The Effectiveness of Feedback System in Developing Writing Skills

Chandreyee Sarkar Mitra

Abstract

In the present education system, teachers are burdened with administrative work, completion of syllabus, and conducting tests. The advantageous implications of formative tests often take a back seat and fail to attain the purpose behind them. If the feedback system did not merely exist in theory and policy documents, it could have a huge impact on closing gaps in performance of students. A study was conducted at College of Engineering, Anna University, Guindy, Chennai, to investigate the success of the feedback system, and based on the detailed analysis of the study, this article attempts to incorporate belief in the feedback system. The study also shows that students who had scored well at school level exams couldn't write good English at the tertiary level, and tries to explore the reasons behind it.

Keywords: Feedback, formative tests, tasks, success level, error correction

The implications of the term 'feedback' is not new to teachers and students partaking in the exercise of teaching and learning in the classrooms. Ideally, academic performance and testing should be followed by feedback. Feedback is considered by some to be the "life-blood of learning" (Rowntree, 1987, p. 24). Rowntree further states that students look forward to teacher's comments on anything that they do or say in the classroom, for instance, be it a physical activity or an essay in an examination. Students are eager to know whether the performance has been judged approvingly in the eyes of the teacher. It is this information "between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter

which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). This information to the student is most commonly conveyed by a teacher in the form of a comment, a grade, or a mark in a test. Several research studies on feedback have proved the futile effect of grades and marks that rarely help in bringing about improvement in the performance of the students. In fact, awarding similar grades to students is simply reminding someone that, "It is not likely that this continual labelling has beneficial consequences for the individuals' educational development" (Bloom et al, 1971, p. 7).

It appears that what really shall be useful to the student is reducing the gap between desired and actual performance. However, teacher feedback even when intertwined with marking a student's script will rarely lead to improvement until a student understands the necessity to act upon the feedback. It is ultimately teachers who "are responsible for both guiding their students and judging how successful their guidance has been" (Brookhart, 2001, p. 158). The important thing about feedback therefore is how it can help students and how students respond to it (William, 2016). In fact, it is assessment and more so formative assessment that the teacher and the student should focus on since it includes the feedback of the teacher, and helps in assessing learning of students.

Statement of the Problem

The Teacher-Researcher (TR) has repeatedly faced the problem of poor language skills of the students at the tertiary level, and undertook the study to test the result of feedback on writing skills of learners. Twenty students were selected for the study: sixteen from English medium schools and four from mother-tongue medium schools.

Irrespective of the school background, the students struggled to write long essay answers, they either lacked original ideas or their language skills and vocabulary were insufficient to articulate thoughts. The reason for this incompetence lies with the school education system in India, especially in the state board schools, where readymade essays are provided to students. The students are rarely taught to write essays and practice writing as a skill. Thus, most students find it difficult to express their ideas through coherent writing passages. The situation is particularly pathetic in state-run schools where sometimes students may not have had an English language teacher for an entire academic year.

Even when there is a regular teacher, he/she often does not pay heed to class XI syllabus and instead focuses on class XII course to ensure that students get good scores in XII board exams. The worst kind of dumbing down takes place as students are provided readymade essays on topics that are often repeated in the exams. The students are then asked to memorize and regurgitate these in the examination. More often than not, the school system focuses on the (readymade) product rather than the process, and this leaves the students impaired, and does not equip them with the required skill set.

Literature Review

The significance of the term 'feedback' is not new to teachers and students partaking in the exercise of teaching and learning in the classrooms. Swaffield (2008) writes that "the term 'feedback' has its origin in regulatory mechanisms, where part of the 'output' of a system is returned or fed back to it in a way that affects its performance, keeping it on track" (p. 57). Keh (1990) through her study suggests feedback "As an input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision" (p. 294). This input, mostly in the form of comments, questions and suggestions provides a writer to produce "reader-based prose" (p. 294). Thus, feedback or instructional information to students from the teacher aims to bring about the desired improvement on student performance.

The purpose of feedback is then to keep the cycle of diagnosis and remedial teaching continuous during the course designed for learning in the classroom. This is because in countries like India, majority of language learning takes place inside the classroom environment. Most students, especially those from mother tongue medium schools, do not get the opportunity to explore the target language outside the classroom. The ESL teachers need to keep these factors in mind to make student learning from feedback successful. Wiggins (2012) suggests that for feedback to increase performance it has to be "goal-referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing and consistent" (p.12).

