"Papers are never finished, just abandoned": The role of written teacher comments in the revision process

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The debate over the efficacy of written teacher comments has raised a variety of questions for consideration by both researchers and practitioners. Teachers can use written comments, in Vygotsky's (1978) framework, to scaffold the development of student writing. By reflecting on his or her own commenting process, a teacher can assess and modify his or her comments as well as the method by which the comments are delivered. This study examines how four second-language (L2) students responded to comments on a series of three papers. The results show that students overwhelmingly followed the strategy training given during class on how to respond to teacher's comments; however, the strategies used to make changes did not always result in a positive revision. While students believed they followed the teacher's suggestions, they did not always pay attention to the paper as a whole, which resulted in problems with coherence or grammar, and even instances of plagiarism. Results indicate that strategy training does not guarantee an outcome of successful revision. This suggests that revision will be more effective for student paper development if understood as part of the creative process of writing rather than mere error correction. Based on these results, several proposals are made for modifying the comment process.

Papers are never finished, just abandoned. –Paul Valery

Introduction

Valery's quotation illustrates the long-held importance of revision in the writing process. Writers often find difficulty when revising without feedback. Written corrective feedback (WCF) is an approach that operationalizes what Vygotsky (1978) called scaffolding, wherein more experienced learners provide aid to lesser experienced ones. Although commenting may come from various sources, Andrade and Evans (2013) argue that teacher commenting is an important factor for developing independent learners. Research has shown that the analysis of teacher comments can provide important insight into both understanding the role of commenting and changing pedagogical practices (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2015; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Farrell, 2007; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Russell & Spada, 2006; Straub, 1996; Zamel, 1985). The goals for commenting, as well as the context of these practices, can vary greatly depending on factors involved in the commenting process.

Variations can also be found in how students respond to teacher feedback (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2015) and may reflect bias in how teachers view the potential of each student (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Such variations can make it difficult to generalize research results to individual teacher practice. In their review of existing literature on written comments, Liu and Brown (2015) found that factors such as variations in assignment, gene constraints, and classroom contexts make it difficult to generalize conclusions. Ferris (1995) found that students valued teacher feedback in

their development as writers but were sometimes unable to understand or respond to their teachers' comments. In their meta-analysis of research on written corrective feedback, Russell & Spada (2006) found that even when feedback proved to be effective, it was difficult to determine which factors contributed to that effectiveness.

In response to these problems, teachers have developed more and more complex pedagogies that are connected to the commenting practice. In her discussion of her pedagogical approaches to using feedback, Ferris (2015), for example, addresses a variety of factors she incorporates into her classroom to aid the process. Teachers, however, may not have the time or resources to incorporate all such factors. Therefore, despite the number of individual studies on written commenting, new research can aid teachers in understanding the impact of their comments within their own rhetorical pedagogical contexts, as well as within individual pedagogical contexts. The value of reflecting on one's own commenting process may not only help teachers further develop their own commenting practices, but may also provide a perspective for other teachers to cultivate their own processes. Finally, it should be noted that the technology used in teacher commenting, from the personal computer to the World Wide Web, is also evolving along with pedagogy.

This paper examines the array of comments provided by one teacher to four students on a series of three papers and how the students addressed the comments through two revisions of each of their papers. This research gives insight into the strategies students use to respond to comments. Findings show that although students followed the strategy training on responding to their teacher's comments, there were both successes and challenges in their revision strategies. Based on this analysis, the teacher could remediate the commenting process to better aid the students in their revision processes.

Literature Review

The Problem of Teacher Commenting

Teacher commenting has evolved from functioning as the rationale for a paper's grade, often focusing primarily on grammatical correctness, to

playing a greater role in the process of creating knowledge (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). This greater role has expanded the areas for research to examine all the possible factors that can affect teacher commenting. For instance, research has included topics such as providing direct and indirect feedback (Baker & Bricker, 2006), general or text-specific comments (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005), marginal/end comments (Goldstein, 2006), social context (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), student perspectives (Sheen, 2007), and teacher perspectives and attitudes (Ferris et al., 2011).

Likewise, research has also explored multiple factors (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999), including the value and type of teacher commenting (Ferris, 1995, 1997; Lee, 2008; Lee & Schallert, 2008; Tuzi, 2004) and their ability to promote improvement (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009) or learning beyond the revision process (Bruton, 2007; Chandler, 2009). This research has long been an area where first language (L1) and L2 composition teachers have shared a common ground but, at the same time, has demonstrated the complexity and often-chaotic nature of the commenting process. This research both reflects and impacts the dilemma of incorporating more and more factors into teacher strategies for commenting, as the goals for the revision process have evolved.

The growing complexity of the research has affected pedagogy, which in turn has impacted the students, who must develop strategies to respond to the comments made by their teachers. The movement away from commenting as focusing on grammatical correctness and towards a greater integration into the overall writing process can greatly affect underprepared students who may find it difficult to understand what teacher comments are asking for and may produce revisions that do not match teacher expectations (Peck, 1989). In her study of L2 students, Ferris (1995) similarly found evidence that students may have trouble in understanding their teachers' comments, sometimes because of a lack of understanding of the intent of the comment and sometimes because of external factors such as handwriting. As written commenting has moved to digital environments, handwriting ceased to be an issue; however, L2 students continue to struggle more with understanding the comments because of a lack of grammatical or rhetorical knowledge or appropriate strategies with which to respond (Baker & Bricker, 2006; Ferris, 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The growing complexity can make commenting a frustrating process for teachers, particularly when the results are less than satisfactory. L2 composition teachers often ask why WCF often provides limited benefits to students (Ferris et al., 2011). Ferris et al. (2011) found teachers are often unaware of the problems L2 writers have and may be unsure how to respond to them.

