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Written Corrective Feedback Effects on Developing Students' Writing Capacities: The case of second year students of English at the university of Annaba-Algeria

Djeribiai Adel

University of Batna-Algeria

Abstract

Responding to student writing is an important aspect of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) composition research. Error feedback on writing, in particular is still an issue of lively debate. Many researchers argued for the ineffectiveness of error correction and claimed that it is harmful and should be abandoned. Others however, have completely different views asserting that feedback is helpful in developing the writing skill. The research that we have conducted is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the written feedback provided by the teachers of English at Annaba University, Algeria, to the students' writing and questioning the type of feedback being delivered as well as students' perception and preferences about this feedback. The hypothesis which is put forward in this research states that the written feedback does have a positive effect on the students' writing abilities. The research makes use of questionnaires administered to teachers and learners of English in order to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question. These questionnaires are followed by interviews conducted with both teachers and students of second year. In addition, an attempt has been made to describe and assess the written feedback in some corrected papers. The findings of the research have important implications for EFL writing teachers especially in developing their own techniques in providing suitable feedback which requires time and effort on the teachers' part and which ultimately would help the student writers improve their writing capacities.

Key words: written feedback, composition, writing capacities, EFL

ملخص:

تعتبر الردود التي يتلقاها الطلبة حول تعابيرهم الكتابية مظهرا مهما وجوهريا في الأبحاث المتعلقة باللغات الأجنبية. ولا يزال موضوع تصحيح أخطاء التعبير الكتابي بصفة خاصة من المواضيع المثيرة للجدل . موضوع بحثنا يتمثل في محاولة دراسة فعالية التغذية الاسترجاعية المكتوبة التي يقدمها أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة عنابة للتعبير الكتابي للطلبة، ومحاولة فهم نوع التغذية الاسترجاعية المكتوبة، وكذا مدى ادراك الطلبة لهذه الملاحظات وميولاتهم لها. تنص الفرضية الموضوعية في هذا البحث على أن الملاحظات المكتوبة لها أثر ايجابي في تطوير قدرات الطلبة في التعبير الكتابي . سنستعين في البحث باستبانيين موجّهين لطلبة وأساتذة اللغة الانجليزية لتعمق في فهم الظاهرة المدروسة علاوة على ذلك سنسعى إلى تحليل الملاحظات في الامتحانات المصححة. وسيكون للنتائج المتوقعة دور هام لأساتذة اللغة الانجليزية لاسيما في تطوير تقنياتهم الخاصة بهم وذلك بتزويدهم بملاحظات كتابية ملائمة والتي تتطلب وقتا وجهدا كبيرين من جهة الأستاذ والتي قد تساعد الطلبة في تحسين قدراتهم الكتابية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التغذية الاسترجاعية المكتوبة، التعبير الكتابي، الكفاءات الكتابية، اللغات الاجنبية

Introduction

Teaching the writing skill is still considered to be one of the most challenging tasks for both ESL and EFL teachers as it requires teachers to devote more time and effort in order to help the learners write better. This is particularly true when it comes to the evaluation of the written work of the students which is a time-consuming, tedious task. Indeed, writing evaluation does not lie exclusively in assigning grades but rather it involves the provision of comments and feedback that presumably will help the students improve their writing.

As a matter of fact, responding to student writing is an important aspect of EFL composition research. Error feedback on writing, in particular is still an issue of lively debate and there has been a controversy among scholars and teachers regarding the role of error feedback in helping students learn how to write efficiently. Some researchers had pointed out that excessive correction could demotivate and discourage student writers and it may be harmful.

Prompted by what has been said above as well as by our own experience with receiving comments and feedback from our teachers, the research that is

conducted is an attempt to investigate the effectiveness of the written feedback provided by the teachers of English at Annaba University to the students' writing putting forward the following questions:

1. What are the main types of written feedback given to students?
2. What are the students' responses towards their teachers' written feedback?
3. Is the feedback effective in improving the students' writing abilities?

Furthermore, the advanced hypotheses are the following:

1-Most of the students are interested in their teachers' written feedback but they have difficulty understanding it.

2-The written feedback is more effective if it focuses on both form and content.

3-The written feedback does have a positive effect on the students' writing abilities.

