Oral feedback in the context of written language

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An interpretive, qualitative approach was employed to investigate the types of oral feedback used to support students’ learning in written language. Evidence indicated that the nature of the feedback in each of the three classrooms was largely governed by the success criteria. The latter however fell short of what is considered ‘best practice’ (Clarke, 2001; 2003). Furthermore, each class was dominated by teacher-supplied feedback and as a consequence, opportunities for students to exert agency in their learning were the exception rather than the rule. Despite the importance ascribed to quality feedback and the involvement of students in their learning (see Black & Wiliam, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2004) it appears that in New Zealand, implementation in the context of written language has some way to go. It is argued that if feedback is to support and enhance students’ learning, teachers will need sustained professional learning opportunities where they can examine their understanding of feedback and their practice with particular reference to the nature of success criteria, the role of the student and the impact of different types of feedback on learning.

Introduction: formative assessment – assessment for learning

Academic and policy discourse of the 1980s and 1990s depicted formative assessment primarily as an act of teaching with attention directed to the role of the teacher in gathering information and using it to inform their teaching (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). Even though the professed aim of formative assessment was to enhance students’ learning, the discourse of the time was only indirectly concerned with learning, and the learner was afforded a limited role in the process (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). More recent conceptualisations of formative assessment, influenced by work in the fields of socio-cultural...
learning theory, meta-cognition and self-regulation theory, have re-framed formative assessment as a social, collaborative activity and aligned it more closely with learning (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Gardner, 2006). This alignment has given rise to the notion ‘assessment for learning’, a notion that encapsulates “the essence of our pursuit: the promotion of assessment to support learning” (Gardner, 2006, p.2). Consequently, the spotlight has shifted from the teacher, to the teacher and student(s) working in partnership. Students are thus afforded a significant role in both the assessment process and in their learning. Irrespective of this shift in the discourse, it is generally agreed that similar processes characterise formative assessment and assessment for learning: a sharing of the goals of learning; student self-assessment; and the presence of quality feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Gardner, 2006; Harlen, 1998).

New Zealand’s most recent assessment policy statement, the ‘National Assessment Strategy’ (Ministry of Education, 1999), outlines the strategic directions for assessment at the system, school and classroom levels. Set in the context of “current thinking about the impact of formative assessment on teaching, learning and student achievement” (Chamberlain, 2000, p.23), this statement and related initiatives have emphasised development of teachers’ assessment understandings and practice with attention given to increasing their “expertise in giving appropriate, targeted feedback” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p.2). Specific mention is made of involving students in their learning through activities such as goal setting, peer and self-assessment (Ministry of Education, 2002; 2007). The use of “assessment information to provide high quality feedback …” (Chamberlain, 2000, p.23) and of involving students in the learning process has also featured prominently in New Zealand’s ‘Literacy Strategy’ and associated professional learning programs (Ministry of Education, 2001; 2004). Given the prominence in the policy discourse of feedback, and the involvement of students in their learning, we, the researchers, were interested in investigating the types of oral feedback used to support student learning in written language. With reference to the findings from this investigation, it is argued that if feedback is to support learning in written language, students need a clear indication about what constitutes successful achievement in relation to the more substantive, developmental aspects of their writing. Moreover, if students are to take responsibility for their learning, they need to be full partners in the feedback process.

Feedback
Traditionally, feedback has been understood as “any numerous procedures that are used to tell a learner if an instructional response is right or wrong” (Kulhavy, 1977, p.211). Interpreted in this manner, feedback is corrective. A more expansive view is apparent in the notion of feedback as the crucial
interaction between teacher and student carried out for the purpose of furthering student learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003). Quality feedback that fulfils this purpose addresses:

- the goals of learning;
- what constitutes achievement in relation to these goals;
- the nature of student performance in relation to these goals and;
- the moves or strategies that can be used to bridge the gap between current and desired performance. (Sadler, 1989)

Sadler (1989) has observed that when the source of achievement information is external to the learner, it is associated with feedback; however when the student generates the relevant information, the process is part of self-monitoring. The teacher, through the feedback process, plays an important role in facilitating “the transition from feedback to self-monitoring” (Sadler, 1989, p. 122).