A new factor that may have affected the commenting process is the implementation of new technologies (Bloch, 2007). The introduction of the personal computer greatly facilitated strategies for multiple revisions. Even the development of larger screens with higher resolutions impacted how computers could be used for revision (Haas & Neuwirth, 1994; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Today, computers allow for the insertion of print, oral, and even visual comments within the student's paper. Although there has been less research on the impact of these technologies on the commenting process, these technologies can create new contexts that may better respond to the problems that the students have encountered in the revision process.

The Importance of Teacher Commenting in the Writing Process

Despite these problems, teacher commenting has remained a central focus of composition classes, which has prompted researchers to question its effectiveness. Anson (2012), for example, has argued that much of the research on L1 teacher commenting traditionally focused on the types of comments teachers made (e.g., Hillocks, 1986; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Straub & Lunsford, 1995) and not how the students responded. This research has led Anson to raise the question perhaps every composition teacher has asked about the effectiveness of his or her commenting: "How do we know that burning the proverbial midnight oil over a stack or electronic folder of papers really make any difference to the development of students' writing abilities and their identities as literate individuals . . . ?" (p. 188).

Anson (2012) argues that one of the lesser researched approaches to understanding teacher commenting has been to examine the various ways in which students respond to the comments of their teachers. The problem with generalizability has been complicated by the plethora of factors involved in teacher commenting (e.g., Ferris, 2015), which can result in

this lack of generalizability to individual teacher practice. Therefore, new research can be important in examining the particular contexts in which teacher commenting occurs. Specifically, we ask the following questions about the students' strategies, their effectiveness, and the impact of the variations of the comments according to the goals of the teachers and the nature of the assignment:

1. What types of comments did the instructor use?

2. What strategies did the L2 students use when responding to written teacher comments?

3. What was the quality of the student revisions?

With this information, the instructor, one of the authors of this paper (Bloch), can reflect on the commenting process. Anson (2000) argues that "there is currently a pressing need for teachers of writing to become more reflective of the conditions, nature, and sources of their response to "errors" in students' texts" (p. 17). From this reflection, the instructor can evaluate the effectiveness of the commenting processes and how the weaknesses can be remediated. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the context of the course in which the comments were made, the responses of the students to the teacher's comments, and the implications for our understanding of teacher commenting and the teaching of L2 composition.

Methodology

Teacher

The teacher in this course is an experienced composition teacher who has taught this course many times over a 20-year period. He had studied process approaches to writing and had written a dissertation on academic writing.

Participants

The participants were first-year graduate students studying a variety of disciplines. A sample of papers from a randomly selected group of four students out of a class of 15 was chosen for the analysis of the teacher comments and student revisions. At the end of the course, the students

had signed permission forms allowing the teacher to use the papers for research with their names removed. The nationality of the students, their majors, and the general topics of the papers are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant's Nationality, Major, and Paper Topic

Student	Nationality	Major	Paper Topic
Student A	Chinese	Biostatistics	Biodiesel Energy
Student B	Korean	Civil Engineering	Resolution
Student C	Turkish	Food Sciences	Probiotics - Food Science
Student D	Korean	Mechanical Engineering	Nanotechnology

The Composition Course

The course, located in a large ESL program at a Research I university, is the highest level of three post-admission graduate-level writing courses. Students were placed into the course based on a test designed by the department and administered and evaluated by the instructors when the students arrived on campus. The class met three times a week for 10 weeks. The course focused on academic writing following the first four chapters of *Academic Writing for Graduate Students by Swales & Feak* (2007). The three papers analyzed for this research were a definition paper, a problem-solution paper, and a data analysis paper.

The research here is a post-hoc study of the revisions students made in response to their teachers' comments. Each student chose a topic in his or her field and was expected to develop that topic throughout the course. It was, therefore, assumed although not verified that each student had some degree of prior knowledge about his or her chosen topics to draw upon during the revision process. By focusing on the written work of graduate-level students writing about their own fields, we could assume that the revision process would not be constrained by a lack of interest or background in the paper topic (cf. Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Goldstein, 2006).

In the definition paper, students chose a topic from their area of study, preferably from research they were working on in their other courses, and defined a concept in the field. In the problem-solution paper, students analyzed a problem, which was also chosen from their field,

discussed existing research, and presented possible alternative solutions or approaches. For the data analysis paper, each student chose a journal article and analyzed the data found in the article for a non-academic audience. Each paper was drafted three times, but we only focused on comments made to the first draft. The comments on the second draft were not analyzed because these drafts were written after one-on-one student-teacher tutorials, which included oral feedback from the instructor.

Research on the effects of context on teacher comments has shown that the individual characteristics of the course can greatly affect the nature of the commenting process (e.g., Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 2015; Hyland & Anan, 2006). In this course, the teacher commenting focused on the rhetorical and syntactic levels in each draft. Therefore, the comments included macro-level comments at the rhetorical level and micro-level comments at the sentence level. At the rhetorical level, the teacher saw commenting as part of the iterative process of invention by which the comments are used as scaffolding to help students develop their arguments.

Many of the comments asked the students to explain their ideas in more detail. Specific goals of the course, such as developing arguments or creating cohesive sentences, were also focused on. At the syntactic level, comments focused on several key issues connected to the rhetorical issues discussed with each assignment, such as verb tense or the choice of reporting verbs. Each comment addressed a specific problem, which had been explained during the class. Certain grammatical problems, such as the use of articles or subject/verb agreement, were ignored.

The comments were entered onto the students' papers using the comment feature of Microsoft Word (Microsoft Office version 2007), a technological change that could respond to concerns about teacher handwriting (e.g., Ferris, 1995). Another technical change involved entering comments using Macro Express 3 (ver. 3.8), an add-on program that simplified the creation of macros. Macros associate a piece of text with a keystroke (e.g., ctrl-a) and were primarily used for presenting readable feedback without having to retype the same piece of text. Each comment has a unique set of keystrokes. The teacher had created a set of 30 macros, which could be continually updated. Research has shown that macros can be valuable by providing students with both standardized and individualized feedback (Martinez, 2009).

