Students' Perceptions of the ideal-Teacher-as-Reader

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Abstract

Teacher feedback is an important part of the writing process. Whenever students write a paper for class, they continuously expect to receive feedback that allows them to adjust their writing in a way that meets their teachers' expectations. Interestingly, students are more inclined to perceive their teachers as their primary readers. Research has shed some light on what constitutes teachers in their roles of readers. However, little is known about how students perceive their ideal teachers-as-readers to whom they address their writing. This paper reports on a study conducted at the Institut Superieur des Langues de Tunis (ISLT). The study aimed at identifying characteristics of good teachers-as-readers as perceived by students enrolled at a Bachelor program. The main instrument of data collection was the Student Questionnaire (SQ). The findings indicated that the ideal teacher-as-reader was perceived as a sympathetic evaluator, a judge, and an advisor who valued language-related issues over content. The study challenged assumptions of what it meant to be an ideal teacher-as-reader emphasizing the reading process entailed in response.

Key Words: Feedback - Teacher-as-reader - Response -Students' perceptions - Writing process

1. Introduction

Although students receive response on their writing from different sources (peers, friends, family, to name just a few), teachers continue to be the most important source of response. One of the most critical aspect of teacher response is that it incorporates a variety of purposes. Sometimes a teacher reads in order to judge the students' writing ability. Sometimes, the teacher reads in order to decide whether the students can move up to the next educational level. At other times, the teacher reads to correct errors and give students a chance to revise their papers. Still other times, teachers read to encourage students to write by emphasizing the good qualities of their writing.

In most of these cases, teachers assume conflicting roles including a judge, a gatekeeper, a coach, an evaluator, an examiner, a friend, an advisor, a diagnostician, and so on and so forth. It is this "schizophrenia of roles" that necessitated continuing concern in discussions of teacher response (Anson, 1989). In particular, researchers acknowledged the need to focus on the potential effect of this complexity on both teachers and students. Straub (1996), for example, argued that in transitioning from one role to another, teachers might not be helpful to the students who might become more and more confused by various forms of response delivered by teachers in different roles.

Over the years, it has become clear that the activity of reading students' papers is more efficacious if students do really understand the multiple roles of their teacher-as-reader (Phelps, 2000). Yet, little attention has been paid to how students view the teacher-as-readers. Therefore, the purpose of this study was: (1) to examine students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader and (2) to determine the extent to which differences in perceptions were related to the level of writing proficiency. The next section will summarize important scholarship on the teacher-as-reader emphasizing gaps and shortcomings.

2. Review of the literature

The teacher-as-reader has been a source of debate in L2 writing research since the1980's. The most influential article in this debate was (and still is) "the teacher-as-reader: An Anatomy" by Alan Purves (1984). The author identified eight roles resulting from the teacher's thinking processes and determined by the stage at which the paper was read: a common reader, a copy-editor, a proofreader, a reviewer, a gatekeeper, a critic, a diagnostician, and a therapist. Purves (1984) stressed out the conscious efforts made by teachers when selecting the role(s) they should play depending on the context. Anson's (1989) showed how teachers selected their dominant role by responding in one of the three ways: as dualistic responders, as relativistic responders did, or as reflective responders. As dualistic responders, teachers focused on correction of errors and structural aspects. As relativistic responders, teachers concentrate solely on the content of writing. As, reflective responders, teachers responded to both ideas and structure. It was concluded that a good teacher-as-reader was someone who identified a best style and became aware of it.

One major criticism of previous descriptions of the roles attributed to the teacher-as-reader was related to the unequal power relationship. Anson (1989) and Parr & Timperly (2011) indicated that whatever roles teachers played they had to actually move to their role as authority. Teachers-as-readers had to move from the "helpful facilitator,'' to the "authority'' to the "intellectual peer" and finally to the "gatekeeper of textual standards." (Anson, 1989, p.2). Also, the existing literature was very severe in its criticism of the usefulness of the teacher-as-reader. Sommers (1982) and many others expressed doubts as to the usefulness of the teacher-as-reader suggesting that through commenting, teachers conveyed confusing messages to their students. Sommers (1982) argued that:

The interlinear comments and the marginal comments represent two separate tasks for this student; the interlinear comments encourage the student to see the text as a fixed piece, frozen in time that just needs some editing. The marginal comments, however, suggest that the meaning of the text is not fixed, but rather that the student still needs to develop the meaning by doing some more research. Students are commanded to edit and develop at the same time. (p.150)

There is no doubt that this discussion did significantly broaden our views on the teacher-as-reader. One important contribution of previous studies was the suggestion that teacher's values and beliefs about language as well as their roles and goals in reading were conveyed through teacher written comments. Numerous studies were conducted to categorize and analyze teacher written comments (Radecki and Swales, 1988; Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Leki, 1991; Enginarlar, 1993; Nelson and Carson, 1995; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2003; Goldstein, 2004; Lee and Schallert, 2008).). Most of these studies focused on investigating students' perceptions of what and how teachers responded to students' papers in order to provide better writing opportunities for students.

