

INFLUENCE OF TEACHER FEEDBACK ON ESL STUDENTS' WRITING

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Date: 4-19-2010

Seminar Paper Advisor

INFLUENCE OF TEACHER FEEDBACK ON ESL STUDENTS' WRITING

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

by

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2010

Abstract

Writing is very important in foreign language teaching. As to ESL learners, teacher feedback is a vital form of language input and it has been an important part in writing instruction. This paper presents the influence of different types of feedback in ESL students' writing, mainly focusing on teacher feedback in terms of content and form. Peer review is also mentioned in this paper to supplement the effect of teacher feedback. There are a number of studies demonstrating that teacher feedback has a positive effect on student writing although there are still questions about the ways in which teacher feedback impacts learning outcomes. This paper also discusses teacher feedback in China in terms of English writing instruction.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

English writing is one aspect of four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and thus an important skill for ESL learners to master. It has to be learned by people from different countries in order to keep in touch with each other. The unique ESL context of China and the linguistic differences between Chinese and English languages make writing an important part of students' English learning. This paper examines teacher feedback as an effective teaching method for better understanding student writing and how teachers can further improve their students' writing ability.

In ESL writing instruction, teacher feedback means a variety of responses, mainly focusing on lexical, grammatical and content errors, provided by the teacher who intends to help students to improve their writing.

Teacher feedback is an important part in the ESL writing process because writing is probably the most difficult learning task that English learners face as they have to know not only grammatical rules but also writing conventions in a particular culture (ie. organization of a paper, word choice, sentence pattern, and ideas). As Garcia (1999) points out, teacher feedback can help students become aware of errors and other writing problems which they failed to notice when they wrote their drafts. Through teacher feedback, the writer learns where he/she confused the reader by not supplying enough information or by using incorrect grammar. Illogical organization, incomplete ideas or inappropriate word choice are other examples of common writing problems among ESL learners. According to Munice (2000), feedback is vital in

helping learners to improve their writing skills and whatever forms it takes, it can have a positive effect on the learner's awareness in terms of writing. On the other hand, Hyland (1990) explains that student's learning depends on the kind of feedback methods that the teacher provides and on the teacher's ability to encourage the students to continue working on their draft.

In this paper I present some research on ESL writing instructions. In addition to the teacher feedback, I also study the effects of peer feedback. I will examine studies that are looking at the teacher's response practices and the effects of feedback types on student learning outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

The question of this study is about ways THE TEACHER FEEDBACK CAN INFLUENCE ESL STUDENT'S WRITING?

Definition of Terms

Feedback: information people receive about their learning process and achievement outcomes (Butler & Winne, 1995).

ESL: abbreviation for the term English as a second Language

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over eighty-eight (88) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “feedback”, “writing instruction”, and “ESL”.

Method

A brief review of literature on the studies of feedback employed by ESL teachers will be conducted. A second review of literature relating to writing instruction will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations will be made.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definition of feedback

There are different definitions of the term “feedback”. Some are as follows:

Askew and Lodge (2000) adopt a broader definition of feedback to include “all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations.” In this definition, feedback is almost everything that happens in a classroom.

In contrast, Ramaprasad’s definition (1983) is more precise. He claims that feedback is the information which can effectively bridge or at least narrow the gap between the student’s language proficiency and the teacher’s response. He states that the question is whether the information given by the teacher can alter such a gap, which is the key criteria whether it is a feedback or not (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). Ramaprasad’ definition is modified by Sadler (1998). He explains that the teacher has to possess a concept of the standard form of the language (or goal or reference level) that is being aimed for. They also have to be able to compare the students’ actual level of performance with the standards and engage in appropriate actions which lead to the closure of the existing gap. “Closing the gap” as is explained by Sadler (1989) provides an effective and practical framework for teachers.

Different kinds of feedback on student’s writing

English writing is an important communicative form, which is rather challenging to second language learners. Taking Chinese students as an example, for them, English is still taught by using the grammar-translation method in many middle

schools and even in some universities and colleges. The Grammar-Translation Method is known as a method of foreign or second language teaching which uses translation and grammar study as the main teaching and learning activity. The focus of a Grammar-Translation classroom is teaching and practicing the grammar of the target language. In the Grammar-Translation classroom, the teacher uses the native language of the students as the main medium of instruction. There is little use of the target language. Furthermore, students have very limited contact with native English; accordingly, they are confined by their own cultures and writing patterns. In this situation, effective feedbacks are mostly needed. Hence, communication with ESL teachers and the feedback the students receive from them seem to be an effective and direct channel through which the students can improve their second language writing proficiency.

