation, self-revelation, or some combination of two or more of these.

The distinctions among the three types of protocol are as follows. "Self-report" refers to learners' descriptions of what they do, characterized by generalized statements about learning behavior (e.g., "When I have a word I really want to learn, I say it over to myself several times and try to associate it with some other word I already know.") or labels they apply to themselves (e.g., "I'm a 'speed listener' in another language. I make a quick search for the key words, and if I don't know them, I try to figure out their meaning from the context.") Such statements are usually based on beliefs or concepts that the learners have about the way that they learn languages, and are often not based on the observation of any specific events.

"Self-observation," on the other hand, refers to the inspection of specific language behavior, either while the information is still in short-term memory, i.e., introspectively, or after the event, i.e., retrospectively (usually after 20 seconds or so). Retrospection can be immediate (e.g., within, say, an hour of the event) or delayed (a few hours, days, or even weeks after the event). The term "self-revelation" refers to a learner's report that is neither a description of general behavior, nor based on inspection of any specific behavior. Rather it consists of "think-aloud" stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes while the information is being attended to. The data are basically unanalyzed in that the respondents do not provide labels to describe the behaviors that their thoughts reveal.<sup>2</sup>

Some examples of studies using self-report interviews include Naiman et al. (1978), O'Malley et al. (1983), Wenden (1985), Ramirez (1986), Oxford et al. (1987). In such studies, the respondents answer interview questions or complete written questionnaires about their language strategies. Examples of studies involving self-revelation and/or self-observation are those of Hosenfeld (1984) and Cohen & Apek (1979, 1981). Perhaps a key reason for moving beyond self-report to self-observation and self-revelation is the interest in obtaining data that describe the learning event at or near the moment it occurs. Such data might be expected to more accurately reflect what learners actually do than might the response to a questionnaire item calling for a description of generalized behavior. Such questionnaire items might elicit learners' beliefs about what they do, rather than what they actually do. Self-revelation and self-observation are, in fact, intended to complement self-report--to produce convergent assessment of learner strategies.

The two studies that will be presented and critiqued now do, in fact, combine self-report--in the form of interviews and written questionnaires--with self-revelation and self-observation in researching learner strategies with respect to writing. The studies were undertaken in an effort to better understand the strategies that teachers use in giving feedback on compositions and the strategies that learners use in handling this feedback in English-foreign-language and Portuguese-native-language classrooms respectively. First, the research questions and study design will be presented. Then will follow a brief summary of the findings. The final portion of the paper will deal with the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods used in the selected studies.

### **A Learner Strategy Study: Giving and Getting Written Feedback**

Recent survey work has suggested that there may be a misfit between teacher feedback on compositions and the learners' interests--between what the teachers give and what the students would like to get. Part of the problem lies in the nature of the teacher's feedback, namely, that it is unclear, inaccurate, and unbalanced--both by focusing only on certain elements in written

output (e.g., grammar and mechanics) and by overemphasizing negative points (see Marzano and Arthur 1977, Cardelle and Corno 1981, Pica 1986, Semke 1984, Zamel 1985). Another part of the problem is that learners vary greatly in their response to feedback (see Radecki and Swales 1986). Furthermore, students seem to be deficient in their repertoire of strategies for handling the feedback that they get (Cohen 1987 a).

The study under consideration in this paper was the second in a series of small-scale studies aimed at investigating the relationship between what teachers provide as feedback on compositions and what students think about and do with this feedback (see Cohen and Cavalcanti, in press, for more details). This study dealt with feedback in Portuguese first-language (L1) and English-foreign-language (EFL) compositions.

The following research questions were asked :

1. What do language teachers focus on in giving feedback on written compositions in an advanced native-language or foreign-language writing course? What feedback do students report that they usually get from the teacher?
2. What are students' attitudes toward current teacher feedback and what preferences might they have?
3. How do students handle the feedback they receive? What are the strategies they use?

