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Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS

Improving the writer, not the text: Effectiveness of teacher feedback for learning to write

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Context of this research


A majority of students experience difficulties in writing and perform below the desired level at the end of elementary school (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2010).

Within schools, limited time spent on writing, and the quality of teachers' instructions is rather poor.

In our project we aim to improve writing proficiency by implementing an intervention program based on effective instructional practices.

One of such an effective practice is providing feedback to student's texts (Graham et al., 2012).

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Feedback for learning to write

Why is feedback effective for students to learn how to write?

- Students experience whether their ideas are communicated adequately to a reader
- Ideas are already translated to a text, cognitive capacity to learn from feedback

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Effective feedback


To optimize learning, effective feedback provides information about (Hattie & Timperley, 2007):

- Where am I going?
- How am I doing?
- Where to next?

For writing:
Feedback should inform students what a qualitative text is and what is needed to improve their text (e.g. Parr & Timperley, 2010; Matsumura et al, 2002).

Differentiate instructions according to individual needs of students.

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Dimensions of feedback

- Amount of feedback
- Content of feedback
 - Feedback on higher level/lower level aspects of text
 - Feedback on positive/negative aspects (sign)
- Form of feedback
 - Comments versus error corrections
 - Function of comments may be directive or facilitative

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How do teachers provide feedback?

Earlier research on feedback on writing products:

Content
Most teacher comments are related to low level, technical concerns, rather than on the content and organization of ideas (Parr & Timperley, 2010; Matsumura, 2002).

Form
Teachers are tended to control the student's text, for instance by locating and correcting errors or directive comments (Underwood & Tregidgo, 2010).

But do teachers adjust feedback to the needs of the student?

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What do different students in primary school need to become better writers?

1 Amount of feedback

→ Feedback should be selective for both struggling and proficient writers

Students may be overwhelmed by too much feedback and tend to revise only surface level problems (Underwood & Tregidgo, 2010)

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What do different students in primary school need to become better writers?

2 Content of feedback

Feedback on positive/negative aspects
→ Both struggling and proficient students need to know what they are doing well (positive sign) and what they may improve (negative sign).

Feedback should direct students to the main goal of writing
→ Struggling writer: feedback mainly on higher level (HL) aspects of the text.
→ Proficient writer: feedback on both higher and lower level (LL) aspects.

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What do different students in primary school need to become better writers?

3 Form of feedback

Teachers comments or error corrections
→ Both struggling/proficient writers need instructions on how to make improvements (instead of receiving corrections in the text)

Directive or facilitative feedback
→ Struggling writer: explicit and directive guidance
→ Proficient writer: facilitative feedback (hints, questions, reader responses)

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Research aim & questions

Do teachers differentiate between high and low performing students, such that their feedback is adjusted to different levels of text quality?

1 How do teachers provide feedback to student texts?

2 Are there differences between teachers?

3 Is there an effect of text quality on the amount, content, and form of provided feedback?

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Method

Participants

14 teachers of different primary schools

Material

15 student texts in 3 different genres (narratives, formal letters, argumentations) and of differing levels of text quality.

-2 SD	-1 SD	0 SD	+1 SD	+2 SD
very weak	weak	average	strong	very strong

Instructions

"Provide feedback on these student texts, like these are your students"

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Measuring feedback quality

For each text, teacher feedback was analyzed on following dimensions:

1 Amount of feedback

2 Content of feedback

- Feedback provided on higher level/lower level aspects of text
- Feedback provided on positive/negative aspects

3 Form of feedback

- Whether teachers commented/corrected errors
- Whether feedback was directive or facilitative

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Results

1 Amount of feedback

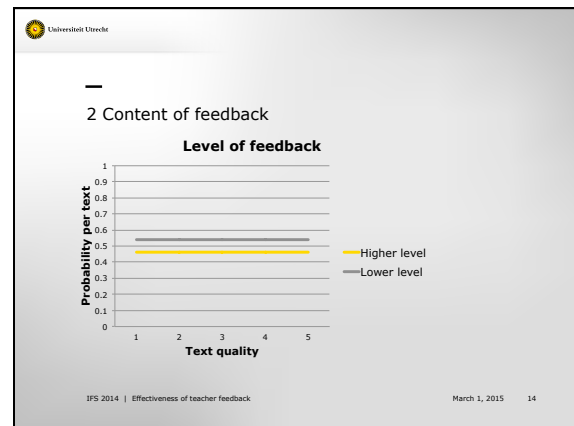
Each text received feedback on seven points, on average.

Differences between teachers:
Some teachers provided feedback on only 3 points per text, while others provided feedback on 22 (!) points.

Differences between texts:
Some texts received only 3 points of feedback, while other texts received 11 points of feedback on average.