Review of the Literature

In the following section a review of the literature about the effects of the written feedback is presented in order to understand the historical development about the phenomenon under study. At first, it is worth noting that the effectiveness of teacher feedback has been examined in different ways, yet the findings have not been conclusive and sometimes even contradictory.

The period after the 1970s witnessed the domination of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This theory has emphasised the communicative function of the language. In this framework, writing teachers have attempted to help their students gain fluency in writing. Free writing was a popular technique used frequently in the classroom.

Since then, some First Language (L1) teachers and scholars have taken interest in the writing process, rather than the product itself (Sommers, 1980). Being influenced by L1 research, many L2 researchers have applied the process approach to L2 writing (Keh, 1990, Raimes, 1984; Semke, 1984, Zamel, 1980,1985). Zamel (1980) suggested that the purpose of composing should help students express their feelings, experiences, and opinions. This approach emphasises the ongoing steps of students writing from prewriting to post-writing such as brainstorming, planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing (Keh, 1990). The

act of writing is considered to be a matter of communication between a reader and a writer, and it is not restricted to grammar practice.

Feedback in the process approach emphasises a reader's (teacher or peer's) response regarding the content and organisation and leaves grammatical accuracy to the final editing phase. Therefore, advocates of the process approach have often argued that overt error correction may hinder the development of fluent writing (Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985). Zamel (1985) examined whether error correction was effective in improving grammatical accuracy in compositions by comparing students who had given correction on grammar with those who had been provided with feedback only on content. She reported that no significant difference was found in accuracy of composing between the two groups throughout the experimental period. In the aspect of content, however, students who were given content feedback only were superior to those who were given grammar feedback only.

Truscott's (1996) article remains the most debatable as he does not attribute the 'failure' or grammar feedback to any sort of inadequacy cause by teachers, students, or teaching contexts but because of the feedback itself. Therefore, he rejects the idea at all. He, however, gives what seems strong evidence that grammar feedback is simply a waste of time and effort for both teachers and students. He goes further and claims that grammar feedback is not only ineffective but it can be harmful too. Therefore, he recommends writing teachers to abandon giving feedback that corrects grammatical errors. His reasons for his stance are that grammatical correction has harmful effects in terms of teachers' intervention in complex learning processes by simply adopting a "simplistic view at learning as essentially the transfer of information from teacher to student" (Truscott;1996,p.342). Teaching practices that rely on transfer of knowledge with no concern for the process underlying the development of the language system are according to him, 'not promising'. He also argues that learning is most successful when the classroom becomes more enjoyable and out of stress. Correction, however, encourages exactly the opposite. Another point he states that what makes grammar correction 'counterproductive' is the time factor. Students will

spend a lot of time reading, reflecting, and correcting their errors instead of doing “more productive learning strategies” (Truscott, 1996, p.355). The time factor seems even more urgent with teachers. He believes that “grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned” (ibid, p.328). Truscott’s reaction to the two presumably valid reasons for giving feedback which are: 1) that not giving feedback will lead to errors fossilisation and 2) that students themselves want their errors to be corrected is that correction does not help students’ accuracy and may well damage it and it should therefore be, once again, abandoned as that “will not have any harmful effect on accuracy (or anything else).” (ibid: 360).

Truscott’s dispute views have been critically and empirically examined by many subsequent studies. That is to be supported with early studies whose findings have been neglected in Truscott’s controversial paper. Some of these studies give practical evidence that grammar correction in fact does help students improve their accuracy as opposed to Truscott. The main weak point of Truscott’s paper is that most of the literature he used to support his claims is actually researchers that have been carried out in L1 contexts which cannot be transferred completely to ESL contexts as the students in the latter environment struggle with their L2 and errors are definitely expected from them. In earlier study which also contrasts Truscott, Lalande (1982) passionately believes that correction of errors is defended. Lalande (1982) asserts that “unless all errors are identified, the faulty linguistic structures, rather than the correct ones, may become ingrained in the students’ interlanguage system” (p.140).