## **The Research Design**

### **Subjects**

The teachers for the study were two women teaching at universities in the State of Sao Paulo. One was the teacher in a Freshman course for advanced composition in Portuguese L1. The other was the teacher in an advanced undergraduate course in EFL composition. She was a native speaker of Portuguese who had her masters in applied linguistics in the teaching of English. Both teachers were highly qualified and experienced in teaching composition.

Three students were selected by each teacher to provide in-depth verbal report as to the handling of teacher feedback, on a case-study basis--after they had written the composition for this study (see "Instrumentation," below). Those selected were intended to reflect high, intermediate, and low performers in Portuguese L1 and EFL writing, as determined by their respective teachers, who based their judgments primarily on the students' ability to write argumentative discourse (i.e., the control of ideas and their organization, more than grammar, mechanics, and so forth). The first two L1 students were female and the third was male, all 17-18 years of age. The EFL students were all female, 21-22 years of age. The two class groups that the case-study students were part of--nineteen Portuguese L1 students and thirteen EFL students--served as subjects for questionnaire data to be described below.

### **Instrumentation**

**Composition** The L1 writing sample was a composition on the topic, "Suicide." The composition was intended to be assessed primarily for its merits as an example of argumentative discourse. The three students wrote compositions of differing lengths--the high student wrote 550 words, the intermediate student 350 words, and the low student 180 words. In the EFL course, the students had to read a story by a popular Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and write a composition discussing whether the story could be understood or not, or whether life itself could be understood or not. The intermediate and low students opted for the former topic, the high student for the latter. The compositions ranged from 200 to 230 words in length.

**Teacher Verbal Protocol** The procedure consisted of having the teachers think aloud while interacting with each composition and providing written feedback. These self-revelational think-aloud protocols were tape-recorded.

**Teacher Questionnaire** A questionnaire was designed to obtain self-report data from the teacher about the nature of her course, the purpose of the particular writing assignment, the categories of feedback offered (grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, organization, content, and other), and plans for follow-up.

**Student Verbal Protocol** After the teacher handed back the compositions, the students were asked to provide self-observational data concerning their reactions to the feedback--indicating their first impressions, their general understanding, and their attitudes. They were also asked to provide comments of a more general nature concerning their experience in the course. All verbal reports were in Portuguese L1.

**Student Checklist** A checklist was designed to enable the six case-study students to think aloud or self-observe about their understanding of each of the teacher's comments and their intended plan of action with respect to any points which they did not understand..

**Student Questionnaire** A questionnaire was constructed to self-report and self-observational data concerning the type of feedback all the students in the L1 and EFL classes perceived themselves to be receiving and the type they would prefer to receive. The students also indicated the strategies they used for handling feedback and provided self-ratings of their writing ability.

### Data Collection

Learners wrote their compositions out of class in April, 1987. The teachers then corrected the compositions, and in the case of the six selected students, they tape-recorded their comments alone and at their own pace, as they provided written feedback. Once the taping was completed, they filled out the Teacher Questionnaire. After the compositions were returned to the learners, interviews were conducted with the six students--involving both students' self-observation (introspection and retrospection) and their interactive response to the Checklist relating to their teacher's comments. All students in the two classes were given the Student Questionnaire to fill out. In the L1 study, the three selected students all had individual interviews with the teacher. In the EFL study, there were no such interviews due to a university strike, but the high student discussed her composition with the teacher by telephone.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures were as follows:

1. A frequency count of the teachers' comments on the three compositions was performed, as well as a qualitative analysis of their verbal report concerning the feedback,
2. A tallying of responses on the Teacher Questionnaire was conducted. The compositions were assessed by the investigators in order to appraise the teacher's comments in relation to all possible comments. Teachers' comments were classified as pertaining to *content*, *organization*, *vocabulary*, *grammar*, and *mechanics*.
3. An analysis of responses on the Student Questionnaire was carried out, comparing the six selected students with the rest of the students in the class, and also comparing the Student Questionnaire with the Teacher Questionnaire.
4. Qualitative analysis of the students' self-observational data from the verbal protocols was undertaken, along with an analysis of the Student Checklists.

