

# Teaching Notes

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## Responding to Writing

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When you write, you are a writer. When students write, they are writers. Some writers are more skilled than others, but regardless of skill, writers at any level deserve to have their writing treated respectfully.

How you respond to writing is important. Too often teachers respond first to the glaring errors in a student's paper and not to the message the writer is trying to share. A paper full of red question marks, circles and arrows is both confusing and disheartening. Following are suggestions for responding to students' papers that show respect for the writer and help move students forward in their writing skills.

1. Don't pick up a pencil before reading the paper because you might be tempted to use it. You would very likely be reacting to errors rather than responding to the ideas (Raimes, 1983).
2. Read the whole piece of writing through once before you respond. Matsuda and Cox (2011) caution that "...if a paper isn't read to the end, the reader may miss out on information that could clarify the meaning or organization of the paper" (p. 11).
3. Respond to what is interesting about the content. Ask questions about content and meaning. Be genuinely interested in finding out more. If there are things in the paper that are unclear ask, "What do you mean here?"; "Can you give me some ex-
- amples?" Ask questions specific to the topic that will help the writer articulate ideas more clearly. Focus on what the writing communicates to you. Writing is about communicating ideas. Research supports responding to those ideas before responding to problems with form. In a multi-draft, process-oriented writing class, a response that focuses on content should come first (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Zamel, 1985). One of my favorite quotes about responding to writing comes from Paul Diederich (1974) who wrote, "...noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly."
4. Look for the strengths in the writing and let the writer know what they are (Raimes, 1983). Give specific praise, for example: "These particular words you've chosen really help me get a clear picture."; "This paper is very easy to follow because you've organized it like this..."; "Your first sentence grabs my attention and makes me want to read more"; "The examples you gave helped me understand this part of your paper." Again, be genuine. You don't have to comment on everything, just what strikes you as real strengths of the writing. I have noticed that when I make students aware of specific things they have done well, I see those same attributes in subsequent papers. When there are multiple errors in grammar and mechanics, it is easy to

overlook the strengths of the paper (the ideas, the flow of the text, or the rich word choice). Hernández (2001) suggests that teachers focus on the strengths and avoid concentrating solely on writing deficiencies.

5. Respond to higher-order concerns: coherence, cohesiveness, content, organization, and global errors before addressing lower-order concerns such as punctuation, spelling and sentence structure. Nothing is more discouraging than to have someone ignore what you're trying to say and instead point out that you've misspelled something or put a comma in the wrong place. English language learners don't need to have full control of spelling, punctuation and grammar before tackling writing concerns such as audience, purpose, ideas, and organization (Hernández, 2001). Additionally, some errors in grammar and mechanics simply disappear during revision of content and organization. Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) provides a useful handout about higher and lower-order concerns in writing for students to use during the revision process. Teachers and writing tutors can also benefit from the information outlined in it.
6. Respond to a few local errors and lower-order concerns. After you've responded to purpose, content, clarity, organization, logic, relevance, transitions, etc. and the writer has revised, you can move on to mechanical errors: spelling, punctuation, structure and other errors that do not affect overall comprehensibility. Guide students to self-correct, to use tools such as dictionaries, spell checks, punctuation guides, grammar books and online resources. Kazule and Lunga (2010) note "that students appreciate the role of self-editing in minimizing errors in their texts and that it helps in eventually producing well-written texts" (p. 61). They

suggest that error detection and aid in making corrections can come from a number of different resources including the teacher, peers, or computers. If many students are making the same error, consider a mini-lesson.

7. Give clear directions on how to improve the paper. In reviewing research on feedback specificity, Ravand and Rasekh (2011) found that specific feedback that guides the learner on how to improve or correct the writing was more effective than just pointing out the errors. The research indicates that students learn more and are more motivated to make changes in their writing when provided with details on how to improve the paper. This is true in working through both higher and lower-order concerns.
8. End with a positive comment about the paper that will help motivate and encourage the writer in revising. A balance of offering constructive steps in making improvements and giving specific positive feedback serves to encourage L2 learners to revise their papers thoughtfully and carefully.

Responding to writing is part of the teaching process and must be done with care and respect for the individual learner. Research on providing optimal feedback to L2 writers continues. In the meantime, these simple steps provide us with some tools to respond effectively and respectfully.

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## **Defining Unknown Words From Listening** **Beth Sheppard, University of Oregon**

I teach oral skills to IEP students in their last term before entering the university, and listening is often a bigger challenge for this group than speaking. When students reflect on why listening is difficult for them, one of their most frequent comments concerns vocabulary: “The speaker uses too many words that I don’t know.”

When listening, just as when reading, students need to accept some ambiguity and search for the main idea even in the face of a certain proportion of unknown words. Sometimes, however, students determine that a certain unknown word is important to their

comprehension of the passage, and they should look it up. Here, the situation of a listener is different than that of a reader. It is easy enough to look up a word seen in print, but how can students look up an unknown word that they hear, if they don’t know how to spell it?

Since students often face this situation, it seemed worth considering. In order to look up an unknown word from oral input, students first need a strong understanding of English orthography to make a reasonable guess at the spelling. When using the dictionary, making a good guess at the beginning of