Different feedbacks from both teachers and peers are necessary in improving students' writing. As Zhuang (2007) claims

“... Appropriate and positive feedback is also the necessity during the learning and teaching. Modes of feedback include the comments from teachers, comments from peers and the combination of the teacher and peers feedback. They are directed at helping students meet goals in writing and giving them a clear guideline in their post-writing processing” (p. 24).

Teacher feedback

Smith (1997) provides a conceptualization of teacher feedback in her research. She grouped teacher comments into three categories: judgmental comments, reader response comments, and coaching comments. Judgmental comments evaluate the student's writing in terms of what is good, what needs further work, or what can be written better according to the teacher. There are four characteristics of good comments: focused, applicable, clear, and encouraging. Reader-response-comments offer the teacher's reaction as a reader to the student's writing and describes her experiences while reading the student's work. The comments are highly personal and characterized by the use of the 1st person statement. Coaching comments advice students on ways to develop their writing, and they tend to be facilitative, which means that the comments act as guides for students to consider the features of their writing, such as word choice, sentence formation, organization and writing style. They also encourage the students to look at their writing critically.

English teachers know that errors constitute one of the biggest problems involved in ESL writing. What to do with the errors? This question is of great concern for teachers in relation to ESL writing. How should teachers give feedback to students' errors in writing?

Teacher feedbacks are mainly focused on two kinds of errors. The one is on form which involves teachers' outright correction of surface errors. In that the teacher is indicating the place and type of errors without correction. Thus, the teacher indicates by underlining the presence of errors only. On the other hand, the other correction

focuses on the content. In that the teacher suggests improvements for future rewrites.

Traditionally, ESL teachers tend to emphasize surface-level problems such as grammar. In order to help students to correct such errors, they can be marked by red-pen and students are expected to work out the revision. Mohammad analyzed whether, the Red Pen Method (RPM) and the other Remedial Instruction Method (RIM), are helpful ways to improve students' writing (Mohammad, 2007, p. 53). RPM and RIM are guided practices, in which the teacher observes students' work and show them where the problem is. RPM requires students to find their mistake on their own and correct them by themselves, while RIM indicates for students the correct form. When it comes to writing instruction, these two methods of instruction are very beneficial for students to know where the mistake is and how to correct it. Teachers use such red pen signs to draw the students' attention to the errors; thus, the students can find easily where the problem is according to teachers' remarks. These two methods are widely used in my writing class. Mohammed's study examined which method of treatment (RPM or RIM) was more effective in EFL writing classes.

It was found that both methods of error treatment were almost equally effective. However, the RPM method was slightly better than the RIM method. This might be due to the very fact that in RPM the student is placed on a journey in which she/he is expected to learn through a discovery procedure. In fact, this discovery procedure may result in a deeper learning compared to what happens in the more or less deductive RIM method, in which the teacher decides what to tell the students and what not to. (Mohammad, 2007, p. 57)

He also states, “The main component of instruction in a cognitive approach is ‘revision’.” (2007, p. 18) He argues that revision requires commitment from both teachers and students. Teachers guide students to “review their writings...predict the problems they may have” (p. 18), and instruct the students to find the possible solutions to their errors. Mohammad suggests that teachers should “write some of the compositions on the board or to use and Overhead Projector to this end. The students may then be urged to identify the mistakes, both grammatical and rhetorical, in their compositions” (Mohammad, 2007, p. 18).

In terms of error correction, the following three issues deserve attention. The first is that over correction can have a demoralizing effect. Second, making errors is a natural and important aspect of the learning process and repeating previous mistakes are common in ESL writing. Third, the question has to be raised of how to balance being accurate and sensitive at the same time when providing feed-back.

Teacher’s marking is another important issue explored in some studies about teacher-feedback. Clarke (1998) argues that effective marking can “provide clear feedback about strengths and weaknesses in their work, and recognize, encourage, and reward children’s effort and progress” (p. 81). She suggests that teachers could change the learning outcome into “child-speak” so that students also can understand the goals and expectations of the lesson. Furthermore, students can be asked to discuss their personal understanding of the learning outcome and their plan to achieve it. Clarke also recommends “a very brief, general comment is made by the side of the learning intention such as very well achieved, achieved, needs more help, perhaps initialed by

the teacher” (Clarke, 1998, p. 67).