### A Brief Summary of Findings and Discussion

In the L1 study, there was a relatively good fit between the feedback the teacher reported giving and what she actually gave. Regarding comments on organization, the fit was excellent. She said she gave priority to organization, her students said the same, and the comments

on the three selected compositions also featured comments on organization. Yet while the teacher also reported an emphasis on vocabulary accuracy, her students saw this as the least emphasized category in her feedback, and none of her comments on the three essays dealt specifically with vocabulary. Then, while the teacher did not mention a focus on content, her students reported her giving many comments on this aspect of their writing, and on the intermediate and low students' compositions she made numerous such comments.

In the EFL study, the fit between teacher's perceptions of feedback and what she gave was even better. The teacher stated that she emphasized all five categories and her students reported that she did this--with emphasis on organization and content. The intermediate and low students did, in fact, receive a spread of comments across the categories.

The only noticeable discrepancy, in the case of the low EFL student, was that between the teacher's expressed emphasis on content and organization and the student's perception that the comments emphasized grammar and mechanics. Although the actual feedback on the student's composition in this study did not corroborate the student's perception, such an emphasis on the part of the teacher would constitute a departure from her pronounced pattern of behavior. Instances where teachers are reported by their students to depart from their self-reported patterns of commenting (as with teachers the low EFL student) may reflect a form of teacher bias in their comments--i.e., a mindset that certain students have certain types of problems that need to be commented on.

The investigators' own assessment of the student compositions and identification of additional comments brings up the issue of whether the teachers were aware of points that they did *not* comment on. Aside from the several cases where the teacher did not write a comment on the paper but did mention it in the taped protocol, there were numerous instances where the teacher did not comment on an incorrect form without acknowledging any awareness of it. A Teacher's Checklist could be added to the current research design such that the teacher would indicate for each identified omission of a comment whether that omission was a conscious choice (e.g., not to include comments on aspects which were not emphasized in a particular task, not to overwhelm the student with comments, not to give a comment beyond the student's level of proficiency, or not to give the learner a sense of being favored or prejudiced against), an oversight, or the result of a lack of knowledge about that issue. Such research would need to be conducted delicately since it would speak to the teacher's prowess in the target language, and could offend the teacher--particularly a nonnative.

As to the students' repertoire of strategies, the finding that the students usually just made a mental note of the teacher's feedback--rather than recording the feedback systematically--is consistent with findings from previous research (e.g., Cohen 1987a), and would suggest the advisability of training students in alternative strategies. One such strategy would be the judicious use of revision, incorporating the teacher's comments. The teacher in the EFL study indicated that as a rule the students did not rewrite their compositions. Such an insistence upon rewriting would be consistent with results of research in first-language composition which generally favors both focused teacher comments and subsequent revision by the students (see Hillocks 1986: 166-168).

This research has shown that there are striking similarities between the way in which teacher feedback on student compositions functions in both native and foreign language. We did note one difference, namely that the L1 students were more likely to disagree with the teacher's comments and even reject them out of hand, perhaps due in large part to their native control of the language. The EFL students, on the other hand, might be expected to be more receptive to comments because of their obvious language difficulties.

The feedback situation as reflected by this study is probably not atypical of situations in many classrooms where writing is taught around the world. In other words, there are benefits to

be accrued from the typical approaches to feedback, yet there appear to be missing ingredients. One such ingredient is a clear agreement between teacher and student as to what will be commented on and how such comments might be classified. It is possible that the teacher and students in this study had different perceptions as to what the five categories (grammar, mechanics, etc.) in their respective questionnaire referred to, and it would be beneficial in future research to determine what these perceptions actually are. Another such ingredient would be the discussion of possible repertoires of strategies students could use in order to derive maximum benefit from the feedback provided by the teacher. Clear teacher-student agreements as to feedback procedures and student training in repertoires of strategies for handling feedback could lead to more productive and enjoyable composition writing in the classroom.

## **A Discussion of the Research Methods Used in the Studies**

### **Perceived Strengths in the Design**

These two studies were carefully designed with respect to the subjects and instrumentation so as to provide types of information lacking from other kinds of studies.