Besides, dealing with the purpose of feedback, the different roles and functions of feedback have also been suggested by Joughin, "The three primary roles of feedback are to support the learning process, to judge

current achievement, and to maintain disciplinary and professional standards" (2008, p. 137). He further elaborates that there is a tension between the three roles: feedback may not support improvement; judgment may not be fair; and disciplinary standards are often unclear or even confusing to students. This study was conducted to explore the various theories regarding role of feedback.

Research Design

The research design is based on the hypothesis that the language skills of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students can be improved by giving them practice on writing followed by detailed and descriptive individual feedback from the Teacher-Researcher (TR).

The study was conducted over a period of three months and the TR met the students chosen for the study for 24 classes in order to test her hypothesis that timely feedback from the TR can help LEP students develop their writing skills in English. The research design of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Research design of the study*
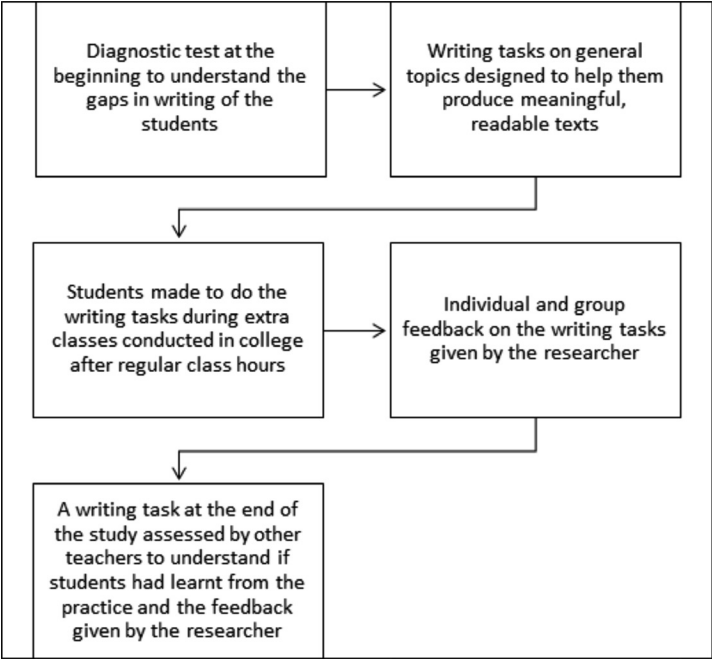
Profile of the students

Twenty students from College of Engineering, Anna University, Guindy, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), were part of the study, but in the following weeks two students dropped out and the study continued with 18 students. Of the 18 students, 10 were regular and worked on all the 10 writing tasks and on the feedback given by the TR.

Among the 20 students selected, 16 were from English medium schools situated in rural areas (but with limited proficiency in the language) and 4 were from mother-tongue medium schools. As step one, a diagnostic test was conducted to assess their writing skills. The test consisted of both objective and essay type questions, the primary criterion for selecting the students for the study was their performance in the essay. The errors made by the students from English medium and mother-tongue medium schools were not vastly different. The only major difference was the length of the essays, the students found it difficult to write long answers as they lacked the language skill set to articulate their ideas onto paper.

Table 1 provides details of the students chosen for the study, such as their names, age, gender, branch of engineering, medium of instruction in school, and their scores in English in the Higher Secondary Examination. This examination is a high-stake examination and the marks scored determines admission to various colleges for graduation degree.

Table 1: *Profile of students selected for the study*

S. No.	Name of the Student	Age	Gender	Branch of Engineering	Medium of instruction in school	Place where the students has been living for the last 10 years	Marks secured in English in the Higher Secondary Examination (Out of 200)
1	Anupriya T	17	F	Computer Science	Tamil	Karur	193
2	Aravindhan G R	18	M	Mechanical	English	Namakkal	190
3	Balaji M A	17	M	Printing	English	Namakkal	181