It has been suggested that the goals of learning and related notions of achievement and/or quality are best conveyed to students through a combination of verbal descriptions and exemplars (Sadler, 1987). Verbal descriptions set out the properties (criteria) and the level of quality (standard) expected in relation to achievement of the learning goal while exemplars are concrete artefacts that typify designated levels of quality. New Zealand primary school teachers involved in assessment and literacy professional learning programs (Ministry of Education, 2002; 2004) have been actively encouraged to share the goals of learning with their students in the form of ‘learning intentions’ and to use ‘success criteria’ and exemplars to convey “what is in the teacher’s mind as the criteria for judging their work” (Clarke, Timperley, & Hattie, 2003, p.28). Together learning intentions, success criteria and exemplars communicate the nature of intended learning and function as points of reference when providing feedback. Research has indicated however that in practice, teacher feedback is largely unrelated to the goals of learning and the furtherance of student learning (Butler, 1988; Clarke & McCallum, 2001; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998). Rather it is focused on positive and negative aspects of students’ behaviour with reference to implicit and explicit norms (Tunstall & Gipps 1996); related to effort and attitude (Knight, 2003); and used for purposes such as class management (Black & Wiliam 1998; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996) and the support of student self esteem (Knight, 2003).

A significant study undertaken by Tunstall and Gipps (1996), investigated the types of feedback used by teachers of Year One and Two students in six London schools. A major aim of the study was to “develop a grounded typology of teacher feedback” (p.390). This typology made a distinction between feedback focused on school socialisation and feedback focused on
learning. Learning-related feedback was further categorised as evaluative or descriptive. Four types of evaluative feedback were identified: Rewarding (A1); Punishing (A2); Approving (B1); and Disapproving (B2). These types dealt, in the main, with affective, conative and normative aspects of learning. In contrast, descriptive feedback was achievement-related with an emphasis on cognitive aspects of learning. Descriptive feedback was also divided into four types: Specifying Attainment (C1); Specifying Improvement (C2); Constructing Achievement (D1); and Constructing the Way Forward (D2). Both C and D types of feedback were associated with the formative use of information. The key differences between types C and D rested in the roles of the teacher and student and in the nature and degree of teacher control over the feedback process. In C1 and C2 feedback the teacher told the student, a relatively passive recipient, what needed to take place to achieve the learning goal, what had been attained, and what warranted further attention, while in types D1 and D2, teachers and students collaborated in the identification of what had been achieved, the gap between current and desired achievement, and the strategies that could be used to bridge this gap. While the typology is advanced as a useful analytic tool, a noted shortcoming of the study is the lack of detail about the practice of individual teachers. Future studies that interrogate such practice would, according to Tunstall and Gipps (1996), make a valuable contribution to the field.

Written language
Feedback in written language has been the focus of a number of studies (for example Ferris, 1997; Hyland, 2000; Xiang, 2004). Evidence gathered from practice suggests that feedback has been less than helpful in assisting students improve their writing (Muncie, 2000). More specifically, undue attention has been paid to how much students write at the expense of attention to quality (Bennet, Wragg, Carre, & Carter, 1992) and an inordinate amount of consideration has been given to surface features particularly in regard to revision expectations (Hargreaves & McCallum, 1998). Rather than treating students’ written drafts as work-in-progress there has been a tendency for teachers to deal with these as finished work. As a result, the focus of feedback has been corrective rather than developmental with reference to the more substantive, deep features of written language. Furthermore, students have been viewed as passive recipients of information (Hyland, 2000) with little acknowledgement given to their ability to generate such information themselves and to take action on the basis of this information. Within the New Zealand context, feedback about students’ writing has lacked specificity in relation to a given task, been devoid of constructive critique and has focused on affective aspects of performance (Ward & Dix, 2001; 2004).