In addition to the text entered with the macro, the teacher could personalize the comment by adding additional, text-specific comments. With the macros, a teacher can enter as much text as desired, adding more detailed explanations and links to other sources, such as concordance websites like *COCA* (corpus.byu.edu/coca), which students could use for certain lexical problems (Davies, n.d.). The student could also ask questions or respond to the instructor in the same text box. These commenting boxes can create a dialogical interaction between teacher and student where students can ask for clarification on a comment or explain why they do not think the comment was useful. Ferris (2015) points out the importance of contextualizing commenting within the course. At the beginning of the course, the teacher introduced the macro for each comment and gave examples of various ways of addressing the problems that each macro was meant to highlight. In addition, each type of comment was reviewed at least once during the remainder of the course.

Teacher Comment Categories

Our first step in the data analysis was to create categories that included each of the comments based on a list proposed by Ferris (1997, 2006). All the comments and revisions were read, and then using a post-hoc analysis of the students' papers based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we created four categories that reflected different aspects of the commenting process. The categories reflected the specific goals for the course (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006), which included using source texts, developing a voice, understanding the organization and structure of an academic paper, and making appropriate syntactic and lexical choices.

Category I includes the comments on the development of the content of students' papers, reflecting the social-epistemic nature of composition teaching where writing is used to explore and develop new ideas and claims (Berlin, 1988). These comments provided scaffolding to help students use their background knowledge to develop claims, cite other texts to support their own claims, and evaluate the claims from the papers they read and refute those they disagree with.

Category II includes comments on developing the structure and organization of the paper; for example, comments showing the

cohesiveness between sentences (e.g., Halliday, 1989), a topic highly valued and frequently discussed in the classroom.

Category III includes comments on grammatical items and can be related to the rhetorical development of the paper. Hopper (1987) has argued that grammatical choice is not a-contextual but emerges from the often-messy nature of rhetorical context. Therefore, a writer can make a number of appropriate choices depending on their understanding of the rhetorical context. For example, many syntactic items commented on, such as verb tense, the use of reporting verbs, and vocabulary choice, can be affected by the rhetorical choices of the writer. The choice of reporting verbs can vary depending on the writer's strength of agreement with the claim or the amount of evidence the writer feels is available for support (Bloch, 2009). Other comments, such as "cut" (asking students to delete something in their essays), that were categorized in this group reflected the rhetorical importance of writing style in academic writing, specifically the exigency of academic writing for conciseness and accurate word choice.

Category IV contained comments that either had to be inputed individually since they were infrequently used or did not belong to any of the coded categories. These included epistemic comments related to a specific assignment (e.g., Why is this a problem?), which was found in the problem/analysis papers, those grammatical comments that were rarely used. A detailed list of the comments and their categories can be found in Appendix A.

We grouped each revision into a category based on Ferris's (2006) student revision analysis scheme. For instance, we divided Ferris's category of "Error Corrected" into three sub-categories that focus on how well the student followed the teacher comments. We then categorized student responses into six types: Followed instructions, followed instructions partially, followed instructions and made other non-requested changes, omitted text, ignored comment, and ignored comment but revised another part of the text.

The goal of the data analysis was to explore both where the students were successful and where they were not. We read each paper using the following protocol: initially, the first and second drafts were read to understand the paper and its changes; in the second reading, each teacher

comment was compared to the second draft and categorized according to the strategy employed. Then, one of the authors of this paper (Christiansen) evaluated whether the change(s) produced a "much better," "better," "same," or "worse" piece of text.

For example, if a student used a present tense verb where a past tense was needed, the comment asked for a tense change. If the student changed it to past tense, the change was evaluated as "much better." If the changes required the student to change a conjunction for a subordinate conjunction at the beginning of a paragraph, which the student only changed to "but" and not to "however," nevertheless, the change was evaluated as "better." Likewise, if the student was asked not to start a sentence with "and, but, or so" and the student replaced "and" for "but," the change was evaluated as "same." If the student attempted to revise the text but the revision was judged to still be problematic, it was rated "same," and if the text was judged to be less comprehensible, the change was rated "worse." To ensure reliability, the researchers assessed their data analysis methods by evaluating a practice set of comments.

Our overall agreement using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was r=.88; differences were then reconciled since the study was only exploratory. We then used the SPSS statistical package to generate descriptive statistics of the distribution of the comments and responses. We primarily used the chi-square test to find areas where they may be significant differences. Since the sample was small and the context was specific to the course, we could not generalize our findings.

Analysis of Written Comments

Question 1: What types of written comments were given?

There were 299 comments given to the four students on their twelve papers. We first present the frequencies of the feedback by (a) category, (b) type of comment, and (c) type of paper. Then, in the next section, we describe the strategies used by students and discuss their quality based on the type of comment and type of paper.

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(a) Corrective feedback by category.

Frequency data were used to explore the differences in the number of comments coded into each category. Results indicate that the instructor provided a variety of different kinds of comments, mixing grammatical, rhetorical, and organizational suggestions. The largest number of comments was found in Category III, which included grammatical items, ($n = 111$, 37%) followed by Category I, which included comments on development of ideas, ($n = 79$, 26%) and Category II, structure and organization, ($n = 30$, 10%). Category IV contains personalized comments, which included more than thirty types. Category II contains the least frequently given comments ($n = 30$, 10%,). This category only has two types of comments: structure (organization) and cohesive relationship (between one sentence and another).

(b) Corrective feedback by type of comment.

The most frequent comment is "explain reasons or give examples" ($n = 56$, 18%) from the Category I, and the second most frequent is "specific problems" (the title of the macro followed by teacher's particular comments) addressed to students in the Category IV ($n = 48$, 16%). The purpose of these two comments was to help students develop and/or clarify their arguments by asking them to provide additional information. Such types of comments reflect an attempt by the teacher to create a dialogue with the student by asking for more information, although, given the role of the instructor as the primary evaluator, the student may not see these comments in the same way but perhaps see them as challenging or critical (e.g., Sommers, 2011).

