

## The Effects of EAP Writing Conferences

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## Overview

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## Rationale for the study

- The vital importance of academic writing skills for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students
- The difficulties of academic writing for EAP students
  - Writing in one's non-native language
  - The differences between the host academic culture and the students' own cultures
  - Identifying and addressing the expectations of audiences in the target academic culture
- Importance of effective EAP composition instructional approaches → **Teacher-student writing conference**

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## Definition of writing conference

- A writing conference is “**a conversation between a student and a teacher about the student's paper**. Since it is, or should be, a genuine conversation, it follows no set pattern; it simply evolves as the two parties talk” (Carnicelli, 1980)

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## Claims about the advantages of writing conference:

- Encouraging teacher-student dynamic interaction
- Maintaining students' confidence and motivation to write
- Providing individualized instruction
- Developing students' self-assessing abilities
- ...

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## Research gaps

- Little research on actual writing conference;
- Few studies on the effect of writing conference on students' subsequent revisions;
- Little research on ESL / EFL students
- Little investigation on other possible effects of conferences

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## Research Question

In what ways are conferences effective in assisting EAP students' writing development?

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## Basic information of the Study

- The setting: an English language school in a suburb of Melbourne
- The EAP course: 5-10 weeks bridging course; the final / most advanced EAP course in the school
- The writing task: 1000-word essay on nature and nurture
- Process writing approach
- Writing conferences as an integral part of the curriculum
- Participants: 1 experienced teacher and 3 students

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## The participant students

Students	Ai	Chica	Dony
Gender	Female	Female	Male
English Level	Strong	Average	Less strong
Nationality	Japan	Japan	Indonesia
Major	Chinese	Law	Engineering & Business

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## Major data sources

- Semi-structured individual interviews with teacher and students
  - Before conferences → experiences & perceptions, expectations
  - Immediately after each conference → evaluation of the conference
  - After students had received corrected final drafts → reflections on the effectiveness of the conference
- Conference observation
  - 3rd week: conference on the outlines;
  - 4th week: conferences on the 1st draft;
  - 5th week: conferences on the 2nd / final draft
- Students' 1st and 2nd drafts → compared to identify the revisions

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## Findings & Discussions (1)

- Conferences are advantageous in restoring or enhancing EAP students' confidence with their writing

- Dony's case --- plagiarism

T's written comments on Dony's 1st draft:

*"I have been unable to mark this as I suspect a LOT of plagiarism."*

Dony wrote:

*"Too Much Quotes, But Not Plagiarism!"*

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## Episode from Dony's conference

**Dony:** I am very very ... you know... very disappointed for myself for the first time when I see this. "Oh, I didn't paraphrase all the source. I just put the original one. But maybe somebody will see this plagiarism!"

**Teacher:** You don't understand I have to be cross with everybody yesterday because it'd better that we all catch this now, all of us, the whole class, everybody... Between you and me, it does not really matter in this context. But it does matter to you for your later, for all of you, for your later study. So this is the time that we need to start working on and improving it. ...

**Dony:** Yeah. Fortunately, I found this problem now rather than when I do my Master.

**Teacher:** Exactly! Exactly! Exactly! Exactly! Now the other thing you need to have a look at is you had a really good outline. ...

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## Quote from Dony's interview

Before I came to the conference, there was **a lot of emotion**. ... You know it is a bad thing that I have did... [In the conference] when we talk about plagiarism, I really was happy with that because she looked like "It doesn't matter. You just are learning in here. It's not in the university". **That makes me calm** and ... I think "Okay. It's not the problem. **The problem is that I have to move to the next step. I have to learn from my mistake.**"

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## Conferences are advantageous in restoring or enhancing EAP students' confidence with their writing (Cont.)

- More personal and detailed encouragement through face-to-face interactions (Harris, 1986)
- Negative / critical comments delivered in conferences are more acceptable to students.  
"Even when weaknesses are pointed out in a conference, comments tend to be less harsh, more humanized, when extended in a conversation between people rather than transmitted in red on paper" (Harris, 1986, p.33)

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## Findings & Discussions (2)

- Conferences can offer teachers and students opportunities to clarify their meanings;
  - Problems of teacher written commentary
    - Illegible handwriting
    - Ambiguous signals, e.g. "?", and numbers
    - Too general, e.g. "Rewrite more clearly"

Ai: "She wrote something but sometimes I cannot understand or I don't know how to improve, so I asked her. When I asked her, she told me how to... I think maybe if I don't ask her, she doesn't tell me".

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## Findings & Discussions (3)

- ...however, conferences cannot always prevent misunderstanding, which may be caused by
  - Mismatch of purposes for the conference;
  - Students' confusions about rhetorical terminology;
  - Students' inadequate oral English competence

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## Findings & Discussions (4)

- Conferences may affect the students' subsequent revisions;  
... however, "**successful**" conferences ( signaled by student's active participation in the discussion) **do not guarantee the success of subsequent revision.** (Dony's case)
  - Some potential influential factors:
    - Student factors (language competence, rewriting habit, ect.)
    - Mismatch of teacher's and student's concerns
    - The task: familiar / interesting to the student?

Another possibility: Some effects of teacher feedback may take longer time to be reflected

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## Findings & Discussion (5)

- Conferences are highly valued by the students

Ai: I think writing conference is like a support for me or for [other] students... On the other hand, the teacher can get information about our essay. So I think it is essential for students and teachers.

Dony: It's very good. Because after a writing conference, there come a lot of ideas in my mind. That's why I feel confident to write my essay.

Teacher: "I do think it's **effective**. But I am not sure it is **practical**". "The biggest thing about the writing conference is **time, is time.**"

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□ Chica's case

**Teacher:** "I didn't really feel that I had too much to tell her because I put it all on the sheet there". [Quote from interview]

**Chica:** "I couldn't understand what Jane wanted to say about my essay so I couldn't understand which one she wanted me to correct just looking at this [the assessment sheet]. ... I need one more conference after I rewrite." [Quote from interview]



## Summary of the findings

- Conferences are advantageous in restoring or enhancing EAP students' confidence with their writing.
- Conferences can offer teachers and students opportunities to clarify their meanings; but they cannot always prevent misunderstanding.
- Conferences may affect the students' subsequent revisions; however, "successful" conferences ( signalled by student's active participation) do not guarantee the success of subsequent revision, which may be affected by many variables.
- EAP Students may need conferences more than the teacher expect.



## My current research study

□ The title

The practice and effectiveness of formative assessment (i.e. teacher feedback and students' self-/ peer feedback) in EAP writing at HKU

## Questions & Suggestions

Thank you!