Informed by contemporary thinking and research, there is now an expectation that teachers will not only share the goals of learning with students
but also provide specific feedback that is both goal-related (Zellermayer, 1989) and focused on development of strategies that will help students make improvements to their writing (Clarke, 2000). Helping writers revise and improve work during production is seen as central to the writing process (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Sadler, 1989). Moreover, the appraisal of one’s work and that of others is considered an authentic way in which students can develop evaluative and productive knowledge and expertise (Sadler, 1989). Indeed, the use of participatory types of feedback such as peer feedback is seen as both desirable and useful to the improvement of writing (Hyland, 2000). Such notions underscore the importance of teachers gaining insights into their feedback practices and the effects these have on students’ learning orientations and subsequent performance. Findings from research into teachers’ feedback and notions from the feedback literature, both in general and in written language, have informed and led to the research question guiding the current study: What types of oral feedback are used to support student learning, during written language?

**Method**

Given the nature of the research question we considered a qualitative framework the most appropriate point of reference. Consistent with this framework, the research was conducted as a field-based activity with data collected in a natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) — teachers’ feedback dialogue was captured, in situ, as they worked with students during written language lessons. This framework enabled us to generate a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 1998).

Non-probability sampling is recommended in the literature as the basis for selection of participants in small-scale, qualitative studies (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003). We decided that between three and five teachers from a single school would provide sufficient breadth and depth of information to address the research question. Of the eight primary schools that met the purposive selection criteria and were invited to participate, one school principal responded affirmatively within the specified time frame. Following our meeting with staff of this school, three teachers volunteered to participate: Yvonne, a teacher of Year One children who had been a primary school teacher for 22 years and held a position of responsibility in the school; Amy, a beginning teacher in her second year of teaching who taught a Year Three and Four class; and Lisa who had been teaching for five years and had a class of year Five and Six students.

We collected data in the three classrooms over an eight-week period. Three observer-participant observations (Adler & Adler, 1994) of between forty-five and sixty minutes were carried out in each of the teachers’ class-

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1 Each teacher was assigned a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.
rooms at different stages (beginning, middle, end) of a written language unit. Teacher talk during each lesson was recorded using an audio-tape and the tapes subsequently transcribed. While we inadvertently captured some student talk on the audio-tapes, it was not the focus of the research and permission was not obtained to use student talk in any publications. Accompanying field notes addressed aspects such as the nature of student talk, setting details and the structure and format of each lesson. Relevant documentation associated with each lesson such as the learning intentions, success criteria and exemplars/models used during lessons and extracts from conference logs were also collected. The audio-taped data from classroom observations were analysed and categorised using Tunstall’s and Gipps’ (1996) typology. As the focus of the study was on feedback used to support student learning, we only coded data according to the four descriptive types of feedback: Specifies Attainment (C1); Specifies Improvement (C2); Constructs Achievement (D1); and Constructs the Way Forward (D2).

**Types of oral feedback used during written language**

During the classroom observations, Yvonne’s 15 Year One students were learning how to write a simple recount (transactional writing – see Ministry of Education, 1994b) about their weekend activities in a diary format; the 24 Years Three and Four students in Amy’s class were learning how to write a narrative on a self chosen topic (expressive writing – see Ministry of Education, 1994b); and Lisa’s class of 32 Years Five and Six students were involved in writing a personal recount (transactional writing – see Ministry of Education, 1994b) about a highlight in their lives.

Regardless of level, each teacher used learning intentions such as “We are learning how to recount a personal recount” (Amy, Obs.1) and “We are learning how to write a diary” (Yvonne, Obs.3) to present the focal point for teaching and learning to the class. Time was spent, particularly at the beginning stages of a unit, familiarising students with what the learning intention entailed. As part of this process, each intention was broken down into more specific success criteria. These criteria listed what each teacher considered the critical elements for inclusion in students’ writing, for instance:

“**How we will know we have learnt this [how to write a narrative]:**
- I have an introduction
- I have included **when, where, why, what, who**
- I have included my thoughts and feelings
- I have used interesting vocabulary” (Amy, Obs.1);

“**The diary will have:**
- the date
- the weather
- what you have done” (Yvonne, Obs.3).

2 Obs. refers to observation and 1 the ordinal number of the observation.
During the course of the unit, each teacher was observed giving feedback to students in relation to the learning intention and/or success criteria in whole class settings:

“[Student’s name] got when – last week; who – with her mum and dad; where – she went to Fiji; why – for a holiday. Included her ‘w’s’ in her beginning and she used some interesting words.” (Amy, Obs.3).