Kepner (1991) believes that error correction in L2 teaching is of perennial concern to L2 teachers. Kepner (1991) notes that many L2 teachers fear the fossilisation of errors (a persuasive argument shared by Ferris, 1999) and that teachers feel morally obliged to correct all mistakes in their L2 students’ work. Kepner (1991), however, is aware that because of this fact, many L2 teachers will try to avoid engaging students in sustained writing assignments because of the burdensome task of correcting and explaining the many surface-level errors likely to occur. This finding shed some light on why teachers correct errors but it does

not give empirical evidence to how successful students become after receiving their writing corrected from the teacher nor does it explain how teachers do in order to give their feedback effectively. Moreover, Kepner (1991) in his study mentions that surface-error corrections are a traditional practice in L2 teaching as a justification to the surface-level feedback given to the participating students in the study.

Other researchers had examined the stand point of Truscott. Lee (1997), for example, describes Truscott's stance as 'radical'. Furthermore, Lee expects that his beliefs will have little impact on classroom teachers. Another researcher who substantially examined Truscott's beliefs is Dana Ferris (1999). First of all, she notes that L2 students themselves are very much concerned about accuracy and they will ask for their errors to be corrected by their teachers. In response to Truscott's claims which state that giving grammar correction feedback must have no place in writing courses and should be abandoned; Ferris describes his idea as "premature and overtly strong" (p.2). Ferris (1999) also notes that Truscott overstates the negative evidence and disregard the research results that contradict his views. Two significant studies that Truscott disregards their positive findings are Fathman and Whalley (1990) and that of Lalande (1982) where both of them found positive effects for error correction.

Ferris (1999) cites three reasons why teachers shall continue providing feedback. First, surveys show that students' opinion about teacher feedback asserts that receiving grammar correction from teachers has been of great importance. Second, studies on the subject of university instructors' perception of ESL students' errors in comparison with the native students' errors. Teachers feel that students' linguistic errors are burdensome and affect their overall evaluation of student papers. Finally and most importantly, it is critical that students become more "self-sufficient in editing their own writing" (p. 8). Ashwell (2000) also responded to Truscott's (1996) ideas concerning grammar correction and suggests that many teachers correct their students written work because they believe that the students will achieve a good level of accuracy in subsequent writings. Other teachers may give surface-level corrections because they believe that this type of

feedback will help avoid fossilisation of errors. Last but not least, Chandler (2003) carried out a study which empirically proves that corrections of grammar and lexis (sentence-level errors) between assignments reduce such errors in subsequent writing without reducing fluency or quality, a finding that strongly opposes Truscott. Unlike Truscott, Chandler recommends teachers to give error feedback and require students to make correction if they want to increase accuracy in student writing.

In this section some of the related studies that dealt with the issue of the effectiveness of written feedback have been discussed. Yet, it is important to say that these studies have to be enhanced according Ferris (2002) who done a lot in this area. She claimed that:

We need to think of ways to carry out longitudinal, carefully designed, replicable

studies that compare the writing of the students receiving error feedback with that

of students who receive none, as well as comparing and controlling for other aspects of error treatment. [...] there is positive evidence from various lines of research, SLA studies, short-term experimental studies of error correction in L2

writing, longitudinal studies of improvement, and reactions and views of students

themselves. (p.60)

It is clear that there is a lot of research to be done about the effectiveness of written corrective feedback on the long-term improvement of the students' writing abilities.

Research Design and Methodology

The complexity of the topic in this research necessitates from the researcher to have a good methodology of investigation if he would have satisfactory results. As a result we have selected the triangulation methodology; a widely accepted and powerful way to attain validity and credibility. Triangulation is typically perceived to be a strategy for improving the validity of research or evaluation

findings: "...triangulation is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with it or, at least, do not contradict it" (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.235).

This methodology was reflected in this research through the use of three methods of data collection (corrected exam papers, questionnaires and interviews). This type of triangulation is called methodological triangulation (Cohen et al, 2000). This methodology can be represented in the following figure:

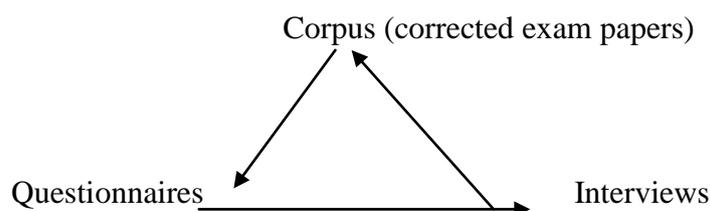


Figure 1: Proposed Model of the Used Methodology in the Research

As figure 1 shows, the data collection goes in three main phases. The first phase consists of collecting some of the corrected exam papers which we referred in the above figure as corpus. This corpus serves as a tool by which we can have a closer look at the written feedback practised by the teachers in their classes and to confirm the idea that the teachers are giving feedback to their students. In so doing, the researcher tries to demonstrate the different kinds of written feedback that are found in the essays of the learners. The second phase consists of distributing questionnaires to both learners and teachers of English at Annaba University. Finally, some of the subjects (teachers and students) are interviewed for further and deeper insight into the issue of written feedback.