Considering the size of class, it is suggested for teachers that they offer their markings effectively. Black and William suggests in their article *Inside the Black Box* (1998) that teachers should spend more time on certain writing assignments to ensure that they give good and effective feedback. In order to make time for this, it is recommended that they either do not mark some of the writings of their students, or they mark only a third of their students’ work each week. Sadler (1989) makes a distinction between feedback and marking. He argues that feedback is a mean to send information back to students to close the gap. Marks, however, do not fulfill this role as they can only provide limited information.

The Suffolk County Council (2001) argues that asking questions can be a vital feedback tool; “developing the use of questions has been identified as an important aspect of promoting assessment for learning” (p.16). Questions are used to test understanding and to develop thinking. Open-ended questions are a crucial part of verbal feedback and are used to probe and extend understanding. Teachers should reflect on the types of questions being asked in their classrooms.

However, teacher feedback on form is not always proved as significantly helpful to students’ work. Polio et al (1998) examined 30-minute drafts and subsequent 60-minute revisions produced at the beginning and end of a seven-week semester by a group of 64 university-level ESL students. During the semester, half of the students were placed in a control group that received no feedback on their journal, while the other half were assigned to an experimental group that received additional grammar

instruction and feedback. The researcher found that both groups of students made improvements on their revisions over the course of seven weeks. However, no significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of linguistic accuracy, leading the researchers to conclude that second language writers may have the ability to detect and correct their errors in the process of writing.

The above two studies, as Polio et al (1998) write can be “added to a list of studies that have failed to show improvement in students’ linguistic accuracy in writing as a result of feedback...or additional grammar instruction.” However, the researchers also note that their results need to be interpreted with caution. Polio (1998) suggests that the lack of significant results could be attributed to the type of grammatical instruction and feedback that was given or to the length of time it was administered (perhaps not long enough). They also raised the possibility that the particular measures they chose for assessing linguistic accuracy may not have been sensitive enough to detect differences between the two groups which have closely related levels of proficiency.

Another aspect of teacher feedback is about content as it is introduced by Sommers (1982) and Zamel (1985). Take Zamel as an example. He outlines how teacher feedback can lead student writers through the “cycles of revision” (p. 95) and how teachers can help students understand that “... meaning-level issues are to be addressed first” (p. 96). She further suggests that content feedback and form feedback should be kept separate in order to avoid students’ confusion about what they should attend to at any particular stage of the process (p. 82). It follows that, if there are to be

at least two stages in the feedback process, there will be at least two drafts (D1&D2) plus a final version (D3) in the writing process. There can, of course, be more than two drafts in the writing process, in which case meaning-focused feedback and form-focused feedback can be given more than once. However, a two-draft plus final-version scenario would seem to be the minimum as is suggested in Zamel's proposals.

In another study, Fazio (2001) compared the effects of three types of feedback (content only, form only, and a combination of form-focused and content-focused feedback) on the grammatical accuracy (subject-verb agreement and noun-adjective agreement) in journals produced by native and nonnative speakers of French at the fifth-grade level. Journals for 112 students were collected over four months and analyzed for grammatical accuracy. In addition, the students were interviewed about their attitudes toward feedback and how often they noticed or paid attention to that feedback. Fazio found that neither the native nor the nonnative speakers in any of the three conditions made any significant changes in the number of agreement errors over the four months.

Peer feedback

Not only teacher feedback can promote the students' writing abilities, but students also can creatively review their own or their peers' work. While giving peer feedback, some students tend to lack confidence, only pointing out some surface linguistic errors rather than some deep problems such as content, style and organizations. In addition, some students have reservations about their proficiency of offering valuable suggestions. As Rollinson (2005) points out that "many students

may need a significant amount of initial persuasion of the value of peer feedback, since they may not accept the idea that the peers are qualified to take on the role of teachers and critique their writing” (p. 25). Hence, Rollinson argues that awareness-raising, productive group interaction and productive response and revision should be confined before peer feedback.

Properly designed, peer feedback can effectively become the complement of teacher feedback. Stanley (1992) studied the interactions of 15 college students who had received training in peer responding and compared them to the interactions of students who had only participated in a short demonstration session, and investigated the effects of training on peer response interaction and their influence on revision. She found that the preparation resulted in a greater level of student engagement in the task of evaluation, more productive communication about writing, and clearer guidelines for the revision of drafts. She also found that trained students made more revisions that directly resulted from peer feedback. Hu (2009) similarly states that if students are encouraged to read their writing critically and then find the errors by themselves or by their peers, then their motivation increases in writing (p. 102). She suggests that peer feedback can go before teacher feedback. Peers can find some basic errors such as grammar and spelling, which cultivate students’ collaborative learning (p. 104).