(c) Corrective feedback by type of paper.

In general, the comments given were evenly distributed across the type of paper. The problem solution papers contained 107 comments, closely followed by the data analysis papers with 101 and the definition papers with 91. Although there was some variance in the number of comments per paper, there was no deliberate attempt to do so by the teacher. A chi-square test revealed that the differences were not significant ($p > .005$).

Question 2: Student Strategies for Responding to Comments

As can be seen in Table 2, the students mostly followed their teacher's suggestions ($n = 147$, 49.16%), although they were more likely to do so on the definition and data analysis papers than on the problem solution paper ($n = 56$, 59, and 32 respectively). To a lesser extent ($n = 18$, 6.02%), they made revisions where the teacher had not commented. In other cases, the students deleted the text highlighted by the teacher instead of revising. Less frequently, but still significantly, they partially followed the suggestion ($n = 29$, 9.69%); that is, they modified some aspects of the text but not others. The least frequent student strategy was to ignore the comment completely ($n = 14$, 4.68%) or to ignore the suggestion but revise other parts of the text ($n = 18$, 6.02%). Table 2 has the overall counts.

Table 2
Student's Strategies by Type of Paper

Student's strategies/Type of paper	Def.	PS	DA	Totals
Followed instructions—specifically to what teacher said	56	32	59	147
Omitted Text	6	27	12	45
Followed instructions—partially	8	15	6	29
Added information from a non-specific comment	4	13	6	23
Followed instructions—and added non-marked corrections	6	8	9	23
Ignore correction suggested but added other changes	5	8	5	18
Ignore correction suggested	6	4	4	14
Totals	91 (30.43%)	107 (35.79%)	101 (33.78%)	299

Note. Def. = Definition Paper; PS = Problem-Solution Paper; DA = Data Analysis Paper

What strategies did the students use?

Since we were analyzing students' classwork, we could not control the number of comments given to each student; therefore, unlike the design of the experimental or quasi-experimental studies, not every student in

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this study received the same amount of feedback. The comments were distributed across the four students as 35%, 23%, 22%, and 20%, respectively. The type of paper did prove to be a factor in the types of interactions.

The interaction between the student and the type of paper was statistically significant as demonstrated by a chi-square test $\chi2$ (10, N = 299) = 31.50, p <.01. Such differences could have resulted from differences in how invested the students were in their papers. As Goldstein's (2006) research on student attitudes towards revision shows, the student responses to the teacher's comments can greatly vary, which they did in this case. For example, Student C responded either completely or partially to the teacher comments almost 82% of the time. On the other hand, Student D mostly chose to omit text (n = 29, 41%) followed by responding specifically to the teacher's comments (n = 24, 34%). Table 3 contains all the percentages of student strategies by discipline.

The amount of additional information the student adds might perhaps illustrate how students use the comments to draw upon their working knowledge and develop their claims and, in many cases, their voice (e.g., Hyland, 2006). One factor that Bitchener (2008) focused on was the background knowledge of the student. In the rhetorical context described here, background knowledge can refer both to the student's understanding of what the comment is asking for and, perhaps more importantly, knowledge of the topic that can be drawn upon for revision.

By developing a better understanding of these factors, the teacher can adjust his or her commenting practices and related teaching pedagogies to better exploit the skills and the knowledge the student is bringing to the classroom. It was assumed that each student had at least some working knowledge and an interest in his or her topic, which they could draw on for revision. However, we cannot generalize about the role of prior knowledge since we did not measure student background knowledge. Nevertheless, our findings indicate areas where the nature of the writing assignment can influence the revision process; a factor, which Bruton (2009a, 2009b) claims, has not been adequately addressed.

Table 3

Percentages of Student Strategies by Student

Student's strategies/Student	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Totals
Followed instructions— **specifically to what teacher said**	24 (36.37%)	26 (46.42%)	73 (68.22%)	24 (34.29%)	147
Omitted Text	9 (13.63%)	3 (5.36%)	4 (3.74%)	29 (41.43%)	45
Followed instructions— **partially**	7 (10.60%)	6 (10.71%)	14 (13.08%)	2 (2.86%)	29
Added information **from a non-specific comment**	0	10 (17.86%)	4 (3.74%)	9 (12.85%)	23
Followed instructions— **and added non-marked corrections**	13 (19.70%)	2 (3.57%)	4 (3.74%)	4 (5.72%)	23
Ignore correction suggested **but added other changes**	10 (15.15%)	4 (7.15%)	4 (3.74%)	0	18
Ignore correction suggested	3 (4.55%)	5 (8.92%)	4 (3.74%)	2 (2.86%)	14
Total amount of strategies	66 (22.07%)	56 (18.73%)	107 (35.79%)	70 (23.41%)	299

Question 3: Quality of Student Revisions

There were two main differences that could affect the ability of the students to revise: the differences in the types of comments and the possible effects of paper type. In this section, we discuss how these factors may have affected student revision.

(a) Differences according to type of comment.

Given the differences in the types of comments presented, particularly the ones that did not ask for a specific kind of revision, we were concerned with what differences could be found in the revisions to these different types. We found a large difference in the acceptability of the revision depending on the type of comment. For example, the data show that students spent the most time with subjective comments for which there was no clear answer. Of the corrections that had the highest success rate of "much better" ($n = 93$, 31%), only 6% ($n = 18$) addressed the rhetorical concerns of the paper (e.g., comments such as "organization," "explain reasons,"

"evaluate," and "show relation"). These comments lacked clear criteria for judging their success, something the teacher explained numerous times in class. The remainder of the "much better" ($n = 82$, 27%) revisions had a clearer set of criteria for judging, such as "vocabulary," "cut," "verb form," and "verb tense problems."