#### **1. Subjects**

The decision was made to study feedback on both native and foreign language compositions so as to see what aspects of the feedback process might be specific to one or the other situation. The one striking difference that emerged was the reluctance of students in the L1 student to accept the teacher's comments. Further research would be necessary to determine whether the difference that emerged in this study was particular to this set of case studies or whether it reflects a larger reality.

With respect to the teachers involved, the study purposely selected two of the finest composition teachers available--ones with outstanding training and experience. Both were finishing doctorates in linguistics and had years of experience teaching composition courses. The reasoning was that if a misfit existed between what teachers gave and what students got, it would not be for lack of experience on the teacher's part.

The study also purposely focused on just two teachers and on six of their students in order to obtain insights from indepth work. The general intention of this line of investigation is to build a better picture of the feedback process through repeated studies in different settings with different teachers and students. In other words, a number of small-scale studies are intended to research the construct of feedback, slowly arriving at a reliable and valid description. The use of the remaining students in their respective classes was intended to provide some element of generalizability--an effort to determine if their perceptions of the teacher's feedback behavior were similar to those of the students selected for case-study work and if their reported strategies for handling such feedback were also similar, under the circumstances (i.e., given the same course, the same writing assignment, and so forth).

#### **2. Instrumentation**

*a. Multi-Method Approach* These two studies involved convergent assessment of learner strategies. In order to have a more complete picture of the role of feedback in composition writing, all three kinds of verbal report data were collected and were coupled with observations by an outside investigator and with outside analysis of the students' compositions. The verbal report data included teachers and students self-report data on the questionnaires, and then self-observational and self-revelational data dealing with the teacher's rationale for making certain comments and the students' understanding of those comments.

*b. Refining of Instruments* All the instruments were based on instruments used in previous studies. The Student Checklist was, in fact, based on open-ended data obtained from earlier survey work (Cohen 1987a).

*c. Directed Protocols/Probes*

**1. Teachers** Teachers were asked to record only at the moment they making comments about the student's composition, in order to facilitate analysis of tapes. They were told that they could read the essays silently or out loud, but that in the moments they were evaluating the compositions, they should think out loud. Also, each time they corrected something or wrote a comment, they should explain what the issue was and give a justification for the comment. The teachers were left on their own with a tape-recorder so as not to have the presence of an outside investigator interfere with their giving of feedback.

**2. Students** Previous experience had shown that student informants would provide more focused, relevant data if they were given checklists to help them identify the strategies that they use. Such checklists have proven most beneficial if they are based on a content analysis of previous open-ended survey work, as in this case. Such checklists can save considerable time and yield more informative results than simply allowing for open-ended protocols. This study used such a checklist to have the students indicate whether they understood each teacher's comment ("totally" to "not at all," 5-1), if they knew how to resolve the problem ("totally"-"not at all"), and what strategy they would use if they had doubts: request additional explanation from the professor, consult a grammar book, consult a dictionary, ask a peer, or check a previous composition.

**Perceived Weaknesses in the Design**

There were some weaknesses in the design that will probably be corrected in future studies.

**1. Selection of Teachers**

The selection of teachers did not include a native-English speaking teacher. Although it is true that nonnative teachers are the rule in EFL composition courses at the university level in Brazil, this would not necessarily be the case elsewhere. The purpose of having data from native teachers would be to see the extent to which an outside investigator's assessment of the corrected compositions would produce additional comments. In other words, this would be a further check as to whether a lack of comments--or comments in certain categories (e.g., vocabulary)--is result of limitations in target language proficiency or a function of other factors (e.g., not wanted to overwhelm the student, focus on certain areas, a momentary lapse, and so forth).

**2. Lack of Training in Labeling Categories for Comments**

Teachers were not trained in the use of the categories used for labeling types of comments--i.e., grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, organization, and content. Thus, at times they did not provide a label for the type of problem they were commenting on, and at other times they used a label different from that which the investigators used.

It also becomes apparent that the students may not have had a clear idea or at least the same idea as the teachers as to what these five categories actually meant, when they indicated how frequently the teacher's comments dealt with one or another of these categories.