No effect of text quality on amount of feedback.
($F(1, 14) = 0.04, p = n.s.$)

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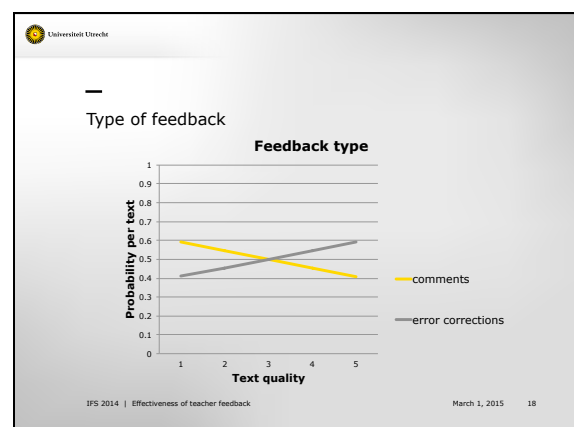
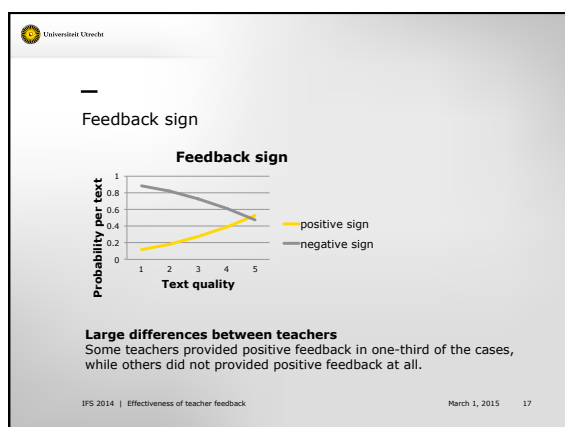
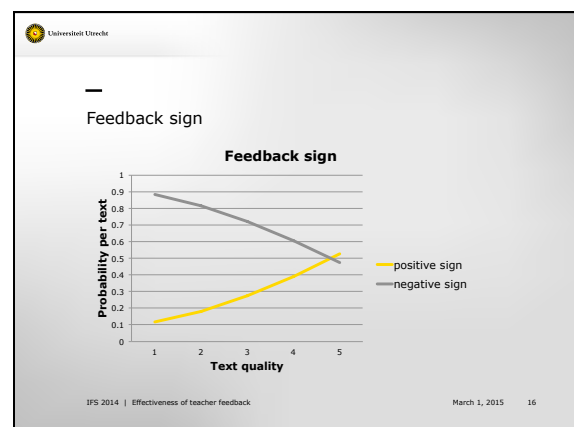
Content of feedback

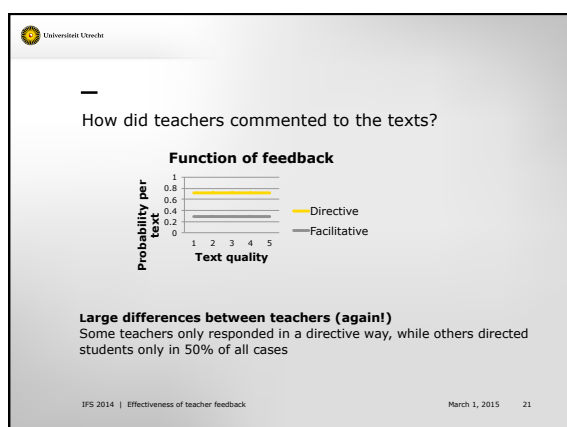
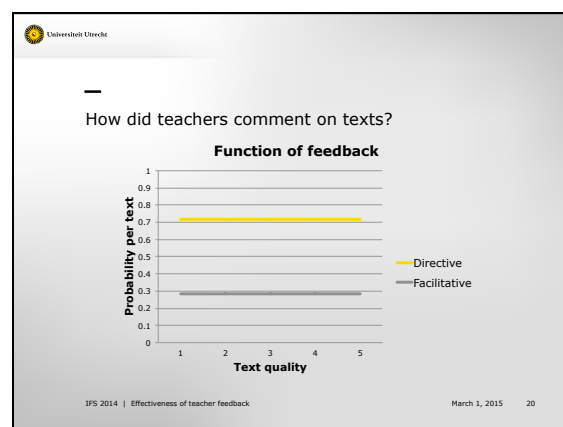
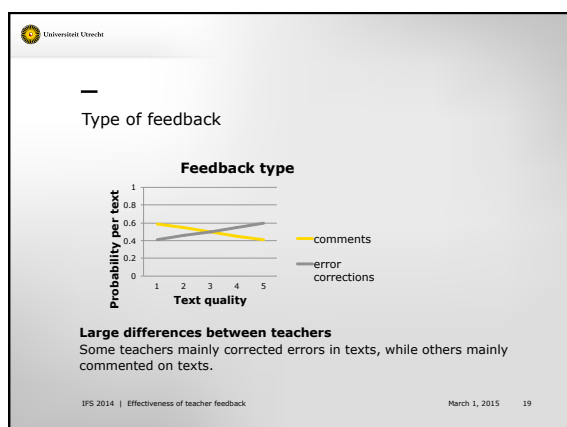
Large differences between teachers and texts:

Object	Teachers		
	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Lower level	.53 (.13)	.13	.74
Higher level	.42 (.14)	.20	.65

Object	Texts		
	Mean (SD)	Min	Max
Lower level	.55 (.15)	.24	.76
Higher level	.45 (.15)	.24	.76

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Conclusions

On average, teachers provided multiple directive comments or error corrections per text, mainly directed on HL and LL problems. Only the sign and type of feedback was related to text quality.

Large differences between teachers in amount, content and form of feedback: feedback seems to depend on the teacher's feedback style rather than on the quality of the text.

Teachers seem to provide feedback on every problem they encounter in a text, instead of adjusting the feedback according to what is needed to improve the text.
→ This sheds doubt on the effectiveness of teacher feedback.

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Discussion

Important follow-up questions:

- What do teachers use as a reference point of evaluating text quality?
- Could teacher feedback be optimized by a training in evaluating text quality?
- In this research: the writing product was the only information for teachers. Will feedback be different if it is directed to own students?
- What is the effect on learning to write: Is learning enhanced by feedback adjusted to text quality?

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Questions or suggestions?

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