Instructors' Written Comments on Students' Compositions in an Intensive English Program: International Standards, Local Pressures[1]

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1. Introduction

Intensive English programs (IEPs) have become a common feature of universities in English-dominant regions and countries such as North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Whether designed as pre- or in-sessional programs, or a combination of the two, university IEPs typically aim to develop non-native English speakers' competence in areas considered essential to their success in post-secondary English-medium educational settings. Thus, a central characteristic of these IEPs, though by no means the only one, is coursework in academic writing.

Recently, however, IEPs have also begun to appear in countries in which English is used primarily as a foreign language, a situation which seems to reflect the growing importance of English as a medium of post-secondary instruction in many parts of the world. In Japan, for example, there are several well-established English-medium universities, as well as an increasing number of programs within universities designed to attract students from abroad with content courses taught in English. In a sense, it has become possible for language teaching professionals to travel the world based on their IEP experience.[2] Given this situation, it becomes relevant to ask how local contexts for writing instruction interact with the assumptions, preferred practices, and standards that instructors and students bring with them to the IEP.

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to examine a specific pedagogical practice, teachers' written commentary on student writing, within the context of a pre-sessional IEP at an English-medium graduate institution in Japan. The importance of responding to students' drafts in both first (L1) and second (L2) language composition theory and pedagogy in North American settings cannot be overstated. Not only has response been a heavily researched and theorized area of inquiry since the early 1970s (see Ferris, 2003 and Straub, 1999, for reviews), it has also become an assumed part of teaching writing, such that books aimed at preparing instructors regularly devote a chapter or section to response strategies (see, for example, Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004; White, 1994). Response is, in fact, so closely related to many of the other practices that characterize academic writing courses, such as assessment, drafting and revision, and the sequencing and design of writing tasks and assignments, that teachers cannot sit down

[1] This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at the Symposium on Second Language Writing, Nagoya Gakuin University, Nagoya, September 17, 2007.

[2] This observation was made to me by Sandy Silberstein (personal communication, May 2, 2006).

to comment on a set of drafts without considering a complex variety of issues.

In this paper, I want to ask how the practice of response in a specific setting outside of the North American contexts in which academic writing is typically understood to be taught represents the influence of local institutional and pedagogical constraints as well as standards set in countries such as the United States. In doing so, I draw on data from a previous study (Clements, 2006), including interviews with a teacher and two students, and commented-upon drafts of the students' writing, all conducted and collected during the eight weeks of an IEP writing course, so as to construct a contrastive series of narratives of teachers and students writing and responding to one another. As I wish to stress the importance of context in teachers' commentary on student writing, I will begin by describing the institutional background of the course and my own role in it as a teacher, coordinator, and researcher.

2. Context

The data discussed here were collected at Kei University,[3] a small, English-medium graduate institution offering MA programs in management and international relations, and located in a mountainous rural region of Japan, 90 minutes away from Tokyo by train. Kei's size and location contrast with the diversity of its students and faculty. The university typically enrolls around 290 students representing some 50 countries worldwide, with full-time faculty representing around 10. Thus, while English is the university's official language of instruction and the most commonly used lingua franca on campus, it is not the native language of the majority of students and teaching staff, and one can hear a number of different languages, as well as different accents of English, being spoken on campus daily. As Kei's official language, English also performs a gatekeeping function for entering students. Although few non-native English speaker applicants to the university are rejected solely because of lack of English proficiency (though this may be one of several factors), those who score less than 600 on the paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are required to take a writing test prior to the beginning of the fall term to determine their possible need for credit-bearing remedial English classes, which students take during the regular school terms in addition to their other courses.

Besides credit-bearing English courses, which students may be required to take, Kei offers a non-credit intensive English program (IEP) during the summer months when the rest of the university is not in session. The IEP is an eight-week program consisting of two courses, one in academic speaking and listening, and the other in reading and writing, each of which meets for 10-12 hours per week. In addition to preparing students for the demands of graduate coursework in English, these courses also produce a rigorous set of qualitative and quantitative assessments which can then be used to make exemption decisions for regular term English courses.[4] The feedback that students receive throughout the course as they complete the various assignments often reflects this evaluative orientation. Students are not required to enroll in the IEP, and the program carries a substantial fee in addition to the university's tuition. Many students who do enroll, however, have been strongly encouraged to do so in the admis-

[3] All place and participant names are pseudonyms.

