Peer Response to L2 Student Writing: Patterns and Expectations

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Abstract

This paper reports the corrective feedback patterns in L2 writing and the student writers' preferences for peer feedback. The study examines the actual focus of peer review and the types of corrective feedback provided in L2 composing process. Sixteen L2 matriculation students at a Malaysian university took part in five peer review sessions, responded to a debriefing questionnaire, and participated in an interview session after completing the peer review activities. Results show that peer responses to writing focused more on clarity of feedback unlike writer expectations which focused more on grammar correction. The study confirms the relevance of peer review as an alternative feedback delivery system in L2 writing and suggests that peer corrective feedback provides teachers with important perspectives about the L2 students' language and writing knowledge.

Keywords: peer review, feedback pattern, composing process, writer expectations, grammar correction

1. Introduction

Peer review has been regarded an essential feedback delivery system in process-based second language (L2) writing classrooms. The essence of collaborative process-based writing is the creation of instances for feedback by peers. Research has shown that peer review, if designed carefully, is a fruitful and not a sterile act which can support teacher error treatment strategy (Ferris, 2002; Rollinson, 2005; Hansen, 2005). Process-oriented writing advocates have argued that collaborative peer feedback is significant because "in process-based, learner-centred classrooms, for instance, it is seen as an important developmental tool moving learners through multiple drafts towards the capability for effective self-expression" (K. Hyland, & F. Hyland, 2006, p. 77). In the same vein, Ferris (2002) argued that "it is more engaging and motivating to work on a peer's paper currently under construction than to always look only at models, especially because the author is usually working on the same general assignment that the editor is" (p. 103). The recursive peer engagement for the exchange of feedback and negotiation of meaning to facilitate revision towards the production of a final draft is also advocated by Chaudron (1984) who argued that "only by means of feedback, receiving information about the effects of their writing on readers, can learners develop their skills in effective writing" (p. 2). It is argued further that "this may encourage or motivate writers, or at least provide a change from (and a complement to) the more one-way interaction between the teacher and the student, where the student may end up making revisions without necessarily agreeing with or understanding the teacher's authoritative comments" (Rollinson, 2005, p. 25). Involving learners in the treatment of errors of their own making, as opposed to teacher-centred strategy has brought new realities in L2 writing classrooms, especially when considering the fact that "teachers tend to approach students' compositions as final drafts to be evaluated and corrected rather than as texts developed over time and analysed in terms of writer's intention, readers' expectations, topic and purpose of writing" (Atari & Triki, 2000, p. 95). The theoretical justifications for peer review suggest that peer feedback in the ESL/EFL composing process, as such, is postulated to motivate writing process and provide opportunities for enhancing language learning and practice.

Research in L2 writing has also found peer feedback effective for L2 writers. Mendonça & Johnson (1994) asserted that peer feedback has positive effects since "the suggestions and explanations offered during the peer reviews allowed students to show what they knew about writing and to use that information in their revision" (p. 765). Another study by Villamil & De Guerrero (1998) examined peer review in two rhetorical modes: narration and persuasion by exploring the way students incorporated peer feedback in revision. The researchers found peer suggestions motivate student writer's revision and self-editing. These findings support similar research in the

area (e.g., Nelson & Murphy, 1993). Another line of research has addressed the sociolinguistic aspects of peer review activities and the sociocognitive dimensions of interaction and collaboration among L2 writing students. This particular inquiry has focused on the students' perceptions towards the feedback provided by peers and the impact of interaction and negotiations of meanings on the revision process. Researchers have reported that instances of interaction through peer response enhanced L2 acquisition and writing skills development (De Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1998). The various studies supporting involving peers as sources of feedback in L2 writing classrooms have revealed one significant fact that "effective peer response is a key element of helping novice writers to understand how readers see their work" (K. Hyland, & F. Hyland, 2006, p. 84).