4	Bhuvana-priya D	17	F	Civil	English	Uthanaga-rai	184
5	Gayathri K	17	F	Agriculture & Irrigation	English	Chennai	186
6	Karthi A	17	M	Mechanical	English	Dharma-puri	187
7	Marishku-mar N	17	M	Information technology	Tamil	Namakkal	152
8	Mohammed Basith H	18	M	Mechanical	English	Chennai	174
9	Vinoth P	18	M	Mechanical	English	Chennai	188
10	Murugavel V	18	M	Manufac-turing	English	Samayapur	188
11	Nivetha R	17	F	Electronics & Commu-nication	Tamil	Vijayman-galam	172
12	Pughazhen-diran C	18	M	Electronics and Com-munication	Tamil	Pattukkotai	184
13	Sabanan-tham S	18	M	Mechanical	English	Morappur	189
14	Shiva C	17	M	Information Technology	English	Tirunelveli	178
15	Santosh V R	18	M	Civil	English	Morappur	186
16	Shiva Shylaja R	18	F	Industrial	English	Vetri vikas	187
17	Yuvasri J	18	F	Information Technology	English	Panchetti	179
18	Ramachan-dran L	18	M	Electrical & Electronics	English	Chennai	186
19	Ashwini K (left)	18	F	Electronics and Com-munication	English	Chennai	189
20	Thennarasu J (left)	18	M	Electrical & Electronics	English	Paavendhar	180

Data Collection and Analysis

Classes conducted

The classes were conducted on days when the students finished their regular classes by 2.00 pm, and were scheduled between 2.00 pm to 4.00 pm. As all the students chosen were hostellers, there were no logistical issues in conducting extra classes in late afternoon. The TR met the students for 24 sessions over a period of three months. The classes were conducted twice a week, and the duration ranged from 50 minutes to 1.5 hours, depending on the time taken for the task, discussion of students' performance of previous day's task, and giving group feedback.

Writing tasks

A set of topics were chosen for students to practise writing and thereby help them produce coherent texts. Several studies in ESL literature give practical tips on helping learners at various levels of language proficiency. Yet, the question that continues to be a mystery for most ESL teachers and researchers is the poor to very poor writing skills of the majority of Indian students, especially at the tertiary level. Successive studies have tried to analyze the reasons but to a large extent have placed the onus on the students' background, and feel it is the game spoiler to all the efforts made by the teacher. There is a gap when studies fail to call out the state of teaching of writing in India, which to a large extent is focused on the product and not on the process. In most schools even today, the emphasis is more on getting the number of words specified in the rubric correct, turning in the assignments on time, presenting neat work, using impressive vocabulary, but not to ensure that the learner is conscious of his/her ability to get ideas onto paper, and develops his/her ability to communicate effectively through the written mode. So, learners go through 12 years of schooling and yet do not know how to write a paragraph properly, let alone an essay.

The focus as stated above is always on extraneous features rather than the actual act of writing. Even students who come from homes where parents speak English and have access to English books from childhood are not confident about the choice of words, sentence structure, and organization of ideas as these issues are not addressed in schools. In schools, the students are given several types of writing exercises but the problems related to communicating original and creative ideas through

writing are not addressed; and the ESL teacher in college is confronted with these issues.

Considering these problems, the TR decided to have the students practise writing paragraphs with a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence as the study was aimed to help students write organized texts with the help of feedback.

Timeline of the Tasks and Feedback

The writing tasks were undertaken over a period of three months, the purpose behind the tasks, and the type of feedback provided have been indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: *Time frame and tasks*

Number of classes spent on task & feedback	Type of task or activity	Purpose of the task	Feedback provided during pre-task/task/ post-task sessions	Intended Outcome
1: Task & Feedback	Diagnostic Test	To select students with gaps in writing for the study	Individual feedback was given on the test	To produce readable, meaningful texts
1: Task & Feedback	Reading	To focus on reading skills	Post discussion on the reading passage	To read and comprehend texts
1: Task & Feedback	Framing questions	Students were asked to frame questions as prompts	Discussion on the exercise	Ability to frame questions
1: Task & Feedback	Jumbled sentences	Rearrange sentences to develop them into a coherent paragraph	Individual and group feedback was given along with learning materials	To arrange sentences using connectives to develop a coherent paragraph.
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write a paragraph on "ozone layer"	To check the writing on familiar topics and then move on to new general topics	Individual and group feedback was given	Ability to write on a familiar topic

