Interview with Dr. Dana Ferris

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Dana Ferris is a Professor of and the Associate Director for Second Language Writing at University of California, Davis. Her research over the last twenty years has focused on response to student writing and on written corrective feedback in second language writing. Her work has been published in a range of journals including Across the Disciplines, Assessing Writing, CATESOL Journal, College English, Journal of Second Language Writing, Language Teaching, Research in the Teaching of English, Studies in Second Language Acquisition, TESOL Journal, TESOL Quarterly, and Writing and Pedagogy. She is the Editor in Chief of the newly launched Journal of Response to Writing. The interview was conducted on March 23, 2015 at the AAAL conference in Toronto, Canada after Dr. Ferris’s presentation on Questioning Writing Placement Examinations: What if L2 Writers Could Really Self-Place? For more information about Dr. Ferris, please visit her website: http://writing.ucdavis.edu/faculty-staff/directory/drferris

C: How did you first become interested in the field and become an applied linguist?

D: It was a long time ago. I had just gotten out of my undergraduate degree, which was in English literature and creative writing, and wanted to do graduate work and wanted to pursue teaching, but wasn’t interested in doing that in literature. I always enjoyed studying foreign languages and this was back in the 80’s when TESOL was still a pretty new thing but I had a friend who had done a TESOL certificate. I had heard it from her so I got into a MA TESOL program near where I lived and started pursuing that graduate degree. And I was teaching and tutoring while I was in the graduate program. I loved it instantly, loved the students. I got interested in it from a theoretical research perspective too. After I finished the master’s, I taught ESL in the community for a year and then I applied to a PhD program in applied linguistics and went from there. And that’s how that started for me. When I was in my MA TESOL program, it was interesting, almost everyone in my program except for me had already taught abroad and now were coming back to get training. Whereas I knew nothing about the field and had never taught so it was really a different frame of reference than a lot of my classmates. I felt like I was an imposter and pretending to know what I was talking about.
C: What motivated your particular interest in written corrective feedback research?

D: That goes back a while. All along my interests in TESOL have intersected with teaching writing my entire career. I was trained and started teaching in the 80’s which was very much about the process approach and Krashen: you don’t need to correct, you don’t need to teach grammar, you need to just give students a lot of natural experiences and they will figure it out. So I’m teaching and I’m finding that students weren’t figuring it out all by themselves without any help. I was teaching in programs where they would have an exit essay exam and they were failing it. A lot of the times they were failing it because of grammar. And I thought, this just isn’t matching up for me. The theory and the way I was trained in saying don’t correct, don’t teach language explicitly, just give them a nurturing, supportive, stimulating environment and it will come. It wasn’t coming and it was hurting the students. So again, from a practical standpoint I wanted to try to figure out how can I help students to be more successful in building their accuracy and linguistic repertoire, so they can pass their exams and do better in their other classes so that lead to me wanted to do some research. So I developed some classroom techniques which seemed to work pretty well. I thought maybe I’d better do some research to see what’s going on so I designed a series of research projects that I got into over the next ten years or so. A few years into developing some classroom materials and started researching them was when the big controversial article by Truscott (1996) came out and I remember one of my colleagues handing it to me going “See what you think about this.” I would tell other teachers in the program here is this guy who says you shouldn’t correct grammar at all and they would react like I punched them in the stomach. I thought that this is an important issue and controversial and we need to keep looking at it. We need answers. The students need help with this or it is going to cause problems for them sooner or later but you don’t want to waste your time and energy and stress out the students by approaching it the wrong way either. My lived experiences were not matching up with how I had been trained, so that lead me to first develop some pedagogical approaches and then research the whole phenomenon to see what was working, and what made it not work, and what makes it work better. That was twenty years ago now that I started working on that as a researcher and as a teacher even earlier than that.

C: Are you doing any current research on written corrective feedback or have you progressed on from there?

D: That’s an interesting question. One of my students, Kendon Kurzer, and I are investigating a pedagogical approach that we have in our multilingual writing series called dynamic written corrective feedback. It’s a particular technique for working with students’ language errors and giving them corrective feedback. We have been using it at our program at Davis for a couple of years. We wanted to do some research on how that particular technique is working. He is doing most of the work and I am just consulting on it. Other than that, I published a couple of books a
few years ago, my second edition of my *Treatment of Error* book. And I have a more theoretical book with John Bitchener on written corrective feedback. After we published that and I published a study in *Journal of Second Language Writing* in 2013 which was a multiple case study on how the students felt about corrective feedback, I kind of came to a point where I thought that I have done a lot with this and there are other things I want to look at. I’m not sure how much more primary research I’m going to do on this topic. Never say never. I feel like I’ve done a lot of work on this and now other people are doing it now. I don’t have to be the one. And I am interested in a lot of other things too.