However, despite the growing body of research on peer review and its positive effects in L2 writing setting, more research is needed on the patterns of peer response to student writing in ESL/EFL context. Thus, research that investigates the actual focus of peer review and the types of feedback provided by reviewers is imperative. Such research will need to highlight the patterns of feedback, its effects on the revision activity and the direction it takes in guiding the text creation process. Thus, there is a necessity to advocate the examination of peer response focus and feedback types in relation to the writers' expectations of feedback and revision process. This paper reports the reviewers' feedback focus in the process of giving feedback to their peers and the writers' need of feedback in specific areas. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What does peer corrective feedback tell about the reviewer's focus?

2. What areas does corrective feedback cover most?

3. Is there any compatibility between reviewers' feedback and writers' expectations?

2. Method

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study comprised a group of (16) ESL matriculation students at a Malaysian university. These students were non-native English speakers aged 19 and 20. In terms of proficiency, the subjects have attained Malaysian Certificate of Education with either A1 or A2 in the English language examination paper, and have successfully passed the university's English Placement Test (EPT) and become eligible to register for the core courses. In addition, the subjects have been studying English for a period of at least 15 years.

2.2 Procedures

This study utilised three sources of data: drafts of peer review activities in five sessions over a period of seven weeks, a debriefing questionnaire survey (Appendix), and post peer review interview.

The procedures for data collection were discussed as follows:

2.2.1 Peer Review

The participants were trained on peer review activities before they were asked to write in each session a composition on a different topic on the expository genre. The rationale behind selecting expository writing was twofold: first, expository writing is a rhetorical mode the students are familiar with as it is most often used in academic writing; secondly, to provide topics of interest for the students.

In each session, the subjects were given one hour to write the first drafts. In the peer reviews, which lasted five sessions, and took place in the form of student-student conference (students working in pairs), the students were asked first to exchange their written essays and read them. Upon reading the drafts, the students gave oral and written feedback on each other's written work.

Each pair was given blank review sheets to enable the participants in review activities to take notes or write any points or ideas to be suggested or discussed later. The students were instructed to initiate the task of review by reading the papers since peer review begins by reading the drafts. To revise the essays, the students were told to have a comprehensive evaluation of the content and organization, and language use. To aid the students in the review activities, and before reading the essays, some guide points such as these below were given to them:

1. Tell your partner the general and clear ideas about your essay.

2. Identify and write down the main idea of your partner's essay.

3. Did you find any idea in the paper difficult to understand?

4. Underline any idea you feel not clear.

5. What ideas for revision could you suggest to your partner?

In addition, the dyads were asked to give comments, and suggestions whenever necessary. At the end of each review session, the student writers of the composition were asked to produce a revised version for submission. The participants' first paper (written before the peer review) and the revised draft (written after the peer review) were collected and analysed.

The students were also observed by the researcher while responding to peer writing inside the classroom. The field notes taken by the researcher through non-participant observation provided important insights on the participants' behaviour during interaction for the review sessions.

2.2.2 Post Interview

The interview was conducted with the participants at the end of peer review sessions in order to explore their perceptions of the activities and to examine their focus in providing feedback to peer drafts. The students were interviewed in groups. Since the interview was set up informally, the participants were asked to respond to questions freely. The interview was recorded and later transcribed, and a careful analysis was carried out on the data. The data obtained by the post interview facilitated understanding the students' composing and revision strategies and also helped in verifying the research questions. The students' statements in the interview were quoted in the study as verbatim.

2.2.3 Questionnaire

Following the authorities in the field (e.g., Mohd. Faiz, 1998; Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1996) a questionnaire was designed by the researcher to explore the subjects' strategies in providing feedback on peer drafts. The questionnaire was also administered to understand the students' expectations of feedback and the effects of that on their revision strategy. The designed questionnaire (Appendix) contained two main parts. Part I focuses on the learners' bio-data and learning experience. The information gained here aided in categorizing the subjects and exploring their language knowledge and background. Part II consisted of 14 statements provided to cover understanding of the composing behaviour displayed by the subjects, their preferences in providing and receiving feedback as well as their perceptions towards peer review. The items were arranged randomly, and next to the items were five columns with five options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The numbers 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 were placed under the five answer options respectively. The informants were told to choose the items they prefer by placing a tick in the box. Selecting a particular option by a respondent determined the degree of agreement or disagreement, and thus the perception about the issue the statement discussed. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants after they had completed the peer review sessions and this was later collected for further analysis.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Analysis of Peer Review Scripts

The peer review drafts (N=80) in five sessions were collected and analysed by the researcher. The analysis specifically examined the reviewers' focus and the patterns of feedback provided by peers.