The teacher limited the choices for verb tense to past, present, and present perfect, so depending on the student's original choice, there may only be one or two options to choose from, greatly simplifying the decision-making process. Moreover, the instructor had discussed how some comments, such as those asking for evaluation, had no clear-cut correct answer and depended on the subjective judgment of the teacher/reader.

The relationship between the quality of the correction and the type of teacher comment was significant χ^2 (85, $N = 299$) = 132.01, p <.01. A possible reason why successful local changes did not always result in better drafts overall relates to how the students interpreted the teacher's comments and his intention.

Overall, the revisions were generally judged to make the paper "much better" ($n = 93$, 31%), "better" ($n = 82$, 27%), and the "same" ($n = 81$, 27%). The remainder of the revisions was judged not to have been successful, either by making the text "worse" ($n = 21$, 8%) or by ignoring the comment. This suggests that in general, students' revisions were judged favorably.

(b) Differences according to type of paper.

Another factor that could affect student revisions was whether the genre demands of each paper type—in particular, the need to respond to audience and evaluate the significance or limitations of the work that varied across different assignments—caused students to respond to the comments in different ways. Research on genre has pointed to specific rhetorical functions that students need to focus on, specifically the ability to support claims and critique existing claims (e.g., Bazerman, 1988, Swales, 1990). Anecdotally, we have found that the students had much more difficulty with the problem/solution paper, which contained a greater need to understand the backgrounds of the audience and to evaluate prior claims discussed in the paper. Thus, to a great extent, teacher commenting focused on helping students develop these rhetorical strategies.

We used quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine if any of these categorical variables were related. A chi-square test for independence was used since the variables had two or more categories and we wanted to compare the frequency of cases found in those categories. The chi-square test indicates that the relationship between the quality of the correction and the type of paper is significant $\chi2$ (10, N = 299) = 31.50, p <.01. The quality of the correction resulted in "much better" when the paper was a definition paper (n = 37) compared to the problem solution paper (n = 24) and the data analysis paper (n = 32). Another example where paper type may have been a factor was when the quality of the revision was judged the "same," which occurred more often with the problem solution paper (n = 40) compared to the definition paper (n = 21) and the data analysis paper (n = 20).

This relationship may be a result of the difficulties in the genre demands of the task itself. While the definition paper asks students to simply describe a concept, the problem-solution paper requires a more complex analysis of a problem as well as an evaluation of possible solutions. The problem-solution paper may require more complex revision strategies since it involves a detailed analysis of the problem and possible solutions that need to be explained.

For example, sometimes, a comment aided the student in noticing a problem, which can be the first step in making a revision (Flower & Hayes, 1981), which the teacher did not identify. In the example below, the student responded in a different way than the comment seemed to intend, providing a different direction for possible new revisions for the subsequent draft.

1. Student D definition paper.

"Japanese scientist Norio Taniguchi first defined terminology 'nanotechnology' as 'consists of (a) the processing of, separation, consolidation, and deformation of materials by one atom or by one molecule' in 1974 in his paper. Dr. K. Eric Drexler promoted the technological significance by nanotechnology in his books 'Engines of creation: the coming era of nanotechnology' in 1986 (b)."

Teacher's comments: (a) Correct the form of the verb—you should paraphrase so it fits your grammatical form; (b) What did he say?

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Revision.

"Feynman **described a process** by *which the ability to manipulate individual atoms and molecules might be developed, using one set of precise tools to build and operate another proportionally smaller set, so on down to the needed scale.* Dr. K. Eric Drexler promoted the technological significance by nanotechnology in his books 'Engines of creation: the coming era of nanotechnology' in 1986. **In his book he said that we can make extremely tiny machine just using hundreds of atoms. In addition, he argued that we can create new things like god using nanotechnology. His argument becomes a base to found molecular nanotechnology**."

The ability of students to go beyond what the teacher asked for often led to creative ways of improving the paper. The first comment (a) asked the student to "correct the form of the verb" to better fit with how the student paraphrased the source. In response, however, the student omitted the original information and source and added a different and somewhat more detailed source. In the first draft, the author quoted Taniguchi, but for the second, the student referred to Feynman and Drexel as new sources, dropping the quote from Taniguchi even though the teacher comment did not ask for that deletion. The revision clearly better responded to the needs of an audience who lacks expert knowledge of the field (one of the stated goals for the paper). Note that there is information (in italics) that had not been previously provided. Because the student had been asked to paraphrase, the teacher assumed that the information did respond adequately to the comment.

While, as discussed above, some deviations from the intent of the teacher led to improved texts, the same strategy could result in additional problems, such has poor citation techniques, patch writing (Pecorari, 2008), or a lack of clarity and cohesiveness. In response to comment (b), for example, the student added a second source without connecting these sentences with the remainder of the paragraph, which caused it to be rated "same."

The student responded to the comment directly but does not connect the material to the previous (Feynman) source. Here again, the student could draw upon background knowledge to add more information but may

have lacked the procedural knowledge to link the new information to the old information. The importance of contextualizing the revision process in multiple drafting is clear here since the teacher and student had another chance to revisit these issues in the succeeding drafts while retaining the improvement made in this draft.

(c) The impact of paper type on revision strategies.

The teacher's comments sometimes play a role mediating the relationship between teacher and student, often incorporating the values of the discipline. To make this interaction successful, both the student and the teacher have to share a meta-understanding of the intent and the assumptions behind the comment. Therefore, it is important that the student see how revision can play a role in knowledge creation and not just view revision as a series of criticisms that undermine or appropriate their writing (e.g., Sommers, 2011). Comments such as "explain what is important" or "evaluate the claim" assumed certain values for the academic paper the teacher wants the student to develop. Since these assumptions may not be apparent, it is important for the teacher, perhaps in the class or in a tutorial, to clarify that this is the purpose of the comment and not simply an attempt to have them "write more."