There are also other studies indicating the advantages of peer feedback over teacher feedback in EFL writing. Their results can be summarized as follows (Chaudron, 1984 cited in Zhang, 1995).

First, since peers are closer to the learner’s proficiency and interest than the

teachers, their feedback is likely to be perceived as more informative than the teachers' feedback, despite the fact that teachers generally know more. Second, since multiple peers may be used, learners tend to gain a sense of a wider audience than simply the only one -- the teacher. Third, learners' attitude toward writing can be enhanced by the more supportive peers. Fourth, learners also learn more about writing and revision by having to read each other's drafts critically, and gain awareness of what makes writing successful and effective even can be enhanced. Fifth, students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their writing.

Research

Effectiveness of teacher feedback for student's writing

There are many factors affecting the efficacy of teacher feedback. Timing is critical to the effectiveness of teacher feedback. Feedback ought to be given as soon as possible after the writing takes place (Freeman & Lewis, 1998). They demonstrate "the greater the delay, the less likely it is that the students will find it useful or be able or inclined to act on it" (Freeman & Lewis, 1998, p.49). Feedback given too early before students have had an opportunity to work on a particular problem or task, however can be similarly unproductive.

Teacher feedback is commonly believed to be helpful for students writing. Most of the teachers regard "helping students write more effectively and finding the confidence to be a good writer are the key ideas in teaching writing" (Zhuang, 2007, p. 24). Sommers (1982) also notes that teacher feedback encourages students to revise

their writing. However, teachers indicate that they have no idea whether the students understood the feedback they were being given. Therefore, teachers should routinely talk to students about the quality of the feedback given to them. This could involve identification of examples of helpful or unhelpful feedback. This assures the students of the importance of considering and using feedback and gives the teacher valuable information about their effective practice. Indeed, there are ways of responding to students' writing that are shown to be ineffective.

Marzano and Arthur (1977) randomly assigned 24 tenth-grade students to three experimental groups. The researchers treated one group with comments to indicate faults, one group with comments designed to correct errors ("to correct" refers to the practice of editing student papers). The last group received remarks to foster thinking which contained the teacher's comments on the content and on the impact of the essays on the readers. Their experiment directed students to write a sample essay and to complete a short questionnaire to measure their attitudes toward writing at the beginning and at the end of the term. Later, the essays were scored holistically and were also analyzed for possible lexical and syntax errors. Marzano and Arthur (1977) concluded that it does not matter what the teachers write because students do not read the comments anyway, so the effect of them is minimal.

In "Responding to Student Writing," Sommers (1982) states that commenting on student writing is a widely used method for give feedback to students (p.148). However, Sommers believes that teacher feedback communicates to students what needs to be revised or changed in their writing for the next time. Sommers also lists

three problems that possibly result from teacher comments on student papers. The first problem is that students think some changes are unnecessary for their paper, they make changes just because the changes are suggested by the teacher. This may result in a paper that presents what the teacher requires the student to say rather than demonstrating the student's own words. Sommers also suggests that teacher feedback is not always clear. As a result, the student sometimes cannot distinguish the most important problem from the less important problems in his/her paper. For example, a teacher comments on student paper as "check your commas and semi-colons and think more about what you are thinking about" (p. 151), the student may be confused with the location of the most important error in his writing. The third problem Sommers suggests is that many teachers' comments are not specific for a particular text (p. 152). That is to say, teacher feedback could be more helpful when it is specific to the text it is dealing with. She also points out that most teacher feedbacks are not explicit and directive enough.

Lindemann (2001) claims another ineffectiveness. Finding his mistakes underlined again and again, or circled, or corrected, students can easily conclude that they themselves have no responsibility for finding the problems that they have previously overlooked. Students believe the teacher will find their mistakes for them.

Therefore, teachers must teach students to recognize their own mistakes. Straub (1999) states that teachers should write their comments in such a way as to avoid imposing their own visions or purposes on students' work. Instead, the focus should be on guiding students' ideas and allowing them to solve and develop their writing

without growing dependent on teachers (Straub, 1999).

However, there are a large number of studies demonstrating the efficacy of teacher feedback. Effective feedback has four basic characteristics: focused, applicable, clear, and encouraging. Clarke (2001) notes “a significant feature of effective feedback in many studies is the importance of informing children of the learning objective of the task” (p. 19).