Researchers found that students generally valued teacher feedback in almost any form (oral vs. written, direct vs. indirect, facilitative vs. directive). Also, in studies conducted in both single-draft and multiple draft settings, students reported that they were very pleased with teacher feedback which they found very helpful (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991; Scrocco, 2012). In the Arab context, there exist two studies focusing on students' perceptions of the teacher written comments. Diab (2005) and Grami (2005) found that students valued the teacher who gave them corrective feedback.

Overall, this line of research revealed that students still assigned a stereotypical image of their teacher-as-reader that was largely based on their experience with teachers. Students described their teacher as primarily a gatekeeper, an editor, and a proof-reader. Teachers were sometimes interested in ideas and content (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) but they were mainly concerned with grammatical correctness. Interestingly, findings from Hedcock and Lefkowitc's (1994) study suggested that students believed the responsibility of error detection and correction lied heavily on the teacher. While the field of writing benefited from such examinations, these were restricted to teacher written comments resulting in a limited view of the teacher-as-reader. Furthermore, while most of these studies used the survey as the main data collection instrument the term teacher-as-reader never appeared in such research.

In light of the gaps in the literature, this study sought to describe students' perceptions of ideal teachers specifically in relation to their roles as readers. Besides asking about the students' opinion towards certain types of teacher feedback, this investigation added questions about reader roles and familiarity with the topic.

Specifically, the present contribution investigated and compared Tunisian students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader in five distinct areas: the teacher's perceived background knowledge, the teacher's purpose of reading, the teacher's feedback techniques, the teacher's evaluative criteria, and the teacher's preferred features of argumentative writing. The next section will explain the methodology adopted in this study. Thus, the study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader?
2. Do students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader display differences according to their level of writing proficiency?

In this study, it is expected that investigating students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader will provide useful information to teachers about the complex relationship between students-writers and teachers-readers.

3. Methodology

The present study was primarily carried out with a quantitative approach using a survey methodology. This was accomplished through the use of scores on argumentative student writing and a Likert-type Student Questionnaire. This methodology allowed for a statistical analysis of the data.

3.1 Participants and Setting

Participants were 200 students attending the Institut Superieur des Langues de Tunis (ISLT). They represented a convenience sample as they were readily accessible to the researcher. Students surveyed were undergraduate 3rd year students. They were chosen because most of them were likely to have more experience with different teachers-as-readers and writing classes. Thus, their prototypical views would be larger than students with less class experience would.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were used to elicit the data required for the present study. The main data on students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader were collected via a Student Questionnaire (SQ). To establish different groups of students with varying writing proficiency levels a version of the Test of Written English (TWE) was employed.

3.2.1. Test of Written English (TWE)

In order to determine the students' writing proficiency, all of the students participating in the study were administered a version of the Test of Written English (TWE). The prompt was designed to elicit writing in the rhetorical mode of argument with the purpose of convincing a general audience. The purpose of investigating the students' writing proficiency was to know whether writing proficiency contributed to differences in perceptions. It has also been widely believed that writing ability is a major variable that differed among students and that could influence students' perceptions.

3.2.2 Student Questionnaire (SQ)

A Student Questionnaire (*SQ*) was used to determine the students' perceptions of ideal EFL teachers-readers. The questionnaire was divided into five areas developed by the researcher after a review of the literature pertaining to audience awareness, argumentation, and response to students' writing.

The first area addressed *the teacher-as-reader background knowledge*. The second area: *the teacher-as-readers' purposes* intended to measure the extent to which the ideal teacher-as-reader performed various roles such as editing, evaluating, grading, etc….The third area dealt with the teacher-as-reader feedback practices. The fourth area addressed the teacher-as-reader grading criteria. The fifth area covered students' interpretations of the ideal teacher-as-reader *preferences with respect to predetermined argumentative features*. Each of these five areas is described as in Table 1.