[4] Students who enroll in the IEP are not given the writing test that other students take prior to the fall term as their IEP scores are considered a more rigorous assessment of academic English proficiency.

sion letters they receive from the university.

Table 1: Coding System for Drafts

Code	Assignment	Week
1.1	Assignment 1, Draft 1	2
1.2	Assignment 1, Draft 2	3
2.1	Assignment 2, Draft 1	3
2.2	Assignment 2, Draft 2	4
Mid	Midterm In-Class Essay	4
3.1	Assignment 3, Draft 1	6
3.2	Assignment 3, Draft 2	7
4.1	Assignment 4, Draft 1	7
4.2	Assignment 1, Draft 2	8
Fin	Final In-Class Essay	8

The interviews, drafts, and comments considered here were collected during the reading and writing course of the 2004 IEP, entitled Text Skills. For the writing component of Text Skills, students completed six essays, four of which were two-draft "take-home" assignments and two of which were timed in-class essay tests. Table 1 presents the coding system used to refer to drafts throughout this paper. Instructors commented in writing on all ten of these drafts and also met with each student regularly for conferences, usually to discuss first drafts of the take-home assignments, but also occasionally to discuss essay tests and students' general progress in writing. Instructors numerically evaluated all drafts, including first drafts of take-home assignments, using an analytic scale consisting of five components (content, organization, vocabulary, language and structure, and mechanics) slightly more heavily weighted toward the last three components, which together accounted for 55 out of 100 possible points (see Table 2 below). Final scores for two-draft assignments were the average of scores on the two drafts. In other words, the writing course incorporated elements of process pedagogy in that the bulk of the writing tasks were drafted and received intermediary oral and written commentary from instructors (and often from peers as well). Instructors also regularly conducted pre-writing and planning sessions in class to facilitate students' composing. On the whole, however, the course maintained a product orientation in that literally everything students submitted was scored, and the scoring itself placed more emphasis on surface-level elements of writing, such as vocabulary and grammar.

Besides conducting research during the 2004 IEP, my primary roles were as teacher and coordinator of the Text Skills course. In order to enroll a larger number of students in the IEP than is possible during the regular term English courses, the university hires visiting faculty every year, many of whom come to the IEP from overseas, reside on campus for the duration of the program, and return home when it is finished. Thus, each course consists of several sections and is coordinated by a full-time faculty member who is responsible for leading weekly meetings and norming sessions, distributing lesson plans and course materials, keeping track of student data, and generally ensuring that instruction is roughly equivalent and that assessment is reliable across sections. As course coordinator and teacher, I had an investment in the production of reliable knowledge about the students, and in students' and teachers' satisfaction with the course and the efforts that they put into it. As a teacher and researcher

with a special interest in commentary, I brought to my research project and the course a strong belief in the value of response and an awareness of the time and effort required to read student writing and comment on it effectively (not to mention the skepticism expressed by many teachers as to the efficacy of written commentary). While I made a conscious effort to separate my role as researcher from those of coordinator and teacher as I collected data, all of these roles should be borne in mind because they inevitably informed my interpretations.

Table 2: Analytic Assessment Scale for All Drafts

Category (points possible)	Scoring Bands	Criteria
Content (20)	20-18	Clear focus on the topic Length (according to specified range) Appropriate balance (among paragraphs) Shows depth and sophistication Ideas are adequately supported Concrete development
	17-16	
	15-14	
	13-12	
	11-0	
Organization (25)	25-22.5	Clear logical development Follows logical pattern(s) of development Introductory paragraph Clear general statements relevant to the topic Thesis statement Body paragraphs Topic sentences Logical development of topic sentences Supporting sentences (concrete support) Concluding paragraph Summary of the main points Closing comments Closure Coherence Linkers btween paragraphs & between sentences
	22-20	
	19.5-17.5	
	17-15	
	14.5-0	
Vocabulary (15)	15-13.5	Effective Word range and choice Word forms
	13-12	
	11.5-10.5	
	10-9	
	8.5-0	
Language & Structure (35)	35-31.5	Accurate sentence structures Variety in sentence structures Accurate grammatical features, e.g. verb tense, prepositions, articles, pronouns, singular/plural forms, word order
	31-28	
	27.5-24.5	
	24-21	
	20.5-0	
Mechanics (5)	5	Accurate Spelling Punctuation Capitalization Paragraphing
	4.5	
	4-3.5	
	3-2.5	
	2-0	

Table 3: Participants

Name	Role	Country
Keith	Instructor	USA
Tsuyoshi	Student	Japan
Dok Champa	Student	Laos

3. The Teacher's Commenting Strategies

Table 3 summarizes basic information about the teacher and students who participated in the study. This section will describe Keith's approach to commenting on student writing as he expressed it to me in interviews and as he enacted it throughout the course.

