Excerpt From: "Ten Mismatches Between Teachers' Beliefs and Written Feedback Practice" by Icy Lee

Overview: In this study, the researchers analyzed student work with feedback on it, and then compared it to information gathered via interviews with teachers. In the study, they identified ten mismatches in teacher beliefs and teacher actions regarding feedback. Below are a few of those mismatches.

Mismatch 2: Teachers mark errors comprehensively although selective marking is preferred

In the feedback analysis, all the 26 teachers claimed that comprehensive error feedback was performed in the 174 student texts submitted from a random selection of typical writing done by students. The actual feedback analysis indicates that there is an average of one error feedback in every seven words in the student texts, thus rather detailed and intensive feedback on errors. In the questionnaire survey, about 70 per cent of the teachers said they usually mark errors comprehensively. Such practice, however, does not seem to be in line with their belief, since the majority of the teachers practicing comprehensive marking (12 out of 19) said in the interview that they prefer selective marking. They also expressed the concern that if a large number of errors are indicated, students, especially the weaker ones, will not be able to cope. One teacher said, 'I do think that if students focus on too many things at a time they cannot learn as their language foundation is not too good'. When asked why they do not mark errors selectively, the teachers said they are guided by a school policy that requires them to attend to every single student error, and this policy is deeply entrenched. In the words of one teacher, 'I think the students, parents, and teachers are all used to this way of marking which points out all the errors. It is difficult to change'. The results suggest that although teachers have doubts about comprehensive error feedback, they feel driven by a school policy that requires such a practice.

Mismatch 3: Teachers tend to correct and locate errors for students but believe that through teacher feedback students should learn to correct and locate their own errors

The feedback analysis shows that about 70 per cent of the feedback is direct, i.e. teachers indicate and correct errors for students. However, the questionnaire data suggest that 96 per cent of the teachers believed that students should learn to locate and correct errors. What might explain such a discrepancy? When interviewed, most of the teachers opined that since students are unable to locate and correct errors themselves, teachers have to help them. One teacher said, 'I tried to ask them to locate errors themselves, but the result was not good ... I also asked them to correct others' work but they tended to have many arguments'. The results demonstrate that teachers' error feedback is not congruent with their beliefs. Although teachers think students should learn to locate and correct errors, their written feedback practice does not often allow this to happen.

Mismatch 4: Teachers use error codes although they think students have a limited ability to decipher the codes

The majority (87 per cent) of the teachers in the questionnaire survey said they use error codes in marking student errors, while the feedback analysis shows that about 20 per cent of the feedback is coded, with codes appearing in almost every marked student text. The interview data, however, reveal that teachers generally believe that students' ability to decipher error codes is limited, especially the weaker ones. In the words of some teachers: 'weaker students don't know how to use the codes'; 'even though students understand the codes, they don't know how to correct the errors'; 'it doesn't help if students are not motivated'. The reason for such a discrepancy is possibly because teachers think that error codes provide opportunities for students to 'think about the error types and do self-correction', which is beneficial to their learning. The results suggest that teachers

have mixed attitudes to error codes, utilizing them in their feedback in spite of their doubts about students' ability to interpret them correctly.

Mismatch 5: Teachers award scores/grades to student writing although they are almost certain that marks/grades draw student attention away from teacher feedback

The feedback analysis shows that all the teachers give student writing a score or grade. Interestingly though, teachers do not seem to have a great deal of faith in grades/scores, as they think these divert student attention away from teacher feedback so much so that some students may even ignore it, especially because they are not required to revise and resubmit drafts for a better grade. One teacher remarked, 'The majority of students do not pay attention to the comments'. Another teacher even said, 'For students, they only look at the scores'. A reason to explain why teachers still award scores/ grades is that this is necessary for summative purposes (as these scores/ grades count towards the final grade students get). The importance of scores was underlined by one teacher at the interview, 'I think compositions serve two functions: one is for teachers to hand over the score sheet (the other is to find out the difficulties students have)'. Thus, the summative function of feedback has made teachers use scores/ grades although they are fully aware of the harm that can be done to students.

Mismatch 6: Teachers respond mainly to weaknesses in student writing although they know that feedback should cover both strengths and weaknesses

The feedback analysis shows that 91.4 per cent of the written feedback is in the form of error feedback marked in student texts, with 8.6 per cent written comments addressing different areas including praise and criticism. Although 38 per cent of the total written comments comprise praise, these positive comments constitute only 3.3 per cent of the total written feedback. Thus, the predominant focus of teacher feedback is on students' weaknesses pertaining to language form. Teachers do not seem to practise what they believe, since the interview data suggest that they are aware of the importance to offer a good balance of positive and negative comments: 'Students should know their strengths and weaknesses concerning both content and grammar'. The reason for such a mismatch can be explained by the error-focused approach to written feedback, which inevitably draws teachers' attention to weaknesses rather than strengths in student writing

Mismatch 7: Teachers' written feedback practice allows students little room to take control although teachers think students should learn to take greater responsibility for learning

The questionnaire and feedback data indicate that in teachers' written feedback practice, they shoulder a great deal of responsibility, marking errors comprehensively, and doing error identification/correction for students. When students receive the teachers' written feedback, as borne our in the interview, 'all the have to do is just to rewrite the essay by correcting mistakes; they are not required to assess themselves or to assess each other'. Since direct correction is provided to the majority of errors, students' role in correcting mistakes in their writing is minimal; often they do not even have to think because correct answers have been given by the teachers. Without being asked to perform self-/peer-editing or evaluation, students are not provided with opportunities to develop responsibility for learning. When asked about their beliefs about the student role, however, 99 percent of the teachers indicated in the questionnaire survey that students should learn to locate and correct their own errors, and 96 percent believed students should learn to analyse their own errors. When interviewed, the teachers also said that students should learn to take responsibility for their learning. Such a mismatch can be attributed to a number of factors evident in the data – for example, the English panel policy that requires detailed marking, teachers' predominant use of direct error feedback, and possibly teachers' infrequent use of alternative feedback strategies like peer feedback that put the onus of learning on students.