Context of the Study

The study took place in the Department of English at Annaba University, Algeria. Having a case study of second year students of English is because at this year learners need to write more effective essays in modules such as civilisation and literature. Therefore, a lot of research has to be done with regard to writing in the sense that the students are required to write essays only after one academic year. In dealing with the issue of feedback in writing, the researcher has looked for not only in the module of writing but also in that of literature and civilisation.

The researcher, being a teacher in the same department, had an opportunity to get a constant contact with the subjects of his study which facilitates the job for him in administering the questionnaires and conducting the interviews. In addition, the researcher had a continuous contact with his colleague teachers in order to have a further understanding of the topic being investigated.

Having said that, it is worth noting that, the outcomes of this study cannot, in any shape or form, be representative of other teachers and students of the same level in other universities.

Data Collection Procedure

The Corpus

The corpus that is used in this study is some corrected exam papers of second year students at the department of English at Annaba University, Algeria. The papers were chosen randomly from modules such as American Literature, and written expression. The purpose of analysing these papers is to look at the sort of written feedback that the teachers provide during the correction and we try to classify this feedback according different categories. In fact the analysis would provide us with a much clearer picture about the way how the writing skill is evaluated in the context of the study and gives us some answers to the research questions addressed at the beginning of the study which questioned the written feedback practices in the Department of English at Annaba University. We will attempt to give some observation about the nature of the feedback provided without making any value judgement about it because we understand the position of teaching in the Algerian universities with the number of students in a single group and the pressure that is put on the teachers' burden to correct the papers in a short period of time. So any kind of criticism would be somehow unjust.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires were administered to both teachers and learners investigating the type of written feedback provided; the students' reactions about it and finally questioning its effectiveness. The population is constituted of thirty (30) students of English and ten (10) teachers.

Both questionnaires contain a small introduction that which explains its overall objectives. The learners' questionnaire consists of twenty four **yes/no** or close ended questions which are related to the topic of the research. Whereas the teachers' questionnaire is composed of eighteen varied questions (yes/no, close ended, open ended questions). Unlike the learners' questionnaire, teachers had more freedom to express their views and opinions by providing complete statements whenever appropriate. Both questionnaires were grouped in four sections. The first one includes background information about the students while the second aims at discovering the nature of the feedback provided by teachers. The third section deals with the students' responses and preferences of the written feedback. The final section questions the effects of the written feedback on developing the learners' writing capacities.

Interviews

To support the findings of the questionnaire, the researcher has also applied another way to obtain data from respondents; interviews. Interviews give participants a broader horizon for their ideas to be revealed. The second means of data collection in this study consists of semi-structured interviews with ten (10) students and five (05) teachers from the University of Annaba, Algeria. As described by Wallace (1998), most of semi-structured interviews' questions will be open and the agenda will include comments, examples and/or follow up questions in order to encourage the interviewee to give fuller and more detailed responses. Other aspects to be considered include time factor, friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and suitable recording tools. Participants were notified about the nature of the questions to be asked prior to the interview. Wallace (1998) assumes that this helps participants give fuller, more informative answers. Other procedures were obtaining participants' consent especially with regard to recording the interview.

The interview comprises twelve questions. First, we wanted to know if the students are willing to receive written feedback (Q1) and asking learners about

what do they think of this feedback (Q2) and whether they are satisfied with the feedback or not (Q3). Next, we moved to the way the students follow their teachers' feedback (Q4) and seeking to know their expectations (Q5). Then, the students are asked what the students do if they do not understand the feedback (Q6) and whether the students use the dictionary or grammar books in the revision process (Q7). Next, we wanted to know if the students will not repeat the same mistake after being corrected (Q8) and trying to know to interested more the learners whether the teacher's commentary or the mark (Q9). After that, we attempt to know the students' views if they do not receive any feedback (Q10) and which commentaries they like most the positive or the negative (Q11). Finally, we want to know whether the feedback is helpful or not from the students' point of view.