According to Sommers (1982), providing feedback can facilitate students’ acquisition of English, improve their English writing proficiency, fulfill the communicative function of writing as well as meet students’ requirement in communicative aspect.

Sommers (1999, p. 107) recommends similar suggestions. She points out that “we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and develop a control over their writing” (p. 148). In this, Sommers highlights the goal of teacher feedback is to help students learn know how to revise.

As to Clarke (2000), marking children’s work “provides valuable personal feedback to children about their performance and related improvement” (p. 36). She argues that teacher feedback recognize the student’s achievement and clearly indicate the next steps that students need to progress.

Teacher feedback should also relate to the planned learning goals, be clear in meaning, and indicate the next steps needed for students. Students must be given time

to “absorb and act upon or consolidate the feedback comments... a response to feedback should be expected as long as the teacher’s comments are brief, clearly written and easy for the learner to understand” (Suffolk County Council, 2001, p.24).

The Assessment Reform Group (1999) proves that “significant progress [is] made by children who have been trained to be self-evaluative... Current thinking about learning acknowledges that learners must ultimately be responsible for their learning since no-one else can do it for them” (cited in Clarke, 2001, p.39). Clarke (2001) confirms the effectiveness and claims that teacher feedback is positive for students’ progress, persistence and self esteem.

Teacher’s feedback in China

Different types of teacher feedback produce a different effect on the quality of responding to students writing. There is not much research in teacher’s feedback in China and little comparative research is conducted on different areas such as grammar, vocabulary, global organization and argumentation given by teacher.

From my experience, many Chinese students attribute their poor writing mainly to their broken grammar knowledge, Teachers tend to confine student writing into a fixed structure. At the beginning, students are told to write some fixed sentence pattern such as “Currently, XX has been the order of the day. This does demonstrate the theory --- nothing is more valuable than XX It is clear that (1). If you (2), as a result, your dreams will come true.” Students just need to fill in the corresponding words or phrases into XX or (1). Accordingly, teacher feedback is mainly dealing with some surface problems such as grammar or spelling. In such situation, the content and

organization of students writing can be hardly improved.

Hu (2009) designs her research for the purposes of checking how well teacher feedback serves as an assessment tool for learning and how well the teacher feedback enhances students' second language writing in China. There are three questionnaires in her research. One is for teachers, which surveys teacher perspectives on their feedback and the kind of feedback they are giving to their students. The other two are for English learners. The one is focusing on students' expectations about teacher feedback; the other is focusing on whether students are satisfied with their teacher's feedback or not. Hu (2009) concludes that 1) teacher feedback should be indispensable in the process of writing teaching; 2) more feedback are suggested on the organization or the content of students writing rather than on the grammatical or the spelling errors; 3) positive feedback is advisable to promote student motivation of writing.

Yu (2004) carried out a design comparative experiment, distributed questionnaire sheets in four universities in China, and interviewed six of subjects in hope of proving the efficacy of peer feedback works in China's natural English classes. The data has indicated that peer work cannot help Chinese English learners to improve their writing ability significantly in a short period of time.

Du (2008) claims that feedback does play a very important role in Chinese EFL students' writing. Her research demonstrates significant improvements in fluency, accuracy, and complexity in students' writing as a result of teacher feedback. Moreover, the impact of teacher feedback seemed to be different from the impact of

peer feedback in improving the students' writing capabilities. Du indicates that peer feedback (content-oriented and form-oriented) on drafts followed by teacher scoring and comments on final texts can be a useful approach to enable teachers of English working in China to better help their students' writing skill as well as save teachers' time in giving feedback.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Feedback is a component of the intervention process. It has emerged as a key means to facilitate the learning-process in students writing.

In writing, it is often difficult for most students to imagine readers' responses in advance and to use such responses as a guide in composing. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to offer feedback and assistance to student writers during their writing process. Teachers' feedback, one of the most powerful components in the writing process, also has a great influence on students' motivation for writing. Given positive feedback to their writing, students may feel capable, successful and worthy, and thus have more confidence and interest in writing.

Feedback should identify what has been done well and what still needs improvement, It also should give specific guidance on how to make that improvement. The feedback process should involve clear expectations about student learning and performance, an explanation of the specific criteria to judge the students' achievement, steps to improve performance and a shared understanding of "quality".

Although there are strong and consistent findings that certain feedback enhances students' performance, in some instances, as it was introduced in the previous section, some feedback can actually result in negative influences. Feedback, when not used constructively, may increase writing frustration. So teachers need to provide feedback properly to learner.

CHAPTER IV

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