Respondents were asked to reply to a series of statements (n=49) regarding how frequently the ideal teacher-as-reader performed each activity described in the statement (*always, usually, sometimes, rarely, and never*). Pilot testing of the questionnaire was conducted with a convenience sample of undergraduate third year students at the ISLT (n=10). Almost no problem was observed in the questionnaire apart from a need to clarify some expressions such as diagnostician and reader response. Five students reported that they did not understand what was meant by these words. So, these words were turned into definitions.

3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted in two steps. First, eight classes were administered the TWE. The students took the TWE in their own classrooms with their own teachers. Next, participants who completed the writing task were invited to fill out the Student Questionnaire. Instructions to the students were included at the start of the questionnaires with ethical information provided, such as the purpose of the questionnaire, the confidential nature of their response, and their right to refuse to complete the questionnaire. In addition, the participants were requested to answer all the questions as truthfully as they can since there was no right or wrong answers. To increase the social desirability of the responses, the students were reassured that their names were required only for research purposes and that their teachers would not have access to their personal responses.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis started with classification of students into four different groups based on their scores earned on the TWE. The students' papers were graded by 4 cooperating teachers. The evaluation of the test consisted in measuring content, organization, language use, mechanics, and vocabulary using the ESL Composition Profile. The ESL composition profile is a scoring guide designed by Jacobs, H. L., Zingraf, S. A., Wormuth, D. R., Hartfiel, V. F. and Hughey, J.B. (1981) to measure the writing proficiency of non-native learners of English. The researcher recorded the scores from each essay for each student on a spreadsheet. An average of the five rubric essay scores was computed and recorded on the same spreadsheet line. Once essay scores for each student were obtained after the implementation of the rubrics, the average of the two raters was recorded on the same spreadsheet using the identical procedure. Third, the students were grouped on the basis of their writing test scores to determine their writing proficiency (i.e. the ability to write clear, accurate, and understandable argumentative essays). Based on the essay scores the students were assigned to four levels; Advanced (86-100 marks), Upper intermediate (68-85 marks), lower intermediate (60-67 marks) and poor (0-59 marks). The classification of essays was made by the researcher.

Finally, students' questionnaires were assigned to the corresponding paper and then analyzed by employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 17.0. To analyze the students' questionnaire responses, we employed descriptive and inferential statistics. The major goal of descriptive statistics in this study was to detect general patterns and understand variability or consensus of students' responses. Analysis aimed to see if students hold similar or different perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader. Parametric statistical analyses (ANOVA) were applied later to check for significant differences between the different groups of students.

4. *Results*

Overall students' mean scores ranged from 2.2 to 4.71. Mean scores indicated that there was moderate to strong agreement among the respondents with moderate agreement assumed at a mean score of 3.50-3.99 and strong agreement at 4.00 and above. They remained neutral (i.e. they responded with sometimes) for 1 statement about whether the ideal teacher-as-reader comments with a personal opinion. However, the standard deviations, ranging from 0.55 to 1.34, indicated that the majority of the responses were somewhat loosely clustered around the mean. Preliminary findings showed that the students rated most of the statements describing the ideal teacher-as-reader positively. In order to determine whether a consensus relative to the importance of specific activities and qualities of the ideal teacher-as-reader could be established among and between four groups of participants, statements rated by the majority of the students (equal to or more than 70%) were examined. Table 2 includes the statements that were rated high by the majority of the students (70%).

As shown on table 2 above, an absolute or strong consensus on the importance of 15 out of 49 statements was also indicated by a percentage of more than 70%. Generally, absolute consensus was realized in statements pertaining to the ideal teacher-as-reader grading criteria, feedback practices, and degree of background knowledge. A strong consensus within the students was recognized on four statements: this teacher is knowledgeable about the content of writing assignments, this teacher corrects students' errors this teacher offers advice, and this teacher emphasizes grammar while reading students papers. Data revealed that students assigned a higher value to conventional aspects and to didactic purposes. Data also revealed that students had divided opinion on 34 statements. These statements related mainly to teacher preferred argumentative features and feedback practices suggesting differences among teachers in the way they provide feedback on students' papers. These statements are outlined in table 3 below along with the corresponding percentages:

The mean values ranged from 2.2 to 4.71 indicating that there was a moderate to strong agreement with the statements describing the ideal teacher-as-reader. The standard deviations ranged from 0.55 to 1.34 revealing that the majority of students' responses were clustered loosely around the mean and suggesting that there was less in-group variation.