1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on the film that you like most	Teach students to write an organized paragraph with a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence via prompts	Teach them to use questions as prompts to develop ideas in a paragraph	To develop ideas in a paragraph with the help of prompts discussed in class
1: Task 1: Feedback	Writing a paragraph	Identify the topic, supporting and concluding sentences from a given paragraph. Identify the irrelevant sentences in a given text.	Individual feedback and group feedback, classroom teaching	To identify topic, supporting and concluding sentences, to sort out relevant and irrelevant matter without teacher support
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on "An unforgettable incident from the past"	To give students practice on paragraph writing and make them report in the past tense	Pre-task: Framed prompts Post- task: Individual feedback, group feedback	To check if students can frame prompts without teacher support and use the past tense verb forms in a paragraph
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on "My favourite activity during free time"	To give students practice on paragraph writing and make them write using present tense form of the verb	Pre-task: Framed prompts Post-task: Individual feedback, group feedback	To examine if students can frame prompts without teacher support and use the present tense verb forms in a paragraph
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on "My favourite television programme / television channel"	To give students practice on paragraph writing and make them write using present form of the verb	Individual feedback on the task	To check if students can frame prompts without teacher support and use the present tense verb forms in a paragraph

1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on the topic: "My favourite childhood friend "	To give students practice on paragraph writing and make them report using past tense	Individual and group feedback after the task	To examine if students can frame prompts without teacher support and use past tense verb forms in a paragraph
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on "The person I like the best"	To give students practice on paragraph writing and make them write using present form of the verb	Individual feedback on the task	To ensure that students can frame prompts without teacher support and use the present tense verb forms in a paragraph
1: Task 1: Feedback	Essay on "Impact of mobile phones on youth"	To develop ideas on a given topic and practice essay writing	Individual feedback on the task	To ensure that students can frame prompts for an essay. To check if they can develop content on a given topic, and are able to link and organize paragraphs in an essay
1: Task 1: Feedback	Write on "City life and village life"	To understand students' level of performance after elaborate feedback sessions	Took support from other teachers of the department to evaluate the task	To examine if students can write a paragraph using linking words, topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence
1: Discussion on effect of feedback	Discussion on overall performance of the students before and after feedback	To see if timely individual and group feedback helped to improve students' performance	-	To assess if the students understood and learnt from the support, and (individual and group) feedback (both individual given by the TR
No. of classes - 25	**Total tasks – 15**			

The TR maintained separate files for individual students, the file included the worksheets of the student and the feedback given on the same by the TR. Each student was also given a file to keep photocopies of the worksheets and the TR's comments. Most of the tasks were followed with individual feedback and group feedback based on classroom teaching.

A set of topics was chosen for students to practise their writing and thereby help them produce coherent texts. The TR corrected the writing assignments and provided individual feedback and comments on students' performance. For most of the tasks, the TR corrected scripts at home and brought them to discuss in the next class. Apart from providing individual feedback, the TR also gave group feedback regarding similar errors across students' works. For the common errors, TR wrote them on the blackboard and suggested ways of correcting them.

To overcome these errors, the researcher at times taught grammar or discussed synonyms and phrases to improve writing. As part of feedback, the researcher provided learning materials too, such as a list of linking words to develop coherent passages on a given topic. One or two tasks were made optional for few students; they were meant especially for those who required more practice to improve their writing.

Implications of the Study

The study was conducted by the TR with a set of 20 students (two students dropped out of the 20 chosen), who had serious problems with their writing skills. A method of correction including feedback comments was carried out by the TR for the students involved in the study.

Image 1 depicts a student's writing at the initial stage, apart from the grammatical errors, the writing lacks clarity. As some students exhibited serious problems in writing and failed to produce short paragraphs, the TR used questions as prompts to help them write. To write a paragraph on "The best film", TR gave prompts like the kind of movies you enjoy watching, name of favourite film, plot of the movie, and special quality about the movie. The students wrote paragraphs in response to the prompts.