Sharing the achievement of individual students with the class seemed to fulfil a number of purposes: provision of information for the individual concerned; identification and reinforcement for the class about what was expected in a piece of writing; modelling of the feedback process for the class; and encouragement of peer participation in the feedback process. Each teacher also used more intimate semi-formal or formal ‘conference’ settings where they met with an individual student or a group of between three to five students to discuss their work. While Yvonne predominantly carried out short and sharp conferences of between thirty and ninety seconds with individual students, the majority of Lisa’s and Amy’s conferences occurred with groups of students who had reached a similar stage in their writing such as completion of a first draft.

Feedback that specifies attainment (C1)
C1 feedback was the type of feedback used most often by all three teachers. This type of feedback gives clear messages about what is expected and what constitutes successful achievement. Each teacher was repeatedly observed informing students about what they had achieved in relation to what was expected.

Group conference. “[Student’s name] included who – got your family; when – because you’ve got Sunday morning; where – you went to church; and why – yes, you said that later on …” (Amy, Obs.3);

Conference with an individual. “You’ve got the day, you’ve got the weather, what have you written about dad?... Your diary goes like this, today is Thursday, so you tell us the day first, then the weather, today is windy, and then my dad fixed the light.” (Yvonne, Obs.3).

In these examples, as in many others, the information provided by the teacher was directly related to the success criteria and involved ‘checking’ for inclusion of specific elements in the story such as who, when, where and why. While it was apparent in all three classes that success in writing was related to the mastery of pre-specified elements, it was particularly prevalent in Yvonne’s class where she ‘ticked off’ the successful components as they were identified in a piece of writing. Moreover, individual conferences in Yvonne’s class typically followed a pattern of ‘teacher question – student response’ as she led the student to identify whether the desired elements were present in their work:
... Now have you checked, has it got all the things in that a diary needs? [student responds] What’s it got? [student responds] Have you got the day? [student responds] ...” (Yvonne, Obs.3).

Attention was also directed by the teachers to specific aspects of the writer’s work through the use of direct questions and prompts. A noted feature of both Amy’s and Lisa’s feedback was their affirmation and repetition of feedback statements from group members:

Group conference. “What did you like about this writing? [Student responds]. Yes, she [the writer] did put what she did. What else did you like? [Student responds]. Yes, it is using her senses isn’t it?” (Amy, Obs.1).

Statements such as these served to remind both the writer and the wider audience about what was expected in their writing. While Lisa, Amy and Yvonne used slightly different strategies, each controlled and directed the process when providing feedback that specified attainment.

Feedback that specifies improvement (C2)

Feedback that specifies improvement is characterised by teachers identifying omissions and errors in students’ work and telling them what they need to do to correct these. Students are also often directed to engage in self-checking and self-correction activities to help them ‘get something right’. As illustrated by Amy, each of the teachers was observed providing individuals with C2 feedback, either in passing:

“Your writing needs to be descriptive and interesting. So you are going to look for adjectives and adverbs ... you need to look through a thesaurus, and find some interesting words.” (Amy, Obs.1);

or as part of a conference:

“Another thing is speech marks. You need them when you are saying something. Okay? [Student responds]. So put your speech marks in when you are saying something. [Student responds] ... make sure you underline spellings so that you don’t have to search for them again.” (Amy, Obs.1).

More often than not, instances of C2 feedback arose out of C1 interactions where attainment in relation to the success criteria was specified before areas for correction or improvement were identified and directions about how improvements could be accomplished were given. As part of the improvement process, students were encouraged to use specific self-checking strategies such as underlining possible spelling errors and referring to dictionaries and thesauruses.

During their interactions with students, all three teachers were observed using exemplars to draw attention to what was expected and how work could be improved so it looked more like the exemplar:
“We need to put in a beginning, a middle and an end. We’ll look at another student’s writing. She has hers in paragraphs so it is all organised. So next time we do writing you will start to think about paragraphs.” (Amy, Obs.2);

“I’ve got some books here that have got speech bubbles in ... do you know what a speech bubble is? You draw one from the person’s mouth like this [pointing to the speech bubble in the picture] and what they say is written inside. Have a look at this one.” (Yvonne, Obs.2).