A series of one-way ANOVA tests was carried out to ascertain if there was a significant difference between the perceptions of four groups of students who belonged to different writing proficiency levels. An interesting observation arising from this analysis is that with the exception of six of the 49 statements the difference in the mean scores achieved no statistical significance. The difference for only six statements was significant at the .05 level. This suggests that the students had significantly similar perceptions. The differences in mean scores as well as the statistical significance of these statements are indicated in Table 4.

The results of the one-way ANOVAs for students' responses on negative comments indicated a significant difference *f (3,196) = 4.044, p=.008*. Statistical significance was also realized at three other statements dealing with the amount of error correction (this teacher corrects the most significant errors- this teacher corrects few errors- this teacher comments on the ideas only. In other words, the students had different attitudes towards the type and amount of error correction depending on their proficiency levels.

ANOVA results showed statistically significant differences on one statement pertaining to the reader's grading criteria. As it is shown on Table 3 the *p*-observed values were smaller than *t*-critical values for ''this teacher is concerned with the organization of the paper'' (*F* (3,196) = 3.00, *p* = .032), implying that the four groups had different perceptions of the value the ideal teacher-as-reader attached to organization. ANOVA revealed also a statistically significant difference among the four groups in their perceptions of "this teacher *encourages students to use examples from personal experience*'' (*f (3.196) = 3.099, p=. 028).* Analysis revealed that while students at the poor ability level believed that the ideal teacher-as-reader did not favor the use of examples from personal opinion, those at the other groups thought just the opposite.

Discussion

It was expected that analysis of students' responses on the SQ would yield a profile of the ideal teacher-as-reader. Data revealed that students valued certain characteristics that could be classified into a profile of the teachers-as-reader. The most interesting finding was that students described their ideal teacher-as-reader as someone more knowledgeable and detail-oriented, who is expected to evaluate and edit their papers in order to help them produce error-free writing and to develop as better writers. When evaluating their papers, students reported that good teachers-as-readers that they had in the past were primarily preoccupied with problems in grammar and focused only secondarily on organization and content.

This general belief reflects the way students have been taught. It is the consequence of a form-oriented curriculum and traditional teachers' pedagogy which over-emphasize conventional roles over more genuine reader roles. They also reflect students' lack of control over writing as they wanted to depend completely on their teacher when revising and editing their papers. The results from the study lead us to revisit the concept of the teacher-as-reader in the classroom and find ways to make readers' expectations as explicit as possible so that students stop assuming that their writing is directed to a reader who is less interested in the students' own ideas.

The comparison of the quantitative data from the student questionnaire has revealed a consensus among and between students in their perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader. Very few significant differences were detected between the four subgroups of students. Their perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader did not vary by writing proficiency which means that probably other variables should be explored. Further analysis should look at demographic or at attitudinal variables such as age, years studying English, gender, and attitude to writing.

Conclusion

The results of this study provided a profile of the ideal teacher-as-reader among the students at the ISLT. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the data collected via the SQ. Comparison of means and One-way ANOVA tests demonstrated that regardless of their writing proficiency levels, students did not vary in their perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader. Overall, findings suggested that the students preferred the teacher's conventional roles of editor, audience, feedback provider, and evaluator over the more facilitative roles.

This profile can be used as a conceptual framework for teachers of writing. They may compare the profile to their own relevant experiences and opinions. This profile may facilitate dialogue between students and their teachers. Ongoing dialogue may help teachers to recognize their students' perceptions and attitudes towards teacher written feedback practices.

This study also highlighted the need to change the way teacher response is viewed. It is recommended that educators begin to refer to teacher feedback as a process of reading and response. Studies of the way teachers read students' papers and the way students perceive their teachers-as-readers should be more abundant and should continue to examine students' perceptions of the ideal teacher-as-reader.