Image 1: *Sample of initial writing*
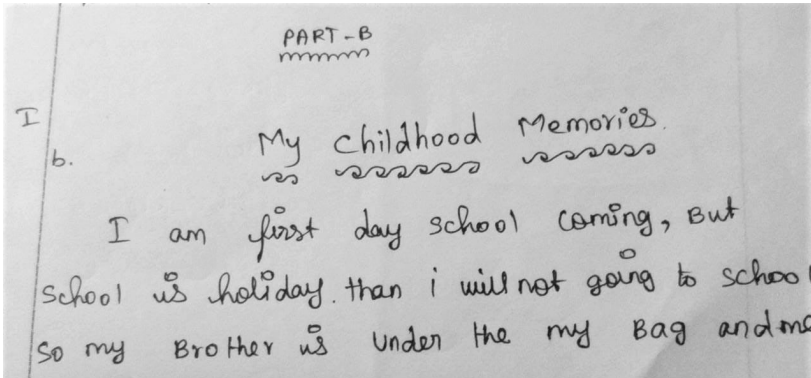
As it would not be possible to provide details about the writing progress of all the students, selected images depicting the tasks given and feedback provided are being shared. Image 2 depicts the use of grammar, Image 3 shows how features of paragraph and comprehension of were taught, and Image 4 shows a paragraph written by a student.
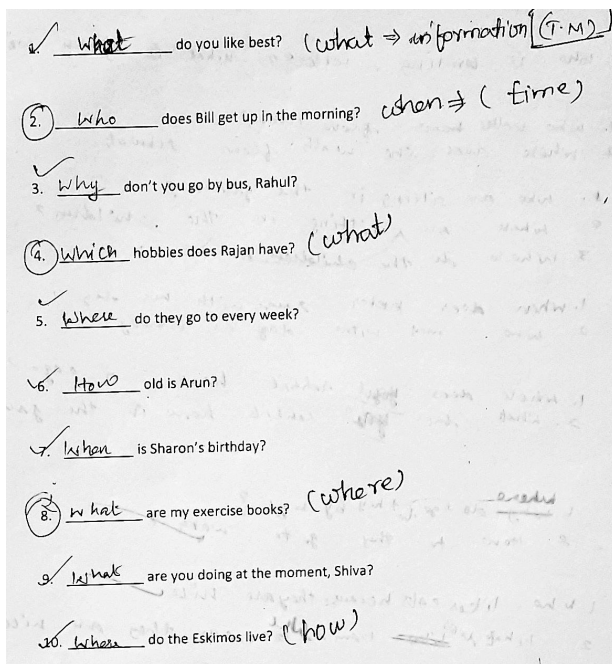
Image 2: *Using simple grammar*

Image 3: *Paragraph writing*

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TASK 1

Look at the following paragraphs and identify the <u>topic sentence</u> (TS), the <u>supporting sentences</u> (SS) and the <u>concluding sentence</u> (CS).

A In times gone by, lions lived in Europe, the Middle East, India and Africa. (TS) Humans killed hundreds of lions either out of fear or for sport. (SS) When areas were cleared to make towns and villages, lions and other animals were killed in large numbers. (TS) Now there are no lions left in the Middle East or Northern Africa. (SS) Lions can be found in Asia and the Eastern part of Central Africa. (SS) They are mostly found in zoos or national parks. (CS)

B In these modern times we live a fast-paced life. (TS) We speed on highways that never end, take jet planes to travel faster. (SS) Fast food restaurants save us time. (SS) Our machines are working faster than ever, and we can enjoy more leisure time. (SS) Then, in our leisure time, we grumble because things move too slowly. (CS)

There should be no irrelevant information in a paragraph; if there is, then the paragraph is badly written, because the meaning link between the topic sentence and other sentences will be lost.

TASK 2

Look at the following paragraph. Is there any irrelevant information? Underline the irrelevant sentences, if any, in the paragraph.

> Our dog Buster is a sprightly, mischievous Spitz. The first thing he did when he was brought home from the breeder's farm was to chew up my rubber slipper. <u>The breeder lives on a farm on the outskirts of the city. She was a teacher once, but now she has taken up breeding dogs.</u> Next he 'read' my father's newspaper thoroughly – a shredding machine couldn't have done a better job. Then he chased our neighbour's poor little kitten all round the garden, yapping furiously. He had a big grin on his face, but we were exhausted.

Now rewrite the paragraph without the irrelevant sentences. Think of a title for the paragraph.

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**Image 4:** *Writing a paragraph*
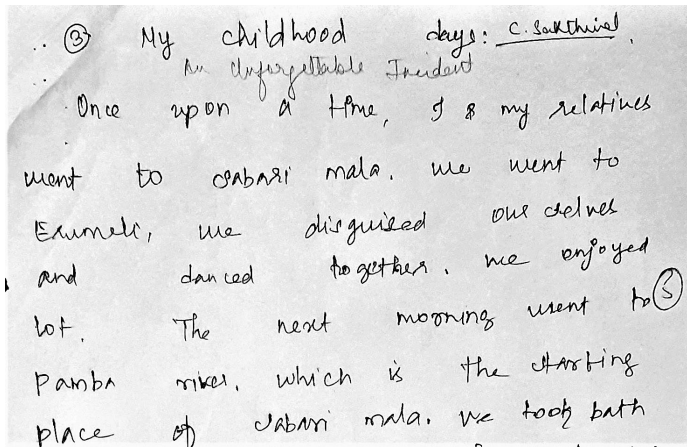
The feedback given to the students focused the discussion on the following points:

