

# Content-focused feedback to enhance students' learning experience in a writing classroom

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## A paradigm shift of feedback practice

“Conventionally, feedback is conceptualised as an issue of ‘knowledge of results’ or ‘correction of errors’, and is therefore seen as an end product which is **a consequence of performance**. The concept of feedback has been developed over the last decade to encompass more than its conventional function of **one-way information transmission** to the student regarding their work, towards **a more ‘sustainable’ student-centred model** that supports learning both in the current context and in future learning beyond it. The latter requires a shift from the view that tutors control feedback towards **an ongoing dialogic approach that engages students more meaningfully in the assessment and feedback process, and facilitates the development of student self-regulation.**” (pp. 2)

# Written feedback research and practice by ESL teachers

▷ Feedback research in the last decade has been focusing on **written corrective feedback** (direct/indirect, focused/unfocused) (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Sheen, 2007; Ellis, Sheen, Murakai & Takashima, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; 2010; Farrokhi & Sattarpour, 2012; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Shintani, Ellis & Suzuki, 2014; Stefanou & Révész, 2015)

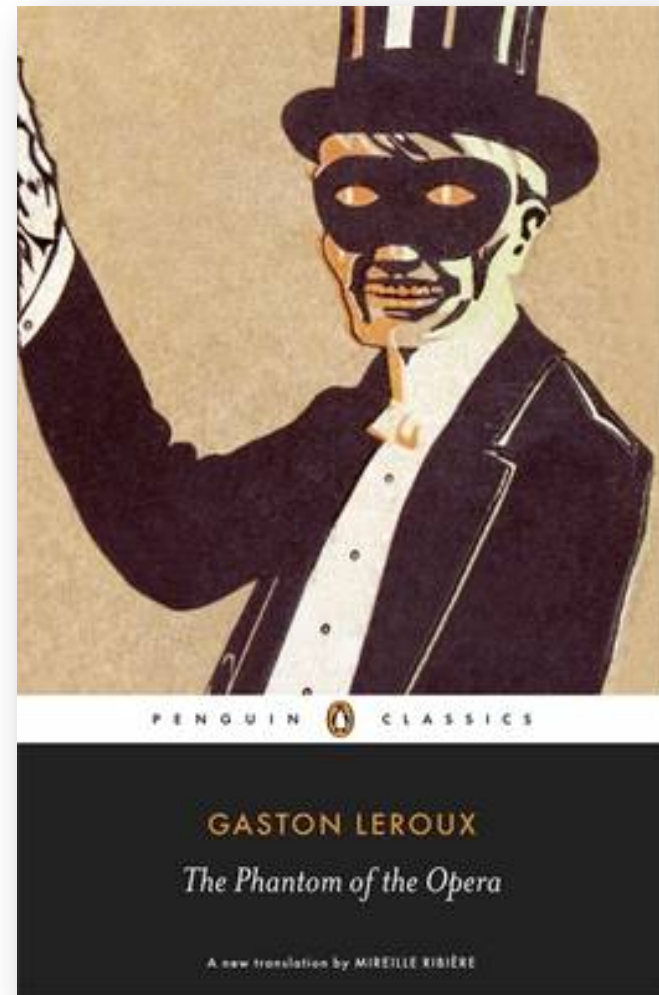
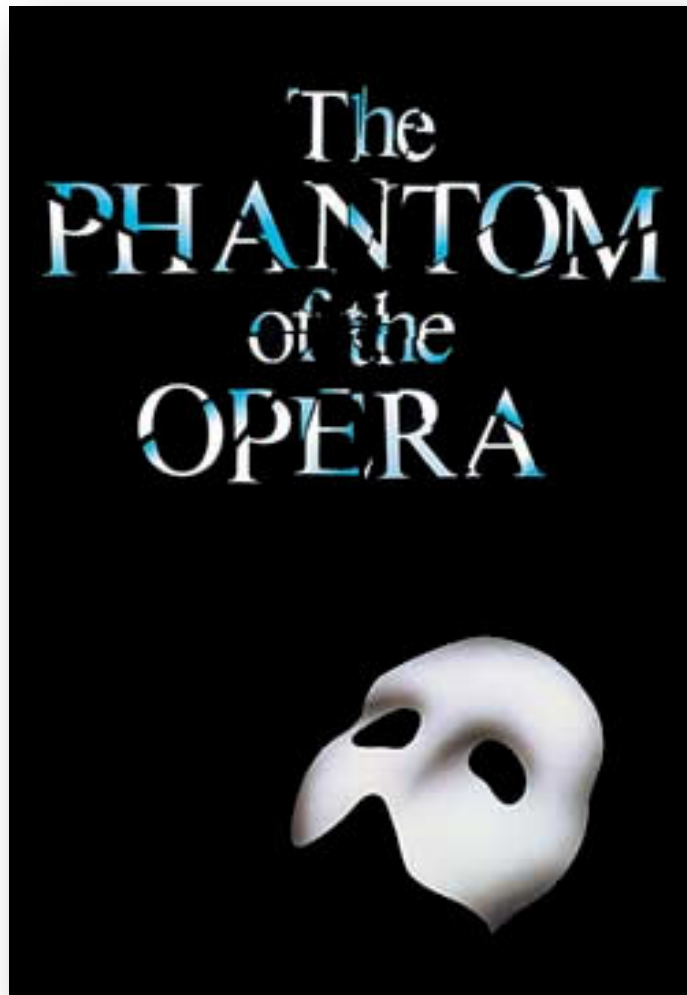
# Research questions