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Table 1: Areas and their Descriptions

Area	Description
Background knowledge	• The writer's judgments about the extent of the ideal teacher's knowledge. • The writers' judgments about the extent of the ideal teacher's shared background knowledge.
Reading purposes/ intention	• Intention focusing on the student • Intention focusing on the reader • Intention focusing on the text.
Feedback practices	• Mode of response deals with the way response is conveyed. • Focus of response refers to writing aspects that receive the highest amount of response (content, organization, language use, mechanics, and vocabulary) • Amount of response deals with how much error correction is conveyed to the students.
Aspects in writing	• Global features refer to content and organization. • Specific features refer to grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics (punctuation and spelling).
Preferred argumentative essay features	• Claim refers to the writer's opinion. Two statements aimed to know whether the PTR encouraged a voice of authority when making a claim. • Style refers to the kind of language used to support one's opinion (emotional or rational appeal). • Support refers to the source of evidence (reference to authority, using examples, and so forth). • Counter-argument deals with the way writers treat the opposite view. • Purpose of argumentation refers to the intention behind arguing.

Table 2: Consensus over Descriptors of the Ideal Teacher-as-Reader

This teacher…..	Rarely/Never %	Sometimes %	Usually/Always %
is knowledgeable about the content of writing assignments.	1	8	91
corrects students' errors.	1	7.5	91.5
evaluates students' writing (i.e. whether it is good or bad).	4.5	23	72.5
offersadvice.	2.5	5.5	92
Emphasizes vocabulary	12	4	84
Emphasizes grammar	5	0	95
Emphasizes cohesion	18	3.5	78.5
Emphasizes spelling	20.5	7.5	72
emphasizes organisation	11	9	80
emphasizes content and ideas	19	5	76
encourages students to include details to illustrate main ideas	7.5	19.5	73
writes the correct word	11.5	12	76.5
Undrelines errors	10.5	12.5	77
instructs students to make changes	78.5	22.1	77.5
corrects the most significant errors	12.5	11	76.5

Table 3: *Statements Showing Less Agreement among the Students*

Statement	Never/rarely	Sometimes	Always /usually
Shares my own views on the topics discussed in class.	15.5	37	47.5
Criticizes students' writing	25	33	42
Diagnoses their strengths and weaknesses	12	29.5	58.5
Puts a mark	21.5	21.5	57
Prepares students for later revisions	8	24.5	67.5
Offersreaderresponse	37.5	27.5	35
Gives the correct answer with explanation	37.5	29	33.5
Writes a list of comments on the coverpage	21.5	19	59.5
Asks questions	22.5	19.5	58
Gives personal opinion	7.5	77.5	35
Suggests a different view point.	23	33	44
Corrects all errors	16.5	15.5	68
Corrects few errors	58	23.5	18.5
Comments on the ideas only	63.5	21.5	15
Writes Positive comments	15	24	61
Writes negative comments	37.5	29	33.5
Writes positive and negative comments	10	21.5	68.5
Emphasizes punctuation	25.5	17.5	57
Encourages students to use passive voice constructions	18	21.5	60.5
Encourages students to use the first person pronoun	29	42	29
Encourages students to use words that appeal to the minds of people.	16.5	18	65.5
Encourages students to use words that appeal to the emotions of people.	50	26.5	23.5
Encourages the students to find a solution for a problem	23	50	27
Encourages the students to argue for a position	18	21.5	60.5
Encourages the students to argue against a position	34	30	36
Encourages the students to argue for and against a position	15	19.5	65.5
Encourages the students to urge the reader to take action	65	20	15
Encourages the students to show agreement with the other side of the argument.	26	42.5	31.5
Encourages the students to challenge (refuse) opposite views	56.5	21.5	22
Encourages the students to remain neutral to opposite views	35.5	31	33.5
Encourages students to use illustrations	21.5	25.5	53
Encourages students to use examples from experience	16.5	29	54.5
Encourages students to use examples from experience of others	15.5	34.5	50
Encourages students to quote important names	21	24	55

Table 4: Variability in Students' Descriptions of the Ideal Teacher-as-Reader

This teacher…	Subgroup1		Subgroup 2		Subgroup 3		Subgroup 4		f-	Sig
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Corrects the most significant errors	3.9	1.1	3.8	0.9	4.2	0.9	3.4	1.4	3	0.02
Writes negative comments	2.5	1.1	3.1	1.2	3.1	1.2	2.5	1.1	4	0.008
Corrects few errors	2.7	1.2	2.3	1.1	2.1	1.1	2.8	1.5	3	0.03
Comments on the ideas only	2.9	1.2	2.3	1	2	1.1	1.9	1	4.8	0000
Encourages students to use examples from experience	3	1.2	3.7	1.1	3.6	1.1	3.6	1.2	3	0.02
Emphasizes organisation	3.7	1.2	4.1	0.9	4.3	0.9	4.4	0.8	3	0.03