3.2 Analysis of Post Interview

The subjects were interviewed in order to explore their perceptions towards the peer review activities, their review focus and the effects of peer feedback on their writing. The interview was recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The interview script was analysed in order to examine the students' strategies in responding to peer draft and the areas perceived challenging by the students.

3.3 Analysis of Questionnaire Data

Analysis of the questionnaire focused on the students' review direction and the type of corrective feedback they provided as well as writers' expectations of peer feedback. The data obtained supported the data collected through the analysis of peer review texts and the interview.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Peer Review Scripts

The analysis of the peer review drafts revealed that the reviewers focused much on the essays structure and meaning when responding to peers' drafts with few instances of discussion on grammar. The students' error detection focused on grammatical aspects such as tenses, prepositions, verbs and vocabulary. For example, a review pair was observed negotiate the grammaticality and correctness of: *diseases also rises*. The discussion between the writer and the reviewer focused on whether the verb should be *rise* or *rises*. In fact, noun number and subject verb agreement were among the aspects that posed difficulty for the students. Another review pair

was observed to negotiate meaning and form when the researcher heard them discuss whether the word *species* has plural form or not. Another pair was observed discuss the correctness of the expressions *still can* or *can still.* Another item negotiated was the usage, meaning, and correctness of *what about* and *how about.*

Interestingly, most of the student writers were observed negotiating for more feedback on grammatical accuracy. This suggests the idea that the students have felt grammar was their major area of difficulty and the most important aspect of revision as well. Due to this, much of their attention was given to grammar correctness, and the expectations of feedback were directed toward grammar accuracy. Limitation of feedback to grammar correction created negotiation instances with mostly limited attention to grammar. However, the writers' expectations of feedback on grammar have created opportunities for using and negotiating meta-language that might provide learning instances.

The tendency to focus on grammar and the perception about grammar as the most important aspect to be reviewed were revealed in the students' responses to both the post interview questions and questionnaire. L2 learners need to have a wider perception on language use in composition writing and to understand that grammar is but an element in the text creation process. Giving students opportunities to focus on other text features in the process of writing and reviewing is deemed important in developing their writing and composing process skills. It could be argued that involvement in peer review activities may help students view writing as a multidimensional process that advocates grammar accuracy and other textual and stylistic features as well.

4.2 Post Interview

The analysis revealed that all the students indicated that peer review was beneficial to them especially in the area of grammar. An analysis of the question about the gains of participating in peer review revealed the students' preference for grammar correction. One of the students revealed that peer feedback allowed her to detect her errors in grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Another student mentioned that peer feedback on grammar is very important and that she would welcome and use peer's suggestions on grammar and mechanics. This particular student stressed that "*I will use my peer's comments especially in some parts where I am, where it is my weakness such as grammar mistakes and the spelling.*" This in fact indicates that the students' expectancy of ideas offered by peers is shaped by the students' weakness in particular areas (grammar in this case). In other words, the students expected peers to highlight and provide feedback in the areas perceived challenging in the writing practice.

4.3 Questionnaire

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed interesting findings pertaining to students' feedback focus and expectations of peer responses to drafts. The results were shown and discussed under the categories of reviewer tasks and writer expectations as follows:

4.3.1 Tasks Performed by Reviewers

Table 1 below presents the respondents' score on the tasks reviewers had to do in the peer review activity.