Writers can use the genre demands of the paper type to guide whether they need to make a revision or where they can bypass what the teacher asks for. Different paper types require different understandings of the constraints on the paper genre (e.g., Bazerman, 1988) and different degrees of background knowledge. In this passage, the teacher comments focused on the evaluation of the claim regarding the pretreatment of maize, but the student responded by cutting the original claim regarding reducing cost and substituting research from another article that evaluates the claim from a different perspective.

2. Student D data analysis paper.

"Decreasing the cost in SSF can significantly reduce the cost of the whole process . . . can be much smaller when water and extra nitrogen sources are replaced by AD manure. . . . In this paper, wet-oxidation is a pretreatment of the maize in the AD manure was proved to

improve the ethanol production a lot. (a) The optimal conditions of the pretreatment of the maize and straw were also studied. The study will be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied in the AD manure economically. This research is meaningful because it provides a new method of producing bio-ethanol and gets a positive result."

Teacher comment: (a) This sentence needs to be evaluated. Explain why this is important.

Revision.

~~Decreasing the cost in SSF can significantly reduce the cost of the whole process . . . can be much smaller when water and extra nitrogen sources are replaced by AD manure. . . .~~ In this paper, wet-oxidation is a pretreatment of the maize in the AD manure was ~~proved to improve the ethanol production a lot. The optimal conditions of the pretreatment of the maize and straw were also studied.~~ The study will be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied in the AD manure economically. ~~This research is meaningful because it provides a new method of producing bio-ethanol and gets a positive result."~~

In the paper written by Oleskowicz-Popiel et al., **AD manure is proved to be a more efficient way to produce bio-fuel instead of water because it can provide nitrogen but water can't.** Water and extra nitrogen resource such as urea together cost much more than AD manure. **As a result, the pretreatment of maize in the AD manure is an economical way to produce ethanol.** This result from this article can lower the cost of biofuel production, thus people can buy it at a lower price. However, **this study may be more creative if other carbon sources such as algae are studied as well.**

In the revision, the student replaces the original claim, which was based on his own background knowledge, with a citation to another source claiming that the manure is more efficient and then expands on the significance of the claim, as the teacher suggested, by arguing that such efficiency made the process more "economical." In doing so, the student may be seen as better incorporating the values of the genre for incorporating

textual borrowing as a means of providing the evaluation the teacher asked for. Since the teacher's comment only uses the general term *evaluate*, the student must understand from previous discussions what that term means in the context of the genre of the assignment.

Sometimes, understanding the demands of the genre can lead the student to revise in a different direction than expected. For example, in the problem-solution paper, the constraints were that the students were expected to evaluate the possible solutions proposed to solve the problem. In (3) below, the student replaces the old information that the teacher had asked to revise hoping that this replacement would eliminate the problem.

> ### 3. Student D problem-solution paper.
> "Second, to give special functional property or high quality to the materials, the process was very expensive and the yield was quiet low using conventional bulk size materials. This high cost process and low yield percent to give special property and high quality." (a)
>
> **Teacher comment**: (a) Explain the reasons for this position or give examples.
>
> *Revision.*
>
> "The evolution of nanotechnology in materials science and engineering does not only overcome the limitation of conventional bulk-size materials, but also has dramatically expanded the classes of materials being explored and new devices. In the past our knowledge about materials was limited to metal, clay, and organics in bulk size . . . "

The student responded by replacing the information in the original version with different information that focused on the positive qualities of the new process. In the initial version, the student had simply criticized the traditional method for solving the problem. In the revised version, the student still criticizes this method (**limitation of conventional bulk-size materials**) but does so by comparing it to a better method. The revision eliminated the more negative criticism of the original process and replaced it with a more positive evaluation, while still retaining the criticism of the old method. This resulted in a "much better" rating for the

evaluation. The revision demonstrates the value of substituting a more sophisticated rhetorical strategy. While it is not clear why the student eliminated the old version, his revision better evaluates the research, to make a successful revision.

This strategy for evaluation was extensively taught in class, illustrating the link between teacher commenting and classroom discussion. The classroom discussion focused on Swales' move 3 for opening a gap with the previous research (Swales, 1990). Regardless of his motivation, his use of this rhetorical strategy resulted in the revision being judged "much better." There were other cases, however, where the use of general comments fails when the student lacks the understanding of the genre constraints. In (3) above, a student is given a comment asking to explain what the claim means.

> **4. Student A data analysis paper.**
> "Fig 3 shows that the concentration of ammonia changed apparently at the first 20 hours but stayed relatively fixed from 20h to 140h. (a) At the beginning, ammonia level was a little higher than that in the rest of the process."
> **Teacher comments**: (a) What does this mean?
> *Revision.*
> "Fig 3 shows that the concentration of ammonia changed apparently at the first 20 hours but stayed relatively fixed from 20h to 140h. At the beginning, ammonia level was a little higher than that in the rest of the process."

In this case, the revision was not judged to be adequate, resulting in a rating of "same." One problem that the students struggle with is responding to the needs of the audience, which are often ambiguous. Here the teacher's comment attempts to have the student clarify the claim, perhaps for a more general audience. The student, however, responded with very little revision, which may have been the result of the ambiguity of the comment or a lack of having more background information. From the teacher's perspective, it is more important to focus on the possible ambiguity of the comment. In one interpretation, the teacher may seem to ask about the relevance of this information, hoping the student elaborates on its significance.

In another interpretation, the teacher may appear to ask for more elaboration. Thus, the ambiguity may not clearly convey the intentions of the teacher, nor can it be clear to the teacher what might be the cause of the breakdown in their interaction. In this situation, the teacher hoped the student would exploit the affordances of the technology to ask for clarification, If the student did not understood the comment or wished to challenge the teacher's interpretation, the comment feature of Word could be used to explain the reasons. However, this feature was rarely utilized.