These exemplars came from a range of sources including students’ work, teacher-created models and commercially produced writing from picture books and journals.

A noted feature in Lisa’s and Amy’s classes was the way in which students were directed during small group conferences to tell peers which success criteria had been met and which were missing. These occasions followed a similar pattern where the teacher posed questions related to the criteria, students responded and at the end of the conference, feedback was summarised by the teacher. In addition Lisa recorded the main areas to be addressed in students’ conference logs:

“Describe the action with more detail. Use describing words to build an image.” (Lisa, Conf. Log).

As with the C1 feedback, each teacher controlled the C2 feedback process, providing explicit direction as to the areas for improvement, sometimes including information about how to go about making the improvements. C1 and C2 feedback observed was unidirectional in the sense that it went from or ‘through’ the teacher to the student(s). Each of the teachers mediated and controlled the information given to the writer.

Feedback that constructs achievement (D1)

D1 feedback is characterised by an extended dialogue or conversation between the teacher and student about the nature of achievement. In contrast to C1 and C2 feedback, the teacher passes control of the process to the student who identifies and describes the critical features of their work. Lisa was the only teacher who utilised this type of feedback.

Lisa: “So what is it you do well?” [Student states that he re-reads his stories well and on the basis of this review, adds more things to his stories to improve them].

Lisa: “So you often go back and put in a whole new bit and a whole new sentence. Do you use your ideas column for that?” [Student states that he does and then gives examples of how he used his try column to generate new ideas for the current story]. (Lisa, Obs.1).

While there were instances of D1 feedback during individual conferences, the majority of D1 interactions occurred in small groups. In one such situation, Lisa initiated dialogue between the students and herself by asking
them what they liked about a piece of writing read to them by the writer. A student commented on the way the writer had used lots of describing words. Lisa then paraphrased and expanded on this student’s response, drawing attention to the effects of the descriptive language:

“A really descriptive one wasn’t it? What happened, what did it make you feel?”

[Students respond]. “So you could just imagine being there. It was such a simple idea ... she made it into something spectacular. What else did the descriptive language do?”

(Lisa, Obs.2).

The students then identified specific descriptive terms that had been used by the writer and explained the effects of these. In this instance as in others, Lisa provided some initial prompts then ‘stepped back’ and allowed students to take over the direction and nature of the feedback. Here the wider audience of group members played an important role, allowing different views about the nature of the student’s achievement to be identified and discussed. During such conferences, Lisa facilitated the flow of dialogue between the students.

Feedback that constructs the way forward (D2)

Like D1, feedback that constructs the way forward is reliant on the development of a dialogue between the teacher and students and among students. As views are exchanged, suggestions are made about ways to move the work forward and future possibilities in relation to the student’s work are identified. Again Lisa was the only teacher who was seen encouraging use of this type of feedback.

Group conference with five students.

Lisa: “Alright, what else can he [the writer] do to help clarify his story? [A student in the group wondered aloud how the rope got up the tree while another made a general suggestion that the writer needed to provide more information and another student indicated that more information was needed about the location of the tree].

Lisa: “So, more information about the tree? Where was this tree?” (Lisa, Obs.2).

Later, during the same conference, a student stated that the writer had not described the setting fully, and asked the writer whether there were any other people present at the setting besides the writer. A discussion then developed between the writer and several students with Lisa re-focusing the discussion by asking “What can we [group members] do to help you [the writer] with it [how to add more information about the setting]?”. This in turn prompted the students and writer to generate ideas and ways of including these ideas in the story. As a result of the dialogue and feedback the writer was presented with a range of possible ways forward. Lisa was also observed working in a similar manner with individual students during first draft conferences. She actively encouraged each student to indicate areas of
achievement and to articulate what they were going to work on next and how they were going to do this. Lisa let the students take the lead in constructing achievement and constructing the way forward. In contrast to C1 and C2 feedback, the nature of the D1 and D2 interactions evolved as group members engaged in dialogue about the writer’s work.