Table 1. Reviewer questionnaire frequency count and percentage equivalent

	S.A	A	U	D	S.D
Tasks to be performed by reviewers					
1. Ask about writer's ideas and meanings	7(44%)	5(31%)	4(25%)	—	—
2. Focus on grammar correction	6(38%)	4(25%)	3(19%)	2(13%)	1(6%)
3. Comment on my partner's ideas and extend them	8(50%)	6(38%)	2(13%)		
4. Provide clear correction/review symbols	11(69%)	5(31%)	—	—	—
5. Evaluate writer's vocabulary use	5(31%)	7(44%)	3(19%)	1(6%)	—
6. Evaluate essay's structure	5(31%)	11(69%)	—	—	—
7. Correct mechanical errors	7(44%)	5(31%)	4(25%)	—	—

Table 1 above reveals that in responding to item (1), 44% of the participants strongly agreed and 31% agreed that they asked student writers about their ideas and meanings, while 25% expressed 'uncertainty' about their stand. On the other hand, item (2) in the questionnaire was about the areas the students focused on when they evaluated peers' drafts. The students were asked about whether they paid attention to grammar correction as the main area in the review process. The analysis revealed that six students (37.5%) "strongly agreed" and four students (25%) "agreed" that they focused mainly on grammatical errors in the peers' drafts. On the other hand two students

(12.5%) "disagreed", and one student (6.3%) "strongly disagreed" that they focused mainly on errors of grammar correctness as a focal criterion. There were three students (18.8%) who were "uncertain" about their stand. The analysis of item (3) in the questionnaire revealed that 50% of the participants strongly agreed and 38% agreed that they commented on their review partner's ideas and developed them as well. For the same task, 13% of the respondents remained uncertain about their contribution to writers' ideas development. Item (4) in the questionnaire explored the participants' perceptions about the clarity of their feedback to peers' writing and ideas. Results reveal that 68% strongly agreed and 31% agreed that they provided clear corrections and review symbols to peers' drafts. This result suggests that students have developed positive attitudes towards peer review process. Table1 also reveals that 31% of the participant strongly agreed and 44% agreed that they provided feedback on vocabulary while 19% were uncertain and 6% of them disagreed with focus on vocabulary (item 5). The table also tells that in responding to item (6) 31% of the participants strongly agreed and 69% agreed that they evaluated their review partners' essays' structure. The analysis of item (7) of the questionnaire also reveals that 44% of the participants strongly agreed and 31% agreed that they focused on mechanical errors in their review, while 25% were found uncertain. The result obtained here serves the study's first question as it reveals the feedback providers' tendency and focus when reviewing peer drafts.

4.3.2 Feedback Expectations

Table 2 below presents the respondents' score on the writers' expectations of peer feedback on drafts.

Table 2. Writer questionnaire frequency count and percentage equivalent

	S.A	A	U	D	S.D
Tasks writer expected reviewer to perform					
8. Ask writer about ideas and meanings	8(50%)	6(38%)	2(13%)	—	—
9. Evaluate writer's ideas' organization	7(44%)	4(25%)	3(19%)	2(13%)	—
10. Evaluate writer's vocabulary use	10(63%)	5(31%)	—	1(6%)	—
11. Correct grammatical errors	11(69%)	5(31%)	—	—	—
12. Comment on ideas and expand them	8(50%)	6(38%)	2(13%)	—	—
13. Correct mechanical errors	11(69%)	4(25%)	1(6%)	—	—
14. Provide clear correction and review symbols	11(69%)	4(25%)	1(6%)	—	—

The analysis of the questionnaire has also focused on specific areas expected by student writers to be evaluated by reviewers: clarification of ideas and meaning, essay organization, vocabulary use, grammatical correctness, ideas development, mechanical correctness, and provision of clear review and feedback symbols (items 8-14). Item (8) was designed to look into the student writers' expectancy of peers feedback and suggestions outcome on ideas and meanings. Eight students (50%) "strongly agreed" and six students (37.5%) "agreed" that they expected peers to ask them about their ideas and their meanings. There were, however, two students (12.5%) who chose "uncertain".

This finding provides more evidence of the tendency of the students to have their ideas evaluated by peers. This tendency was in fact indicated in the students' answers to the interview questions and in their willingness to participate in the peer review sessions.

Furthermore, in responding to item (9), seven students (43.8%) "strongly agreed", and four students (25%) "agreed" that they expected peers to evaluate the way they organized their ideas in the essay drafts. There were two students (12.5%) who "disagreed", and three (18.8%) who were "uncertain". Similar to item (8), the respondents looked forward for suggestions on ideas organization and essay structure in peers' feedback. It is important to point out that when interviewed, the respondents stressed the importance of knowing how to organize ideas and develop a structured essay. In fact, grammar was ranked first in respondents' preference for receiving feedback from peers (Table 3).