Keith was one of four visiting instructors on the Text Skills course for the 2004 IEP, and one of three from the United States. Prior to the IEP, he had had relatively little teaching experience, and almost no experience as an instructor of L2 writing, his main experience coming from teaching a number of different ESL courses as a graduate teaching assistant while he completed coursework for an MA in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). During his MA studies, however, Keith had also taken several courses directly related to composition theory and pedagogy in anticipation of continuing as a PhD student with a concentration in second language writing immediately after the 2004 IEP. He had also accepted a graduate teaching assistantship for which he would be teaching first-year (L1) composition beginning immediately after the IEP. In this sense, Keith might best be described as a novice teacher and future composition and second language writing specialist. Moreover, despite his lack of experience as a teacher of writing, Keith expressed very clear ideas at the outset of the Text Skills course about how writing should be taught. In particular, he emphasized the importance of positive reinforcement, of pointing out the strengths of a piece of writing, especially if it had been written by a student. At the same time, he also suggested that students needed clear guidance and evaluation in all the tasks they completed, that the most unproductive activities were the ones that did not "go anywhere," meaning that students "don't feel like they've been properly assessed" or received appropriate feedback.

Keith also expressed very clear ideas about the challenges of responding to student writing, as well as the feedback strategies that he would use during the course. He felt, for example, that it was important to respond to students' errors and that errors were a source of learning, but also observed that students could easily become obsessed with error, and that they were prone to equating good writing with error-free writing. Keith connected this with a tendency among students to "want feedback that will give them instant results, which probably won't happen in most cases. But I think what they're wanting is OK, I'm going to learn how to write this summer." He further suggested that assessing writing according to a numerical scale (an almost ubiquitous feature of Text Skills) could hinder the writing process by making students less likely to take risks in their writing and more concerned with avoiding error. In describing the strategies that he intended to use, Keith stressed the need for feedback to be as concrete and specific as possible. Thus, he planned to use correction symbols (such as "vt" for verb tense) to respond to sentence-level issues because he felt that they helped to make complex matters of sentence structure and phrasing more tangible to students. More important for Keith, however, was

the need for commentary to be engaged with students' writing, and to hold students accountable for their writing by asking meaning-related questions (for example, "what do you mean by this," "why did you write this"). Keith seemed especially concerned that none of his comments "give the sense that this is here just for the sake of being a comment." This was especially true of positive comments, which, according to Keith, could easily sound forced. He felt it was essential to praise students, but also that praise should be specific and sincere, and that it should be used sparingly, so that students would still know "they have work to do."

Besides these general commenting strategies, Keith adopted specific strategies as the course progressed which were clearly influenced by practical and pedagogical concerns. At the beginning of the course, he seemed to have had some trouble adjusting to the physical demands of commenting, and he admitted to feeling rushed as he responded to first drafts of the first two assignments (1.1 and 2.1). This appears to have led him, especially with 1.1 drafts, to fall back on generic patterns that have been documented in other studies of commentary (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Smith, 1997; Sommers, 1982). For example, he noted that many of his comments aimed to support the scores he had awarded, not only because he wanted his feedback to reflect the different areas of the scoring rubric, but also because he wanted to be able to defend his scores in case students questioned them during conferences (which, to his surprise, no one did). At the same time, Keith aimed to offer positive to support as well as concrete suggestions for revision, a task which he often found difficult to do without the positives sounding forced. The following is Keith's end comment on the draft written by Tsuyoshi, one of the students whose interview responses are considered below. The first sentence refers to the assignment prompt, which told students to write about energy resources.

> I can see that you have tried to describe three resources in your country. However, a lot of this essay is confusing, mainly because I think you have tried to say too much. There are too many details crammed into this essay…I eventually got lost in the essay. (Tsuyoshi, 1.1)

Keith singled out the first sentence as an example of a forced positive comment followed by more detailed criticism. We can also see that rather than provide specific advice for revision, his comments do not manage to go further than pointing out general problems with the essay.