In summary, all three teachers used C1 and C2 types of descriptive feedback with C1 the more frequently used. Occurrences of C1 and C2 were short, to the point, and their focus was determined and directed by the teacher with reference to the pre-determined success criteria. Lisa was the only teacher who encouraged use of D1 and D2 types of descriptive feedback. These types of feedback were for Lisa, however, the exception rather than the rule. In contrast to C1 and C2, instances of D1 and D2 feedback were less frequent and longer, reflected the students’ voices, and the nature of the feedback was largely determined by the students. The role of the teacher was to facilitate student dialogue and expedite the feedback process for the purpose of improving the students’ writing.

Discussion
Success criteria – the point of reference for feedback

If feedback is to enhance achievement, students must understand the goals of learning (Sadler, 1989). It is assumed this understanding will lead to students who are more task-orientated and better positioned to make decisions about how to go about their learning (Clarke, Timperley, & Hattie, 2003). While understanding the goals of learning is important, equally, if not more important, is an understanding of what counts as quality work and successful achievement. The latter are usually conveyed in verbal descriptions termed ‘success criteria’. Success criteria function not only as the point of reference when giving feedback; they also have the potential, over time, to shape students’ understandings about the area of learning. As such, in the present study, success criteria needed to be expressed in a manner that captured the essence of expressive and/or transactional writing (Ministry of Education, 1994b) and reflected key features of the writing process. In ‘best practice’, success criteria are aligned with the learning intention; emphasise knowing, thinking and/or using skills; cover both product and process outcomes; and address the quality or standard expected (Clarke, 2001; 2003). Success criteria that lack alignment with the learning intention, focus exclusively on an end product, and list items for inclusion in a performance are considered less than helpful (Clarke, 2001). While the success criteria displayed in each teacher’s classroom were generally aligned with the learning intentions, they fell short in relation to the other aspects of ‘best practice’ (Clarke, 2001; 2003), had the appearance of competency-based check-lists or ‘fix-it lists’ (Clarke, 2003), did little to convey clearly the more substantive aspects of either transactional or expressive writing, and made little to no
re-examination at the key features of the writing process. Torrance and Pryor (1998) have noted that check-lists of criteria “almost inevitably dictate a convergent approach” (p.156) to formative assessment – an approach where the teacher provides feedback on whether students know, understand or can do a predetermined thing. The majority of feedback observed in the present study (C1 and C2) was consistent with a mastery-oriented, convergent approach – it informed students about whether the pre-specified elements identified in the success criteria were present in their texts and, if not, students were directed to make the necessary corrections. Hyland (2000) has also noted an emphasis on teachers providing students with information about the presence or absence of prescribed elements in their written work and giving messages related to ‘fixing up’ mistakes.

It is recommended that verbal descriptions which convey notions of quality and what counts as successful achievement are used in association with exemplars as together they “provide a practical and efficient means of externalising a reference level” (Sadler, 1989, p.127). Exemplars with written annotations that elaborate on the critical elements of successful achievement show students what criteria ‘look like’ and how they can be met in practice. Exemplars used by the teachers in the present study, however, did little more than reinforce the importance of including the prescribed elements in written work and addressing omissions. Neither the teachers’ oral explanations nor any written annotations accompanying these exemplars elaborated on what constituted the required standard of achievement. If feedback is to support and enhance learning in written language, exemplars and their associated success criteria need to capture the substantive features of the writing focus and the writing process, and convey the expected standard.

Role of the student
A distinct feature of feedback that specified attainment and specified improvement (C1 and C2) was the retention of control over the process by all three teachers through a series of closed or pseudo–open question and answer interactions. These interactions resembled the basic three-step IRF sequence that is a noted feature of classroom talk: Initiation by the teacher; Response by the student; and Follow up (feedback or evaluation) by the teacher (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). As part of the ‘follow up’ stage, each of the teachers repeated and/or paraphrased students’ answers, adding their own emphases for the purpose of instruction. This pattern of interaction assigned students a relatively passive role – that of respondents to teachers’ prompts. Teacher control over the nature and scope of feedback information encourages student dependence on an external source, their teacher, for judgements about their work. This dependency, which the teachers seemed unaware of, could reflect an underlying assumption that they have the expertise to evaluate students’ work and this expertise is not readily transferable (Sadler,
Without the opportunity to build up a collection of evaluative and productive strategies, students might well be denied the chance to learn how to become self-monitoring.