When asked about their expectancy of peers' feedback on their use and choice of words item (10), ten students (62.5%) "strongly agreed" and five students (31.3%) "agreed" that peers should evaluate their choice of vocabulary and suggest correction. There was one student (6.3%) who "disagreed" with the statement. This finding reveals the student writers' willingness to share ideas with peers about the use of vocabulary. It is worth mentioning here that during the interview, many of the respondents expressed their need for more feedback on vocabulary and strategies for vocabulary learning.

Responding to item (11) about the importance of grammar, all respondents gave grammar great care. Eleven

students (68.8%) "strongly agreed" and five students (31.3%) "agreed" that their peers should correct their grammar. This finding is important as it serves the study's third question and reveals the respondents' tendency to place grammar an important aspect in their essays.

However, item (12) was designed to explore the respondents' expectation from peer review outcome on ideas expansion and paragraph development. Eight students (50%) "strongly agreed" and six students (37.5%) "agreed" that ideas expansion and how to develop a paragraph are important aspects to be shared with peers. On the other hand, two of the students (12.5%) chose "uncertain".

In responding to item (13) about peers' feedback on the mechanical features, eleven students (68.8%) "strongly agreed" and four students (25%) "agreed" that they expected peers to correct their spelling, punctuation etc. On the other hand, one student (6.3%) chose "uncertain".

The study also investigated (item 14) the student writers' expectation of peer feedback in setting clear review and correction signals. This is very important in a sense that clear feedback clues are deemed to facilitate revision and feedback incorporation. Eleven students (68.8%) "strongly agreed" and four students (25%) "agreed" that peers should provide clear feedback symbols. There was, however, one student (6.3%) who chose "uncertain". This finding indicates the importance of feedback clarity and confirms the previous research findings on the necessity of making peer review useful (see Ferris, 2002; Rollinson, 2005). On the other hand, when feedback and suggestions are provided in an ambiguous manner, the required feedback incorporation might not be fulfilled.

4.3.3 Reviewer Focus and Writer Expectations

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire items (7-14) were designed to examine the respondents' feedback focus and preferences for peer feedback on certain areas. By combining the respondents' frequencies in both "strongly agree" and "agree" in the items of the questionnaire the data was tabulated to show the rating of feedback patterns writer preferences outcome. However, other values in the questionnaire were statistically less significant and as such were not compared and ranked. Table 3 below shows the percentages and ranks of each statement and thus, the rank of each area every statement represents.

Table 3. Scores and percentages rating of reviewer focus and writers' expectations of feedback

| | Reviewer | | Writer | |
	S.A&A	Rank	S.A&A	Rank
1. Focus and feedback on ideas and meanings	12(75%)	3	14(88%)	3
2. Focus on grammar correction	10(63%)	4	16(100)	1
3. Suggestions for ideas development	14(88%)	2	14(88%)	3
4. Clear correction/review symbols	16(100%)	1	15(94%)	2
5. Feedback on vocabulary	12(75%)	3	15(94%)	2
6. Essay's structure	16(100%)	1	11(69%)	4
7. Mechanical errors	12(75%)	3	15(94%)	2

According to Table 3 above, the reviewers have selected feedback clarity and essays' structure as prime areas of focus while the same areas were ranked second and fourth by student writers respectively. The disparity in the reviewer focus and writer priority pertaining to essay's structure justifies the instances of negotiations of essay writing structure the researcher observed during peer review sessions. On the other hand, student writers have selected grammar as the most important aspect needed to be evaluated by peers; giving it the first rank in rating. The same aspect was ranked fourth by the feedback providers. This result is interesting because it serves the study's questions and throws light on students' recognition of their weakness in grammar and expectations of receiving peer feedback as well. In addition, rating grammar first among other areas that were expected to be reviewed by peers is deemed realistic in a sense that L2 learners always perceive grammar as the most difficult area in the target language. Research in L2 has reported that grammar was found to be a difficult area for L2 learners (see for example, Chanquoy & Negro, 1996; Sinyor, 1997). One more possible reason might be the absence of peer review and collaborative writing in L2 writing classrooms. L2 students of writing need to be introduced to the composing process and collaborative language learning to develop sense of audience, social skills, ideas development and whole language awareness.