As the first half of the course progressed, Keith was able, in his words, to "anchor" his comments to specific themes and issues that had come up in the course. Thus, many of his comments on 2.1 drafts refer to coherence and unity, which had been the focus of in-class work the previous week. These include feedback on whether or not essays stay "on topic" ("How does this support the topic?"), appropriacy of transitions ("Shift into related supporting detail, good"), relevance of details ("good details"), and unity within paragraphs ("maybe add another sentence linking this to the topic sentence"). At this point, he began to address individual students' strengths and weaknesses more directly, and, more crucially, to point out what he thought students were doing right. For example, in one marginal comment, he praised a student for successfully employing a different style of organization than that modeled in the textbook (Oshima & Hogue, 1998): "You're following a different essay structure than the [textbook], but it is working so far." In his comments on both the 2.1 drafts and the first in-class essay (Mid), Keith also

began to praise students because he felt they had shown improvement over the first essay, even if their numerical scores were quite low compared with the rest of the class. He noted in a subsequent interview that "I may have made similar comments on papers that were drastically different" because he saw most of his students as having progressed noticeably since the course started, even though they were at different stages of development. In other words, by the midterm, Keith had begun to distinguish his own criteria for a good essay, which took into account students' previous work and progress, from the scoring criteria of the course (Table 2).

As he read and responded to final drafts of the first two assignments (1.2 and 2.2), Keith continued to personalize his comments in greater detail. He had told me in my first interview with him that he wanted final draft comments to give students a "sense of closure" in that "even though this might not be the grade you want, you completed this…paper." This comes out most visibly in the marginal comments, which are noticeably fewer on 1.2 and 2.2 drafts, and which frequently refer to students' revisions. Keith's end comments, on the other hand, are much longer and more detailed than before (in some cases as long as the essays themselves), and often contain references to textbook chapters and other suggestions for further review and practice. In this sense, his comments look ahead to second half of the course, in which students would have to complete three more essays.

In discussing the next two drafts (3.1 and 4.1), on the other hand, Keith described his commenting strategy as a return to general issues. He said he wanted students to feel that "OK you've made some progress. So rather than this being a continuation, it's almost a mini-beginning in a way. So we're actually on the next level of your writing ability." Keith also noted that he was trying to be more positive than he was in the first half of the course, a strategy which seems to have been prompted by two factors. On the one hand, he saw students beginning to, in his words, "reinvent themselves" in that they were experimenting more with language and taking more creative approaches to organizing their essays, and he wanted to support this, even when it was not completely successful. On the other hand, he was keenly aware of the frustration that some students were experiencing because their writing did not seem to be showing visible improvements. One of these students was Dok Champa, the other student whose interview responses are considered below. Dok Champa had received relatively high scores from Keith on her first two essays, and although she was improving in his estimation, her actual scores, especially in the language and structure category, did not reflect this. Keith thus worked to point out specific strengths in Dok Champa's writing, as in the following end comment that he wrote her 4.1:

> Another solid essay! You have a sound thesis and provide good main points with a lot of support …Despite your language and structure score (I know this is probably what you'll notice first!) you are making some real improvements in your writing…I'm thinking especially of your paragraph development: the way that you supply more than one supporting idea and then provide relevant details. (Dok Champa, 4.1)

Keith's comments on the final drafts of the course (3.2, 4.2 and Fin) decrease considerably in length and in the number of comments written on each draft. Though his comments are still somewhat individualized, they make greater use of set phrases, such as "this is a great essay to end on," which appears,

with slight variations, on several 4.2 drafts. Keith provided several reasons for this, the most basic being that he had simply run out of things to say: "I mean they've clearly improved in each of their own ways. But they haven't done anything drastically different." Keith also sensed that as the IEP drew to a close students were less invested in their writing at the substantive level and more concerned with just finishing, especially on the final in-class essay (Fin). As a result, in discussing Fin drafts, Keith stated, "I didn't focus on any of that other stuff like showing that they could reinvent themselves or experiment because I don't think they were thinking about that." His end comments on these drafts thus consist mainly of a few clipped phrases oriented toward the assessment scale, for example: "good thesis, main ideas, etc. topic sentences good support; however, more details needed," and so forth. At the same time, Keith noted that many of his written comments on take-home essays had turned into a kind of shorthand reflection of more complex interactions that had taken place during conferences. One illustration of this is that a student had included an example which Keith felt was not directly related to the topic of the essay. When Keith and the student talked about it during their conference, the student originally wanted to omit the example, but later decided that it needed to be explained more carefully, which he did in his final draft (4.2). Keith's brief and seemingly general comment on the revision ("much better!") was thus "a reflection of that whole conversation" between him and the student.