While all three teachers predominantly used feedback that specified attainment and improvement (C1 and C2), there were occasions when Lisa encouraged students to engage in feedback that constructed achievement and constructed the way forward (D1 and D2). Although the instances of D1 and D2 feedback made reference to the manifest (Sadler, 1989), pre-specified success criteria, the information provided was by no means limited to these criteria. Rather, criteria of significance emerged (latent criteria – see Sadler, 1989) as the teacher and students jointly appraised what the writer knew, understood, and could do, and explored how they could ‘move forward’. In contrast to the IRF interactions, D1 and D2 dialogue involved students and the teacher in a “criss-crossing of ideas, thoughts, opinions and feelings” (Carnell, 2000, p.50). As Lisa and her students collaborated in the generation of rich, qualitative feedback, students developed understandings about what constituted quality in their own and in others’ texts. According to Sadler (1989) such understandings are ‘caught’ through experience rather than through the reading of verbal descriptions. Engagement in D1 and D2 type interactions provided students with opportunities to develop evaluative and productive strategies (Sadler, 1989) during the writing process, strategies associated with self-monitoring. Students have reported that having opportunities to develop their self-monitoring skills has enhanced their ability to revise and improve their writing (Xiang, 2004). Furthermore, as they are credited with the ability to appraise and revise texts in an authentic manner (Hyland, 2000), students are put in a position of “relative power because [they were] more likely to know the answer in a way the teacher doesn’t” (Torrance & Pryor, 1998, p.163). By establishing a discourse structure where power was shared with students and students were acknowledged as having insights into their own writing, Lisa was able to promote self-assessment and meta-cognitive reflection, skills integral to formative assessment (Torrance & Pryor, 1998) and critical to developing students’ skills in, and understandings about, written language (Ward & Dix, 2004).

Both C and D types of feedback are associated with the formative function of assessment and the improvement of student achievement (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Each however fulfils a different function. Feedback that specifies attainment (C1) and improvement (C2) focuses on providing information about whether students know, understand or can do a predetermined thing and on specifying ‘corrections’ in the light of this information. As such, this type of feedback is relatively narrow. Furthermore, while improvement in student achievement can occur when teachers provide detailed corrective information and students follow it through (Sadler, 1989), constant and exclusive use of C1 and C2 feedback maintains students’ dependence on the
teacher. Collectively, the narrow nature of C1 and C2 feedback and reliance on an external source for information about achievement have the potential to constrain rather than enhance students’ achievement particularly in situations such as those observed in Amy’s and Yvonne’s classes where C types of feedback were used exclusively. In contrast, D types of feedback focus on generating information about what students know, understand and can do and on suggesting possible ‘ways forward’. Emphasis is placed on student involvement in direct, authentic evaluative experiences. As they engage in these experiences and collaborate with others in the generation of information that constructs achievement (D1) and constructs the way forward (D2), students build up a body of evaluative and productive knowledge which enables them to become ‘insiders’ rather than consumers of assessment information (Sadler, 1989). D types of feedback thus move students from a dependence on teacher-supplied information to ‘intelligent self monitoring’ (Sadler, 1989). Involving students in ‘constructing achievement’ and ‘constructing the way forward’ (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996) has the capacity to make a significant, positive difference to the quality of students’ learning and achievement.

Conclusion

Despite the importance ascribed to quality feedback and the involvement of students in their learning over the past decade in both the research literature and policy documents (for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Ministry of Education, 1994a; 1999; 2004), findings from this study indicate that implementation in the context of written language in New Zealand has some way to go. Although teachers shared the goals of learning with students in the form of learning intentions and success criteria, and feedback was given in relation to these points of reference, neither the success criteria nor the feedback addressed the substantive, deep features of writing and the writing process. Moreover, opportunities for students to become ‘insiders’ (Sadler, 1989) in the feedback process and to exert agency in their learning, were the exception rather than the rule. It is concluded that if feedback is to fulfil its potential in supporting and enhancing students’ learning, and if students are to take a more active role in their learning, teachers will need sustained opportunities through professional learning to examine their understanding of feedback and their practice with reference to the nature of success criteria, the role of the student and the impact of different types of feedback on learning.
References