Table 3 also tells that in this rating, feedback for ideas development was rated second by reviewers, while it rated

third by student writers. Feedback on vocabulary and mechanical features was ranked third by the reviewers, while the same features were ranked second by student writers. This result is supported by the students' responses to the interview question about feedback on vocabulary. A student is quoted saying "*I would absolutely prefer in vocabulary because I think my vocab is pretty weak and mmmm besides my mmmm besides vocabulary I would like to improve my mechanics because sometimes I think my words mmmm my words aaa my choices of words and sentences are very mmm I think it is too simple. So I need to work so it would make it a bit sophisticated probably, something like that*". Another student reported that "*I am weak in vocabulary, I have lack list of vocabulary and I aaa I aaa I am really glad if someone ant to show me the exact way o how to organize correct mmm correct sentences*". The rating also showed that the only area all the respondents agreed on was verifying writer's ideas and meanings.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, peer review activities provided students with opportunities to share ideas, provide feedback, negotiate meaning and collaborate to provide the final drafts. The results of this study show that all of student writers placed grammar as the main area for the reviewer to respond to while reviewers concentrated on clarity of feedback provided to peer drafts. The inconsistency between the patterns of feedback given on drafts and student writers' expectations and focus provides significant pedagogical insights about L2 learners' knowledge and writing skills. Second language writing students need more training on other aspects of essay writing such as structure, organisation and coherence for more effective writing. Learners of writing need to be taught the processes of text creation and the various areas that review should cover. Moreover, L2 learners must know that grammar correctness is one of the aspects that must be focused on among many other textual features. Thus, learners need to move from grammar-bound feedback to multi-focus feedback.

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Appendix

Debriefing Questionnaire

Dear students:

This debriefing questionnaire forms part of a study about exploring the reviewer focus and types of feedback patterns in L2 composing process practice. I would therefore very much appreciate if you could spend a little time to respond honestly and objectively to this questionnaire. Your responses will help me to identify preferences, perceptions and strategies within cooperative language learning context. Kindly be informed that the questionnaire is conducted for research purposes only.

This questionnaire consists of two parts. Part I focuses on your bio-data and your language learning experience. Part II deals with the focus of peer review practice. Please respond to **All** the items in this questionnaire. It has been piloted with a representative group of students, and the average time taken to complete it was 40 minutes.

I thank you in advance for your cooperation and help with this research.

A. Rahman Abdalla Salih

_____

General instruction: Please respond to **all** the items/questions in the questionnaire.

Part I

Please provide relevant information by filling in the blank spaces below:

1. Matric Number: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Year of Study: _____
4. Sex (Please tick the appropriate space): (   )male   (   )female
5. Years of studying English: _____
6. Your first language: _____
7. Your *SPM* English Language Grade: _____

Part II

Please respond to the following statements by placing a tick (   ) mark in the box that represents your attitude.

		Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Uncertain 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
	For reviewers: after reading the first draft:					
1.	I ask about my partner's ideas and their meanings					
2.	In peer review activities I focus mainly on grammar correctness as an important aspect.					
3.	As a reviewer I comment on my partner's ideas and meanings and extend them.					
4.	I provide a set of clear corrections, or review symbols.					
5.	I evaluate my partner's use of vocabulary, and suggest correction(s).					
6.	I evaluate my partner's essay's structure.					
7.	I correct mechanical errors (e.g., spelling, punctuation, etc.)					
	For writers: after my review partner has read my <u>first</u> draft of an essay, he/she should:	Strongly Agree 5	Agree 4	Uncertain 3	Disagree 2	Strongly Disagree 1
8.	ask me about my ideas and their meanings.					
9.	Evaluate the way I have organized the ideas in my essay.					
10.	Evaluate my vocabulary and make corrections.					
11.	Correct my grammatical errors.					
12.	Comment on my ideas and meanings and extend them.					
13.	Correct mechanical errors (e.g., spelling, punctuation, etc.)					
14.	Provide a set of clear correction, or review symbols.					