In summary, Keith's written feedback to students throughout the course represents not only the general pedagogical goals and commenting strategies that he brought to the IEP, but also more specific and ongoing role negotiations with individual students, and with the demands of the course. In this sense, many comments which appear non-specific and "rubber-stamped" (Sommers, 1982) are mere traces of more detailed discursive interactions. I turn now to two students' reactions to and perceptions of Keith's comments, as expressed to me in interviews.

4. Students' Responses to Commentary

The two students from Keith's class whom I interviewed, Tsuyoshi and Dok Champa, were both enrolled in the IEP in preparation for entering Kei's graduate school of management. However, they came from very different cultural and professional backgrounds. Tsuyoshi, a native of Japan, was an employee in the sales division of a large copy machine manufacturer who had been sent to Kei to complete MA studies prior to being posted to a branch office in Shanghai, China. Dok Champa had been born and raised in Vientiane, Laos, and had worked in the local office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), most recently in the human resources unit. She planned to return to this job after graduating from Kei and hoped to be promoted as a result of obtaining her degree. In different ways, Tsuyoshi and Dok Champa both saw writing in English as important to their jobs after Kei: Tsuyoshi because he would need to communicate with clients and subordinates who did not speak Japanese, and Dok Champa because writing in English was a substantial part of her job at the UNDP. They also reported little experience prior to the IEP with writing instruction involving feedback and revision. Tsuyoshi in particular said that virtually all of the writing he did through his undergraduate years, both in Japanese and English, received minimal commentary at best. He described writing instruction at these levels as acutely lacking in the "technical" aspects of composition (by which he meant mainly organi-

zation). Dok Champa reported that, despite large amounts of time devoted to L1 writing in the public schools she attended, she also received minimal feedback on her writing through high school. Her first experiences with extensive feedback on her writing were (in her L1) a thesis completed for her undergraduate major, and (in English) several university language courses which included short essay assignments.

Tsuyoshi's and Dok Champa's individual preferences for feedback on their writing, as expressed to me at the outset of the course, were generally similar, but with individual points of difference. Both stated that feedback from the instructor should be as specific and concrete as possible, especially about how a draft could be improved. Both also stated that comments on content and organization were the most useful, not only for revising their individual drafts but also for their general development as writers. For Tsuyoshi, however, these areas were more important because he had received very little such advice in the past, and also because he did not view sentence-level errors as a major issue in his own writing. Dok Champa, on the other hand, connected the importance of content and organization feedback to learning what readers expect from a piece of writing. Sentence-level errors, on the other hand, were important as "a kind of opportunity for them [English teachers] to measure us." Feedback on errors was thus both an indicator of progress (or the lack of it) and an aid in the internalization of grammar rules.

My interviews with Tsuyoshi and Dok Champa throughout the eight weeks of the IEP generated a number of common responses to Keith's commentary. Both students were rarely able to point out any comments that they did not understand, which was likely due to the fact that interviews usually took place after they had received drafts with comments, and after they had had the chance to meet with Keith for conferences. Thus, misunderstandings had mostly been ironed out by the time I spoke with the students. Moreover, both students were generally appreciative of Keith's commentary. When I asked them which comments they did not like, they typically answered "none," that all comments were helpful for them, and that there were no issues for which they expected feedback that they did not receive. This reaction can be partly attributed to the fact that the students were being interviewed by another instructor (me) and so were perhaps hesitant to express dissatisfaction with their own instructor's comments. However, I also suggest that it can be accounted for by the fact that both students had had little experience of substantive feedback on their writing before the IEP, which seems to have encouraged their positive reception of his comments on the whole. By examining some of Tsuyoshi's and Dok Champa's more specific remarks about individual assignments, we can also see that they both singled out certain kinds of comments for greater appreciation than others, and that they did not always find the feedback-revision process a smooth one.