- ▷ How does the teacher go about giving content-focused comments (CFC) with a dual emphasis on focus and type?
- ▷ How do students make changes in their revised work based on the teacher feedback?

# Participants, course, and material

- ▷ The present study was conducted in a writing classroom with **four students** (Simon, Pauline, Trice, and Bella in pseudonyms) in a community college in Hong Kong.
- ▷ This course is called Interpretation and Appreciation of Literature in English, which is essentially a writing course teaching students to **write critical responses to literary work**.
- ▷ Student samples from **two critical response essays** were analyzed. As the four students were asked to write two drafts on each task, **a total of 16 samples** were collected and analyzed.

# *The Phantom of the Opera*



# Analysis of teacher feedback

<b>Comment type</b>	<b>Number (%)</b>
Content-focused comments (CFC)	29 (14)
Written comments on language	171 (85)
Written comments on organization	2 (1)
All written comments	202 (100)

Table 1: Distribution of written comments by the teacher

# RQ1 – Teacher’s CFC practice

CFC category	No. (%)	Example
Ask for additional information/question	2 (7)	<i>How to ‘know clearly what’s underground’? Do you remember in the story, Christine mentioned that she had a key to the underground lake and that she had been there before? How can you make use of this information to come up with a more concrete suggestion?</i>
Ask for additional information/suggestion	7 (24)	<i>I would like to see some examples taken from the book e.g. the Apollo statue, the grand staircase, the chandelier, etc. Again, your goal in your revised version is to quote specific lines from the book so that your arguments are more convincing.</i>
Ask for additional information/direction	1 (3)	<i>This is too brief. There are two questions in this assignment: possible ways Erik could kill and how the design of the opera house could be designed to prevent future killing. You talked mostly about the first question. Write at least 2 paragraphs (i.e. suggest two ways to improve the design of the opera house) to answer the second question.</i>
Ask for additional information/combined	3 (10)	<i>It is a very interesting description of Box Five. I need to see how the lines in the book support this interpretation. Also, when you speculate that Erik may kill by poisoning others, can you refer to another instance when Erik actually poisoned Carlotta? Remember to cite specific lines from the book to support your claims and include the page numbers.</i>

**Table 2: Eleven categories of CFC given by the teacher**



# RQ1 – Teacher’s CFC practice

CFC category	No. (%)	Example
Ask for clarification/question	3 (10)	<i>‘The wealthy audiences’: Why ‘wealthy’ is important here?</i>
Ask for clarification/direction	2 (7)	<i>You gave an example of Erik’s brutal actions by quoting Joseph Buquet. I think you can do better by relating this example to the question. Since the question asks you to discuss ways the phantom could kill, try to give details of the way that Buquet was murdered.</i>
Ask for clarification/combined	5 (17)	<i>I don’t understand. There is only one door in the box! Where did you get this idea from? Can you quote the line(s)? Do you mean the opera ghost could appear suddenly in the box, making you have the assumption that there must be more than one door in the box? You need to include references from the book.</i>

**Table 2: Eleven categories of CFC given by the teacher (Cont’d)**

# RQ1 – Teacher’s CFC practice

<b>CFC category</b>	<b>No. (%)</b>	<b>Example</b>
Ask for replacement/question	2 (7)	<i>This is no longer a relevant suggestion. Rewrite it: how to prevent the phantom from luring people to the underground lake?</i>
Ask for replacement/suggestion	1 (3)	<i>I don't think it would prevent the accident. Even if the alarm goes off, it is still too late to prevent the chandelier from falling down... Include an alternative method here e.g. strengthening the wires that hold the chandelier, regular maintenance, etc.</i>
Ask for replacement/direction	1 (3)	<i>This is not an example to support the argument that the opera ghost would appear in the box suddenly. Quote other lines.</i>
Ask for replacement/combined	2 (7)	<i>The quote does not support your point that the underground lake is a austere place. Can you replace it with a description of the Erik's place by referring to p. 123-125 of the book?</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>29 (100)</b>	<i>This is no longer a relevant suggestion. Rewrite it: how to prevent the phantom from luring people to the underground lake?</i>

**Table 2: Eleven categories of CFC given by the teacher (Cont'd)**

## RQ2 – Student response

<b>CFC category (Total number)</b>	<b>No discernable change (%)</b>	<b>Change with negative and negligible effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with mixed effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with positive effect (%)</b>
Ask for additional information/ question (2)	1 (50)	1 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Ask for additional information/ suggestion (7)	1 (14)	0 (0)	3 (43)	3 (43)
Ask for additional information/ direction (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)
Ask for additional information/ combined (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (33)	2 (67)