It may also have been a weakness of the study that teachers were not given training as to the type of information they were to supply in their taped verbal protocols about the comments they wrote on student compositions. It was felt that such training interferes with the teacher's normal behavior far more than the taping alone would, and that consequently they should be free to say anything they wished at this exploratory stage in our research efforts. Yet such an approach did limit the results. For example the teachers did not tend to label each comment as to its type--an activity which would have provided useful information for the tallying up of teachers' comments by

category. It would have been possible to include this activity in a form of checklist, as was done with the student informants.

### **3. Lack of Equivalence Between Student and Teacher Questions**

Although the questionnaires were piloted and revised, the item requesting that teachers indicate which categories they emphasized in their feedback was not the same as that for the students. The students had to rank the degree of attention the teacher gave to each type of comment appeared (much, some, little, none), while the teachers just listed which one or more of these categories they emphasized. This made comparison of teacher and student responses less useful than it could have been.

### **4. Lack of Corroborating Data from Other Compositions**

Other compositions were not collected to determine whether the comments on the essay selected for the study were in any way atypical of their usual comments. Such an investigation may have provided information regarding the reactive effects of the research situation and especially of the requirement to provide a taped protocol of the rationale for each comment. Ideally such compositions would have been assessed by the teachers without their foreknowledge that the comments would be used for research purposes. The results may have helped to support or refute findings based on the tallying of comments on the single selected composition in each study.

## **Weaknesses in the Execution of the Studies**

The main cause of weaknesses in the execution of the studies were the prolonged strikes at the universities involved. Furthermore, the EFL teacher had misgivings about the quality of her participation in the study.

### **1. Inconveniences and Changes Brought on by Strikes**

A series of university strikes lasting for a total of two months or more greatly hampered the collection of data. The EFL study was to be conducted during the second semester of the 1986 year, but had to be rescheduled for the following semester, and strikes during that semester made it almost impossible to get the data. The effects of the strike were as follows:

a. The EFL teacher lost her enthusiasm about the study and had to be persuaded to participate.

b. Due to the lengthy strikes, the teachers were unwilling to use instructional time to have their classes fill out the Student Questionnaire. Hence, the students were asked to fill them out at home, resulting in a portion not being returned.

c. A planned interaction between the teacher and each of the three selected students--to take place during class, just after the students had received their corrected compositions back--never took place. This interactive session was going to be tape-recorded, studied by the investigators, and then brought up for discussion during the student verbal protocol sessions (i.e., regarding the effectiveness of teachers' "on-the-spot" explanations of comments).

### **2. EFL Teacher's Feeling of Being "Wise" to the Research**

The EFL teacher felt that her own masters and doctoral research training made her too knowledgeable about the process approach to writing to serve as an informant in the study. She felt that she would not produce natural data in describing the comments that she made. After doing the verbal protocol session with the three student compositions, she had the feeling that her verbal report did not truly reflect the considerations that were going on in her head.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This paper, then, has called attention to the ever growing focus on learner strategies and has noted that verbal report data are playin an increasing role in describing learner strategies.



The paper then presented two studies which use verbal report techniques, among other things, to describe learner strategies--specifically in the handling of teacher feedback on compositions. The studies pointed up the limited nature of the learners' repertoire for handling such feedback. A critical analysis of the studies has indicated the areas of strengths and weaknesses and has suggested certain avenues for future research. For the field of research in second language acquisition to advance, it is necessary to maintain a critical stance with regard to our research efforts--always striving to produce more accurate measures of the language learning issues under investigation. The issue studied in this paper--that of the handling of teacher feedback--is, perhaps, a lesser studied phenomenon, but certainly one well worthy of quality investigation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A revised version of a paper presented at the Symposium on Methods of SLA Research, AILA Congress, Sydney, 17-22 Aug 87, and at the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI), Bangkok, 28 Aug 87.

<sup>2</sup> See Cohen 1987b for more details on these distinctions.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, there were a further complication that the teacher's verbal protocol on the original second and third students' papers were not recorded due to a technical failure. Hence the teacher recorded her comments for two new compositions written by students at comparable proficiency levels.

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