C: Can you talk a little more about *dynamic written corrective feedback* (DWCF)?

D: That’s a technique that was developed by a couple of professors at Brigham Young University and they have published several pieces on it. It’s where you have students write regularly in class, a little short timed writing, maybe ten minutes, and give them some kind of prompt. It could be either a generic everyday kind of a prompt or it could be something related to what you are doing in class. You have them write for ten minutes, like a paragraph, and then go through it immediately, like overnight before the next class, and code their errors. You have a set of codes and return it and ask them to correct those errors. You go back and forth with them a couple of times until they get three errors or fewer and then you move on to the next one. Then you chart their errors as you go along and you do a bunch of them. The thing that it does is it allows you to work in a small, bite-sized way of issues, small, individualized, frequent. They get a lot more feedback than they would from a paper that is due every few weeks. You give them some feedback about their errors. And because it is small and short, they can do a class set of papers and code them under an hour, maybe half an hour. So you get a building sense, as the teacher, of what each individual student is making progress on or struggling with and the students themselves get really focused, consistent feedback about what they are learning and making progress in. It doesn’t substitute for learning to edit and deal with issues in a longer and more complex paper, but I think it provides a little something extra that you can’t get in more a longer more drawn out writing session. If you are going to spend class time on something, I’d rather do that than “ok here’s today’s grammar point and here is your worksheet” because we often know that students don’t know how to apply it to their own writing. So these are their own writing samples that they generated, so this is about their writing. And it’s a little artificial because it’s just ten minutes but I just observed a class last week where the teacher spent the whole time on sentence boundaries and afterwards I asked, “Do your students have a lot of problems with this?” She said, “No, not really. Maybe two or three of the students do but the rest of them once in a blue moon.” I said, “Why in the world would you spend all this class time on something that they are not having a problem with.” She said, “Well, they told me they wanted more grammar and this was a good thing so I taught them.” It was a two hour lesson on sentence boundaries and way too often teachers think their students have problems with grammar and then they think “I’d better teach more grammar.” The grammar really needs to be targeted. DWCF
actually helps everyone get individual feedback. I’d rather spend ten minutes of class having them writing and correct than wasting it on two hours of sentence boundaries.

C: What suggestions do you have for teachers to make written corrective feedback more effective?

D: It needs to be focused on individual students needs at a particular point and time as opposed to “I’m only going to correct this feature for everybody”. What if everybody doesn’t make the same kind of error? It really needs to be individualized and adaptive in the sense that as students make progress in one area you start focusing on something else so I absolutely think it is critical that students be allowed or required to revise, correct, apply feedback on a particular paper. I think you are kind of wasting your time if you give students error feedback and say next time you write a paper, remember that. Have them sit down, whether or not you actually have time make the corrections, or just do a chart, or a reflective analysis, something where you are requiring them to engage with the feedback and grapple with that. I think that is absolutely critical. I very much believe in focused feedback, meaning specific error patterns and not too much of it at any given time. If you just take a paper and write all over it students can’t see any rhyme or reason or pattern to it, again it is overwhelming and I’m not sure how much they can get out of it. But if you mark three or four error patterns and then give them a little note at the end saying here’s what I marked then you are giving them something to go on that is manageable enough for them to learn something from it and apply it in the future. I think some sort of explanation of errors [is important], whether it’s a little rule reminder in the margins or an opportunity for a conference with a teacher. By only marking things and hoping they figure it out, you can miss a lot of opportunities. Students do need a little bit of metalinguistic explanation.

C: Can you talk a little bit about the new Journal of Response to Writing that you are editor of? What are its scopes and aims?

D: It is intended to be a broad look at response. It is not just for L2 audiences, it is for response in general L1 and L2. It is certainly not just on corrective feedback. It is anything to do with response: writing centers, how faculty in the disciplines give feedback, how graduate advisers give feedback, teacher commentary on content, not just language, peer review, so anything that involves writers getting feedback. We are also doing research articles and teaching articles so if teachers want to write an article where they are describing an approach or a program but we also are accepting primary research articles both qualitative and quantitative or mixed methods because we want to be a kind of big tent. So the idea is to have a place where people who are interested in response as a kind of pedagogical focus and/or as a research focus can kind of come both to submit their own work and to view what has been published and to read new stuff. There
are a lot of journals on writing that publish work on response, but it can be a little scattered and then they have to compete with space on all the other topics on writing. I think response is an incredibly important part of teaching writing, and maybe the most important part, and we need more research on it. We need to be able to share more ideas on it. It is so important to students’ learning and it’s so time consuming and energy consuming for teachers that there is kind of an imperative that we investigate it and share ideas. Hopefully the journal will provide a way to do that.

References