**Table 3: How students responded to teacher's CFC (adapted from Ferris, 1997)**

# RQ2 – Student response

<b>CFC category (Total number)</b>	<b>No discernable change (%)</b>	<b>Change with negative and negligible effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with mixed effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with positive effect (%)</b>
Ask for clarification/ question (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (33)	2 (67)
Ask for clarification/ direction (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (50)	1 (50)
Ask for clarification/ combined (5)	1 (20)	0 (0)	1 (20)	3 (60)

**Table 3: How students responded to teacher's CFC (Cont'd)**

# RQ2 – Student response

<b>CFC category (Total number)</b>	<b>No discernable change (%)</b>	<b>Change with negative and negligible effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with mixed effect (%)</b>	<b>Change with positive effect (%)</b>
Ask for replacement/ question (2)	1 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (50)
Ask for replacement/ suggestion (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)
Ask for replacement/ direction (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)	0 (0)
Ask for replacement/ combined (2)	0 (0)	2 (100)	0 (0)	0 (0)

**Table 3: How students responded to teacher's CFC (Cont'd)**

## RQ2 – Student response

### Ask for additional information

Amongst the three categories, students made the most changes with positive effect by responding to the **categories 'ask for additional information/combined' (67%) and 'ask for additional information/suggestion' (43%)** because these two feedback types provided the most support and scaffolding to students in the forms of examples and specific references to the book and musical.

## RQ2 – Student response

### Ask for clarification

Students were able to clarify their ideas by responding to teacher's CFC category 'ask for clarification/question' (67%). It was followed by the category 'ask for clarification/combined' (60%) and 'ask for clarification/direction' (50%).

## RQ2 – Student response

### Ask for replacement

Students showed the most favorable response to the category ‘ask for replacement/suggestion’ (100%), followed by ‘ask for replacement/question’ (50%). For the other two categories, students responded either with mixed effect (‘ask for replacement/direction’ (100%)) or with negative or negligible effect (‘ask for replacement/combined’ (100%)).



## Implications: Alignment between feedback type and focus

- ▷ Unlike findings in previous studies which lionize the use of specific feedback namely 'suggestions', **the findings of the study show that the effectiveness of feedback types highly impinges on the feedback focus at hand.**
- ▷ To inform feedback practice, teachers are advised to **take into consideration the focus** of their CFC when deciding on which **type** of feedback to use.
- ▷ Moreover, since the present study only looks into **four types of feedback (suggestion, direction, question, and combined)**, future L2 feedback research on CFC **could examine additional feedback types including praises, criticisms, imperatives, and the use of symbols (e.g. '?)** (Hamp-Lyons et al., 1998) and their effectiveness in helping students to revise their content.

# Implications: Other factors

- ▷ The present study also **confirms the need for taking into account the broader context** including students' and teachers' belief, school context and expectation when conducting feedback research (Lee, 2008).
- ▷ In the present study, the contextual factor identified which negatively affect students' responses to CFC was **students' content knowledge**.
- ▷ In the findings, when receiving two CFC in the same category, Simon responded to one of them with mixed effect while he did not make any changes with the second. It was contended that the student's undesirable (or the lack of) responses to the two feedback points was due to his unfamiliarity to the plot of the story rather than the lack of clarity of feedback. Even Simon understands the comments given by the teacher, he failed to locate and include the relevant information from the story to give his responses.

# Implications: Other factors

- ▷ Another student, Trice, did not respond to the teacher's CFC because of another reason: **She was not convinced of the need to revise.**
- ▷ In that instance, Trice was asked to replace her original quotes from the book with another quote which the teacher believed would better illustrate her argument. Nonetheless, given the similar nature (both quotes were used to prove that a character was very arrogant and self-centered), Trice decided not to make any changes.
- ▷ Teachers could **include more information regarding the changes that they expect from the students**, for example, by giving a summary of the ideas and referring students to the sources of the ideas. Moreover, it is more likely for students to respond to teachers' CFC **when the teacher provides a reason to persuade students** that the new idea is better than the original one. As for researchers, understanding why students do not respond to a teacher's CFC could be conducive to improving CFC practice.

# Conclusion

- ▷ In conclusion, the present study examined **CFC practice** in a composition through literature class with four college students.
- ▷ Through analyzing the CFC given by the teacher and the essays written by the students, **the findings painted a more complicated picture** than other studies in the area of content feedback.
- ▷ The author also calls for **a more systematic and closer investigation** into how the different **types and focuses of CFC** assist students in revising their works.
- ▷ In spite of the small number of participants and a paucity of studies to refer to, the findings of the present study shed light on an under-explored area in L2 feedback research and illuminate **future research direction to include content feedback alongside corrective feedback.**



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# Q & A Session