4.1 Tsuyoshi

The first two drafts which Tsuyoshi submitted for the Text Skills course (1.1 and 2.1) were, in Keith's view, extremely problematic. For 1.1, Tsuyoshi seems to have misunderstood the wording of the prompt ("identify and discuss the two or three most important types of energy resources in your country"), with the result that his draft was more a mass of loosely related details than a coherent essay. For 2.1 ("identify two or three important issues facing the educational system in your country and discuss them"), Tsuyoshi's writing went to the opposite extreme, presenting several propositions related

to the topic but failing to develop them with adequate details and examples. In his comments on these drafts, Keith was almost unremittingly critical. See, for example, the end comment on 1.1 which I have already cited above. Further, Keith's marginal comments on Tsuyoshi's 2.1 include pointed criticisms, such as "This paragraph has no development," and "You are off topic here. How does this relate to education?" Rather than dissatisfaction or discouragement at comments like these, however, Tsuyoshi expressed appreciation for Keith's telling him directly that his writing was off the mark. Throughout my interviews with him, in fact, Tsuyoshi often said that Keith's comments "got to the point," or that they "pointed out my weakness," that they showed him that his writing was "far from perfect," and that he had "still much room to advance." Thus, for example, although Keith was not altogether satisfied with his end comment on Tsuyoshi's 1.1 (as I noted earlier), Tsuyoshi himself singled out the end comment as particularly useful to him because it showed him that he had misunderstood the requirements of the assignment, and of essay writing as it was defined in the course.

Beginning with his final drafts of the first two assignments (1.2 and 2.2), both of which were completely rewritten essays, Tsuyoshi's writing began to garner more and more praise from Keith, although the praise was often qualified by specific criticisms, as in the following: "This sounds like a good example, but it is too vague and general. Can you tell me something more specific about junior high school?" Tsuyoshi liked this comment because it acknowledged his efforts at incorporating more detail, but also told him that the writing needed to improve. Interestingly, when I asked Tsuyoshi if he noticed the generic move of a positive comment followed by criticism (Smith, 1997), he said, "This is normal way of teachers but I yeah [laughs] I like this way." More important for Tsuyoshi, however, was the fact that Keith's comments began to recognize his attempts to take creative approaches to the essay assignments. For example, Keith commented on Tsuyoshi's opening paragraph of 3.1 with, "Interesting intro. Effective. It looks more like a narrative than an academic essay, but I like it. It definitely draws the reader in." Tsuyoshi said he particularly appreciated this comment because he had intended to write an attention-grabbing opening. In fact, in my interviews with him, Tsuyoshi repeatedly stated that good writing had to catch the reader's interest, a standard that he realized was his own and not necessarily shared by the other students in the course. His final take-home essay of the course was his most unorthodox (he wrote about former professional basketball player Michael Jordan as a "development" in world culture, fashion, and marketing), but also his most successful in his and Keith's estimation, leading Keith to state in his end comments, "it was an interesting choice, but you pulled it off. Clearly [Michael Jordan] is a 'development'…on the global level." Keith also noted in one marginal comment, "only you could write this, Tsuyoshi" ; my interviews with both Keith and Tsuyoshi verified that this comment was meant and understood as a positive one (and not sarcastic as it might be taken to imply). Tsuyoshi was clearly proud of comments like these, almost as if he felt vindicated by Keith's responses to his final essay.

At the same time, Tsuyoshi continued to suggest that Keith's critical comments motivated him to rethink his writing in significant ways. One example of this is Tsuyoshi's 3.1 draft, on which Keith had pointed out problems of coherence. Specifically, the essay seemed to be switching back and forth between the causes and effects of urban air pollution. In talking about these comments with me, Tsuyoshi remarked that they had made him realize that coherence and logic were crucial in keeping the

reader's attention so that the more creative and, in his words, "interesting" aspects of the essay could be appreciated. In a later interview, Tsuyoshi further elaborated the importance of critical comments in comparison with positive comments, stating that the latter were more likely to lead him to make changes for the final draft, but that the former were also "useful," not because they led to specific changes, but because they gave him specific evidence of the extent to which his choices had been successful. Tsuyoshi ultimately characterized the writing that he did for Text Skills as almost a collaborative effort between himself and Keith. For example, he felt that his last draft (4.2) was his best overall, stating that "It's because I and Keith went right way step by step…Yes and finally we reached." In other words, Keith was able to establish a particular rapport with Tsuyoshi through his comments, such that he could write rather severe criticisms at times and unabashed praises at others. This rapport seems to have arisen not only through Tsuyoshi's apparent receptiveness to all comments, especially critical ones (a receptiveness which Keith was aware of), but also through Keith's willingness to persistently and unequivocally point out strengths and weaknesses in Tsuyoshi's writing.