1. Success level in assigned tasks assessed the students on the following parameters

    *   Organization of ideas—Ability to describe and formulate ideas
    *   Linking devices—Use of connectives and reference words for purpose of coherence and cohesion in the text
    *   Sentence formation—Focus on construction and structure of sentences
    *   Vocabulary and spellings—Use of words appropriate to the content

2. Error correction by the TR on writing tasks and constructive feedback or comments at the end of each task was provided

3. Change in writing skills and style of the students following TR feedback.

Feedback focused on the content of the assignment, the synthesis of information, student's approach to writing (grammar) and other mechanics of writing (spellings, punctuations). No mark or grade was awarded on any of the writing tasks as it was felt that this was not appropriate for the learning environment. In the first few classes, some students found it difficult to write paragraphs and could only write phrases. Such students were provided prompts to help them develop points into sentences. The feedback over several classes focused on

paragraph writing using connectives to achieve coherence and cohesion. A score was awarded on the last task to assess the performance of the students after several sessions of teaching and feedback. Constructive comments and positive aspects of the assignment were highlighted on students' written work by the TR. Image 5 depicts a sample of TR's detailed feedback given to a student on write a paragraph on ozone layer.

Image 5: *TR's detailed feedback*
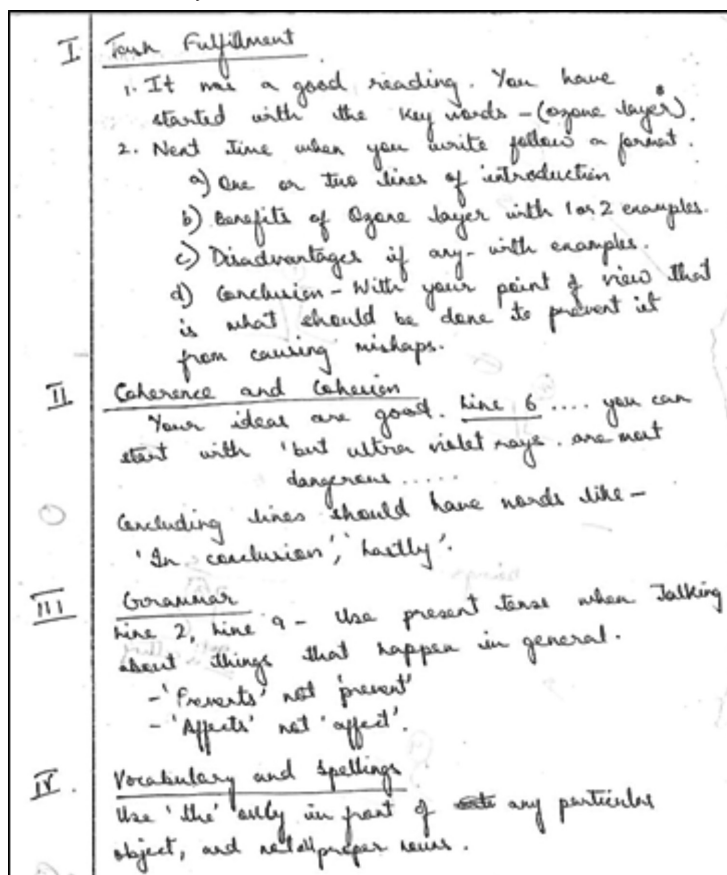
Conclusion

Feedback is essential for learning to be fruitful. However, providing feedback is not an easy task, "Giving useful feedback turns out to be

much more difficult than most people imagine" (William, 2016, p. 10). One of the toughest parts about giving feedback is the varying degrees of errors in students' use of language. For feedback to be relevant, it must be related specifically to points that the students have missed out in understanding. Learning becomes secondary when feedback is on extraneous elements like comments on handwriting and not too serious spelling errors, especially at the tertiary level. It is important for teachers to understand the aim and purpose of feedback: As input provided for revision, rewriting and improvement. The TR in the present study spread over a span of time has shown the impact of detailed feedback on language skills of LEP students.

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Chandreyee Sarkar Mitra *is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Anna Adarsh College for Women, Chennai. Her areas of interest are language testing and role of feedback in second language learning.*

chandreyeesarkar7@gmail.com