These examples illustrate how a comment may trigger the student to recall the necessary information or rhetorical strategy that had been learned either inside or outside the classroom for a successful revision, as well as to recall areas where breakdowns can occur. Since we did not interview the students about the motivations for the revisions, we do not know what incited their decisions, but surmise that it could have less to do with the type of comment and more to do with how the comment was contextualized into the genre of the paper type and how well it was understood when explicitly taught in class.

Conclusion

This paper explores the interactions between teacher commenting and student revision through a reflection on one teacher's comments and how the students responded to them. The ability to consider questions regarding the successes and problems inherent in written comments that have long been addressed in the literature highlights the complexities that commenting still poses. The problem of generalizability explored in the introduction raises questions about whether this research can impact how other teachers comment.

Nevertheless, this research does raise questions that teachers and researchers can consider. Teacher comment is never a neutral process. Cohen & Cavalcanti (1990) argued how teacher bias can affect the commenting process. Our exploration of the teacher's commenting processes illustrate the biases that the teacher expressed in his comments and how students responded to them. The long history of research on teacher commenting illustrates how students face the same problems with

understanding comments that students have long faced and how teachers still encounter the same questions about motivating student engagement (e.g., Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995).

As Robb et al. (1986) found, commenting can be most effective when it directly addresses the students at the point where they are making meaning. This research attempted to examine how the teacher's comment impacted this process of meaning making. This research may not have answered Lee's (2013) question of whether "L2 writing teachers become any wiser in their WCF practice" (p. 108). This question, however, does try to elucidate how written teacher comments can create a dialogical relationship between a teacher and a student. Nevertheless, these findings can help teachers rethink both the nature of WCF and how the goals for the comments are integrated into the structure of the class.

Consistent with previous research, the analysis of this data suggests that student revision strategies can be affected by various factors that include individual differences, the type of assignment, and the nature of the comment (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al. 2015). As a result, students may exhibit more than one strategy to respond to the same type of comments. Students can choose to follow the comment exactly, make further modifications that go beyond the comment itself, omit information, or ignore the comment altogether.

Some strategies, moreover, proved to be more effective, especially if the writers considered how the revision fit the text as a whole as well as the overall goals of the course and the nature of the paper. On the other hand, even the use of appropriate strategies may not necessarily lead to positive revisions. Consistent with what Conrad & Goldstein (1999) and Goldstein (2006) found, our students often revised successfully, but they also ignored or unsuccessfully responded to the comments.

This research also attempts to demonstrate the impact of how the teacher views commenting. As with other aspects of the writing process, the responses to the teacher's comments could not be easily predicated. Commenting is not just a form of correction; it serves as a heuristic in the knowledge-making process in which teacher comments can help students not only improve their writing but also help them enter the conversations of their learning communities (Graff, 2003). Therefore, writing teacher

comments can have important pedagogical implications for the larger goals of teaching academic writing.

Responding to a variety of types of comments can also help students develop their writing skills (e.g., Sheen, 2007). As Flower (1979) proposes, a writer's ability to revise as the teacher/reader expects, can require a variety of strategies more often found in expert rather than novice writers. It is, therefore, crucial that the teacher in the commenting process develop the expertise of the students' writing skills and the expectations of the writing genre they are learning. For the teacher, the commenting process reflects the approach to learning that the teacher is incorporating into the classroom. Straub (1996) argues that commenting can help student writers engage in the types of meaning creation that reflect the nature of their disciplinary communities. The nature of comments may help explain both the successes and failures in meeting the teachers' goals for commenting.

This research still leaves large gaps in our understanding of the commenting process. The question, for example, about what constitutes learning within this revision process is more difficult to show. Overall, our results show a mixed picture, which is consistent with what Ferris (2008) has argued about the difficulty of measuring learning in the revision process. We cannot claim that providing feedback always results in better papers, for students interpret comments differently and apply different strategies in different contexts. Han & Hyland (2015) found students may lack an understanding of the assumptions underlying the comments. Remediating this problem may entail revising the comment and/or increasing classroom discussions about the issues incorporated in the comments.

There are pedagogical risks in this approach to teacher commenting as well. Of particular concern is that there can be misunderstandings, which can result in problems with the revision. On the other hand, such problems and misunderstandings can help teachers to revise their comments or to better integrate them into the classroom teaching. Although we have no evidence that the use of computer macros aided the students' responses to the comments, our attempt to standardize the wording of the comments was intended partly to deepen their understanding of the goals and values underlying each comment and to help them develop more consistent strategies for responding to the comment. The evidence for success in

this goal was inconclusive. The repetitiveness of the comments may have helped the students better understand them, but this standardization also may have made the comments less conversational and more formulaic. Although we attempted to remediate this problem by encouraging students to respond in the comment feature of Microsoft Word, few of them did so.

One question this research only briefly addressed was in the role technology can play in the commenting process (e.g., Tuzi, 2004; Milton, 2006; Ware, 2014; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). Since the introduction of the personal computer, technology has played a role in how teachers give comments and how students respond to them (Bloch, 2007; Hill, Wallace, & Haas, 1991). The evolution of comment boxes in Microsoft Word allowed teachers to address problems with handwriting (e.g., Ferris, 1997). These boxes also allowed teachers to insert hyperlinks to other sources as well as macros, which allowed teachers to simplify the commenting process. Straub's (1996) suggestions for "clarifying and extending" (p. 393) comments has helped us reformulate how we use the macros program since they are easy to revise, based on what we learned from this research. The reflective nature of this research allowed us to address the limitations of the macros. Later, we created a YouTube channel containing videos that could be directly related to the individual comments (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqFZU2ZlofNcg0BxQ9-zVSg).