4.2 Dok Champa

In contrast to that of Tsuyoshi, Dok Champa's experience with drafting and revising during the Text Skills course was less positive. I noted earlier that her numerical scores on her essays, though relatively high at the outset, failed to increase noticeably during the course, a fact which clearly affected her reception of Keith's feedback as she expressed it to me in my interviews with her. Underlying Dok Champa's frustration at her apparent lack of progress, as well as her specific responses to commentary, was her sensitivity regarding her own writing as well as her composing style. She stated, for example, that her first reaction upon receiving a commented-upon draft back from Keith was to first look randomly at the marginal comments and always to notice that there were "too many." She seemed to see marks on her drafts as direct evidence of her personal failure, stating that "when we see many comments and sometime we don't like about ourselves," and even admitted to hiding her face when she got essays back (a reaction which Keith reported noticing as well). Dok Champa also described her second drafts as attempts to "protect ourselves" from further errors (as indicated by the instructor's markings). She depicted her drafting process for all of the take-home essays as initial freewriting followed by extensive and painstaking revision. Thus, by the time she turned in her final drafts, she had been over them so many times that it was disconcerting to see that there were still things "wrong" with them.

Like Tsuyoshi, Dok Champa made a distinction between positive comments and critical ones, which she referred to as "challenge comments." During the first few interviews I had with her, she admitted to being pleasantly surprised to see positive comments, for example: "Effective title," "great first sentence," and "Another solid paragraph. Good use of transitions to shift between points." As with Tsuyoshi, she felt that comments like these would not lead her to make substantial changes to her drafts, but suggested that they were helpful for future assignments because they showed her where her choices had been successful. Dok Champa also tended to respond favorably to Keith's "challenge" comments. For example, in one paragraph about the benefits of infrastructure development (4.2), Dok Champa had mentioned better access to health care services, but had not explicitly tied this to the improvement of roads and transportation. Keith wrote, "But exactly how does infrastructure develop-

ment do this?" Dok Champa stated that she found comments like this useful both for the particular assignment and for future writing because they "challenge us in term of thinking" about issues of content and support.

At the same time, "challenge" comments on her first drafts posed problems for Dok Champa in that she found it difficult to address them without running the risk of further error. For example, in her 2.1 (on the topic of education), she had included a paragraph on the lack of qualified teachers in Laos with a sentence referring to the fact that teachers were not paid regularly. Next to this, Keith wrote, "OK point taken, but maybe add another sentence linking this to the topic sentence." In my interview with her about this draft, Dok Champa pointed to this comment as helpful for the next assignment, but later added that she was not sure how to address it in her revisions of the assignment itself. In fact, she did not address Keith's suggestion to link the detail with the topic sentence, instead making primarily surface changes to the paragraph. In a subsequent interview, Dok Champa described challenge comments as a sort of paradox:

> That let's our brain think that in what way we going to improve, make it better. But …it can be both way right? (It) either way I think and then I try to improve, but it may get worse than before.

This sense that revision could easily lead to further problems seems to have been reinforced by Dok Champa's reception of comments on her final drafts of the take-home assignments (1.2, 2.2, 3.2, and 4.2). For all of these drafts, she noticed critical comments at places that Keith had not commented on for the first draft, and even some cases in which he made a positive comment on the first draft and a critical one on the next. For example, next to the opening paragraph of 2.1, Keith wrote, "Very nice intro. good background info./clearly sets up thesis." On 2.2, he wrote "This sentence still needs some work" next to a sentence in the middle of the introduction. Dok Champa said that she asked Keith about comments like this, and that Keith explained that he might notice different things on a second reading of the same essay because he focused more on content and organization for first drafts, or simply because of the effect of a new reading in slightly different circumstances. Dok Champa herself ascribed these occurrences to Keith's having to comment on so many papers that he simply could not mark everything (as she seems to have hoped he would). However, she also expressed some frustration, stating that it made her wonder if she should simply rewrite the whole essay for the final draft. She seemed to want, at least to a certain extent, to depend on Keith to point out the issues that she most needed to focus on, and she also wanted to see that these issues had been resolved by the final draft. By the end of the course, after this had happened several times, Dok Champa stated that she was "not fully satisfied" when second-draft comments pointed out further problems, or Keith's explanations for them, but she admitted "somehow I understand." In short, this seemed to be another indication to Dok Champa that, for all her efforts to polish her writing, and despite specific positive comments from Keith throughout the course, her writing was not getting measurably better.