The teachers' interview is composed of sixteen questions concerning the nature and the effects of the written feedback they provide while correcting the written work of their learners. It questions the types of the written feedback often used by the teachers (Q1) and which types seems to be helpful for the students (Q2). Then, the researcher asks the teachers whether the students care about the feedback or not (Q3) and what types of feedback they prefer (Q4) and what are their preferences (Q5). After that, we ask the teachers which feedback is important; the one that focuses on content or the one that focuses on the form (Q10). Next, we question the effectiveness of the written feedback (Q11) and whether is it important to enhance it with an oral feedback (Q12). Finally, we ask the teachers to give some suggestions about the best ways of written feedback provision.

Discussion of the Obtained Results

The following section is an attempt to recapitulate the obtained results and try to bring them together and explain the potential contradictions between the respondents. More importantly, we attempt to answer the questions of the research and the confirmation of the hypotheses.

The first question of the research was about the nature and types of the written feedback provided by the teachers. To answer this question, some corrected exam papers were analysed and it has been found that the teachers use of variety of

feedback techniques. However, the findings of the questionnaires of both students and teachers showed that the teachers make use of symbols, an element that was not found in the analysis of all the exam papers including the non chosen ones. This could be explained by asserting that the exam papers are not representative of all the teachers especially those who were interviewed and answered the questionnaire. Nevertheless, by triangulating the means of data had given us convincing answers.

Moreover, another area of investigation in this research was the students' responses towards the written feedback. The teachers in answering the questionnaire and during the interview have claimed that the majority of the students are careless about the feedback and they do not make use of it in future writing. However, the students have shown a great interest of their teachers' written feedback whether in the findings of the questionnaire or in the interview and they are willing to receive more feedback. This contradiction between the students' views and those of the teachers could be explained by a potential lack of discussion or communication between the teachers and the learners concerning the written feedback in the classroom and hence the issue of feedback should not be overlooked by the teachers and it should be a part and parcel of any writing instruction course. This finding confirms the hypothesis that the learners are interested in the written feedback despite the incomplete consensus of the teachers who may be unaware enough of their students' attitudes about feedback because the learners have shown their interest in the feedback despite the fact that they have some difficulty understanding it due to many reasons related to the way feedback is given.

Both learners and teachers have affirmed that the feedback is more effective as long as it gives equal importance to the content and the form and this confirmed our second hypothesis. Furthermore, it has been shown that the written feedback has a positive effect on the development of the students' writing capacities and this was found in both the questionnaires and the interviews. So, the third hypothesis was confirmed as well.

Conclusion

The writing skill occupies an important position in any foreign language teaching. However, many students in the Algerian context have serious problems of writing. The study that we have conducted was about evaluating the writing skill which constitutes a crucial part of teaching this skill. In other words, we have been interested in the effects of the written feedback on the development of the students' writing abilities taking as a case study the students of second year at the Department of English at Annaba University.

Throughout this study, we have shown that the area of written feedback is not given enough interest. The learners are in need of any guidance that does not come necessarily from the teacher; students themselves can have a peer feedback. Furthermore, the students experience a difficulty understanding their teachers' written feedback, an issue that the teachers should be aware of.

Teachers of English have recognized the fact that feedback delivery is time consuming task and they are trying to do their best to help students write better. They have also affirmed that the written feedback is more effective providing that it addresses most of the aspects of language, i.e. grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, ideas, etc.

The hypotheses that were advanced in the research have been validated and enable the researcher to assert the following points:

1. The students are interested in the written feedback despite the fact that they have a difficulty understanding it.
2. The written feedback is more effective if it focuses both on content and the form of writing.
3. The written feedback has a positive effect of the development of the students' writing skill.

Hence, we can say that the teachers of English have to give the written feedback more importance and they have to be aware of their learners' needs and lacks. Effective writing course does not lie exclusively in good instruction, evaluation and sustained assessment through feedback delivery contributes enormously to the student writers' development.

In conclusion, it is quite safe to say that the written feedback constitutes an important element in any writing course and teachers should not overlook its importance in the long term. In addition, students' preferences and wants of the feedback should also be taken into account during evaluating the written work.

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