The limited nature of this research leaves other questions about the effectiveness of our commenting process. Bitchener's (2012) recent overview of research on commenting concludes that it is difficult to make judgments about the effectiveness of comments because there are so many different factors involved. Can students become more independent writers with the help of teacher commenting, as Andrade and Evans (2013) suggest? This independence requires a more longitudinal study (Ferris, 2006) that includes a greater focus on the persona of the students as they interpret and respond to their teacher's comments. Providing these insights into the students' revision strategies can help teachers understand the personas they want to project in this dialogue. This persona can include both the goals and values the teachers want to focus on and the relationship the teacher wants with the student.

Thus, reflecting on the comments and the responses the students make to those comments can help teachers understand whether their comments accurately reflect this teacher personae, whether the students understand what their instructor is looking for, and how the students want to respond to what the teacher is asking for. Although teachers may project their persona in their comments, students may not interpret it in the way teachers intend.

There are pedagogical risks in this approach to teacher commenting as well. Of particular concern is that there can be misunderstandings, which can result in problems with the revision. Because we did not interview students about their goals for revision, we cannot comment on the reasons for their decisions regarding revision. Nevertheless, such problems and misunderstandings can help teachers to revise their comments or to better integrate them into the classroom teaching.

The approach to revision outlined here reflects research on both L1 and multilingual writers. While there are unique factors about writing in a second language that make the revision process particular, other aspects cut across L1 and multilingual writers. Even the most experienced academic writers learn from submitting papers to journals, receiving feedback, and having their papers evaluated. They learn that the relationship between writer and reviewer involves a complex set of social interactions that immerse all parties in the process of knowledge creation, which can be both exhilarating and frustrating. The recent controversy over the revisions Harper Lee made to her original draft of the novel that would become *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrate how commenting, at least from highly informed resources, can impact even the most skilled L1 writer. The editor suggested Harper Lee change the narrator to be a young girl; however, Harper Lee made this change and changed the father as well. The controversy is whether this additional change was what made the book so popular. Thus, we need to look at revision not simply in terms of what is suggested by the reviewer or editor as our data showed, but as a whole. As we attempt to contextualize research on teacher commenting to better include the actual relationship between teacher and student, it becomes clearer that not only are papers never finished but neither is the research.

Christiansen, M. Sidury and Joel Bloch. (2016). "'Papers are never finished, just abandoned': The role of written teacher comments in the revision process." *Journal of Response to Writing, 2*(1): 6–42.

As has long been noted in the literature, (e.g., Robb et al., 1986; Sommers, 1982), these interactions reflect the chaotic nature of learning; the problems encountered with the comments can be helpful for revising commenting practices. Although sometimes the chaotic nature of the interactions often resulted in positive changes, we felt we still needed to clarify some of the problems the students were having. For example, in response to Ferris et al.'s (2011) finding that decontextualized instruction may not be of great value to students, we attempted to elaborate on the context of the comments by creating a series of videos that explained each of the comments. Links to these videos could be included in the comments and if the students felt they did not understand the comment, they could view the videos wherever and whenever they wanted to. All of these factors were intended to increase the engagement between teacher and student during the revision process (Han & Hyland, 2015). However, how effective this engagement was, particularly over the long term, remains a question for further research.

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Appendix A

Category of Comment	Type of Comment	Wording of Comment	Def.	PS	DA	Subtotal	Total
I	Development	1. Explain the reasons for this position	18	16	22	56	79
		2. This sentence needs to be evaluated. Explain why this is important	2	8	10	20	
		3. This is an opinion so you have to cite it	2	0	1	3	
II	Structure	1. Show the relationship between this sentence and the previous ones	6	7	6	19	30
		2. There is a problem with the organization	2	5	4	11	
III	Grammatical	1. This is unclear–rewrite this and explain what you mean	8	6	1	15	111
		2. Change the tense of the verb: use only past, present, and present perfect	7	8	9	24	
		3. Cut – redundant or irrelevant	6	18	8	32	
		4. Vocabulary – choose another word. You might check corpus.byu.edu/coca for some suggestions	4	2	7	13	
		5. Verb Form	7	9	11	27	
IV	Other	a. Addresses specific problems	12	21	15	48	79
		1. What is the problem the research is addressing/Explain the problem		2	2	4	
		2. Why is this a problem?		4	1	5	
		3. How does this deal with the problem		1	1	2	
		4. What is the purpose of this			1	1	
		5. Why – how does the method attempt to answer the question (you don't really have a clear question), so your organization isn't very clear.			1	1	
		6. What are the causes/consequences of this?		3	1	4	
		7. What does this modify?		1		1	
		8. Low enough to do what?			1	1	
		9. First explain what they are doing	1			1	
		10. This paper is too short to be summarized – just discuss the importance of the results		1	1	2	
		11. Be more specific		2	1	3	
		12. What paper?		1	1	2	
		13. Who?	1		2	3	
		14. You need to cite your reference if you used any	3		1	4	
		15. Check this	1			1	
		16. Hedge this claim	3	2		5	
		17. Too specific – be more general	1			1	
		18. Too much detail–need to focus more on the problem		3		3	
		19. How do know this?	1			1	
		20. What did he say?	1			1	
		21. You have already said this		1		1	
		22. What does this mean?			1	1	
		b. Addresses Specific Grammatical Problems	17	7	7	31	
		1. Missing a verb/noun			2	2	
		2. Add X word	5		3	8	
		3. Adjective			1	1	

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	Def.	PS	DA	TOTAL
4. **Make this another sentence**			1	1
5. **Clause**	6	2		8
6. **Reverse**	1			1
7. **Parallelism**	2			2
8. **Pronoun reference – the pronoun should match the noun that precedes it**	1	4	1	6
9. **Korean-English**	1			1
10. **Not a sentence**	1			1
TOTAL				299

Note. Def. = Definition Paper; PS = Problem-Solution Paper; DA = Data Analysis Paper

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