Ultimately, Dok Champa maintained that she valued all of the feedback she had received on her writing, and that it helped her to progress as a writer. However, as the foregoing examples indicate, she also had difficulty negotiating the developmental aspects of commentary on the one hand, and its evalu-

ative aspects on the other. Specifically, she valued "challenge" comments because they encouraged her to explore possibilities for developing and shaping her writing further. These comments were especially valuable to her when they were linked to other opportunities for dialog about her writing, such as tutorials and in-class discussions of her drafts[5] because these were chances not only to clarify the meaning of specific comments but also to explore possible solutions and alternatives which might not be explicitly indicated in necessarily compact written feedback. However, these opportunities do not seem to have been able to counterbalance the negatively evaluative aspects of commentary, specifically Dok Champa's view of comments as inextricably linked with measurement of her writing. This perspective, which was undoubtedly reinforced by the continual presence of the scoring rubric as well as her disappointingly unchanging scores, seems to have worked against her wanting to reshape and refine her writing, to try out different solutions, and to make more than surface-level changes to her essays (all of which in turn may have made her scores less likely to increase from draft to draft and assignment to assignment). Thus, she stated to me that while she benefited from the feedback that Keith provided, these benefits did not show up tangibly in the actual writing that she did during the course.

5. Conclusion

As Keith's, Tsuyoshi's, and Dok Champa's stories have suggested, the practice of commenting on student writing as it was realized during this IEP was influenced by a complex interaction of personal, professional, institutional, and pedagogical factors. Like the IEP as a whole, the Text Skills course was characterized by continuous assessment and a remedial function that made students acutely aware that their writing was being measured. At the same time, the course acknowledged process approaches to writing instruction by incorporating multi-draft assignments, feedback on initial drafts, pre-writing activities and a number of different opportunities for feedback (written comments, peer review, conferences, and in-class discussion). Within this institutional context, Keith adopted several commenting strategies, most notably a balance of positive support of and critical engagement with students' writing, as well as an avoidance of "forced" or gratuitous comments. Although the course itself perhaps encouraged an evaluative approach to commentary, and although Keith's comments were at times overtly evaluative (especially on in-class essays), on the whole he took a developmental approach. His feedback also adapted in response to practical demands, most notably the sheer amount of commenting that he had to do within the short space of eight weeks, as well as his sense of individual students' personalities and needs. Specifically, he was more direct with Tsuyoshi in both his criticisms and his praises, but with Dok Champa made a more concerted effort to temper criticisms and to offer more praise.

Finally, the accounts of the students themselves offer contrasting examples of the effectiveness of Keith's approach to commentary within this particular context. Tsuyoshi does not seem to have been adversely affected by the evaluative orientation of the course for several interrelated reasons. First, according to the grading standards of the course, his writing had plenty of room to improve in the first

[5] Keith made a regular practice of using extracts, usually single paragraphs, from students' essays (names removed) for in-class discussion of specific composition issues. Dok Champa reported to me that her drafts were discussed on two occasions.

place (which it did). Also, as I have noted, Tsuyoshi was distinctly receptive (perhaps unusually so) to critical comments, a fact which Keith noticed, and which seems to have made him less likely to mitigate either his criticisms or his praises. On the other hand, Dok Champa, who started the course with relatively high grades, was quite sensitive to measurement of her writing, to the extent that she at times seemed to view weaknesses or errors in her writing as evidence of personal failure. Although she appears to have wanted to experiment with phrasing and structure as she wrote drafts and revised them (which she reported doing as she wrote first drafts), the association between commentary and measurement, as well as her frustrating scores, seems to have made her less likely to do so as the course progressed. Thus, the developmental aims of Keith's feedback became derailed by the evaluative purposes imparted by the course and institutional context.

To conclude, while it is perhaps tempting to make proposals for how instructors ought to comment in contexts like the one that I have presented here, I would suggest instead that the foregoing account adds to the growing recognition among teachers and researchers that commentary is a context-embedded practice that will continue to defy what another IEP instructor referred to as "silver-bullet solutions." More importantly, as has been suggested elsewhere (for example, Ferris, 2003) instructors and administrators in the "international IEP" would do well to examine the at times conflicting assumptions, philosophies, and constraints that underpin widely used teaching practices such as written response in specific settings, and then to engage students in dialog about each others' preferences and expectations. While this will not guarantee that all comments will be effective all the time, it will help to mitigate students' and teachers' working at cross purposes from one another, and to make the teaching experience a more productive one.

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