



Effectiveness of Written Feedback in ESL Writing

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Abstract – Feedback is one of the most influential tools in the learning of writing. However, there are divided views on its impact on ESL writing. This article reviews past studies to explore the various types of written feedback and its effectiveness. Firstly, it discusses the feedback role in ESL students' writing, followed by the types of feedback. Furthermore, it highlights the type of feedback which is useful and effective in the writing process. Next, it presents the different views on the effectiveness of feedback in ESL writing due to the type of feedback and the way it is given. Lastly, it concludes that feedback acts as a scaffold by providing a meaningful and impactful learning to students.

Keywords: ESL writing, written feedback, effective feedback

Introduction

Research in the area of writing has in the past decade stressed that feedback is crucial for the development of a writer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Paltridge, 2004; Reichelt, 1999). However, greater importance was only placed on revision and feedback in ESL writing during the emergence of the process writing movement in the 1970s. It was through writing researchers such as Emig (1977) and Flower & Hayes (1981) that writing as a process was discovered to have provided a platform for instructor intervention. This resulted in the notion that the writing process is to be viewed as “an activity, a process, which a writer can learn how to accomplish” (Lawrence, 1972, p.3). Presently, feedback is used to provide support and encouragement to writers and act as a type of formative intervention in achieving their writing goals (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

A substantial number of studies have researched on ways of giving effective feedback and providing valuable insights into the aspects of teacher feedback on student writing. Some studies have found that teacher feedback is an essential component in ESL and EFL students' writing as it motivates and encourages students to revise and improve their drafts and, therefore, helps develop second language writing abilities (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Goldstein, 2004). However, there are some L2 studies which have shown contrary findings that teacher feedback is not particularly effective or helpful for students in their subsequent writings (Goring-Kepner, 1991; Rob, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984).

Feedback is considered to provide valuable information to writers in achieving writing goals. It is usually given in written form and is an important component in the teaching and learning process. Teacher feedback has been generally understood as a valuable tool in the writing process (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 2002). Teacher feedback has helped writers to understand their progress in writing and how they may further develop their writing (Ryan, 1997). This is because written

feedback contains *heavy informational load* which offers suggestions to facilitate improvement and provides opportunities for interaction between the teacher and student (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). It can also be defined as writing extensive comments on students' texts to provide a reader response to students' efforts and at the same time help them to improve and learn as writers (Hyland, 2003). The teacher provides feedback to enable students to read and understand their problems and use it to improve future writing. Thus, it is important to provide feedback which is tailored to individual student needs and personality in order for it to be effective. Students should be able to understand teacher feedback and use it as the main instrument to transfer meaning and improve their writing skills through tailored feedback.

The role of feedback in ESL student writing

It is evident from many studies done that feedback, which is used as a communication tool, provides ESL students with helpful information which is crucial in the improvement and learning of ESL students' writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback provides students with a sense of direction towards what can and needs to be done in order to achieve better learning and writing goals.

Studies have also indicated that feedback closes the current and desired performance gap (Askew & Lodge, 2000; Parr & Temperley, 2010). The idea of the performance gap being reduced by feedback was already evident in previous studies done in the 1980s. Ramaprasad (1983) conceptualised feedback as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter gap in some way" (p.4). Years later, Sadler (1989) further refined the concept of feedback, stating that it is active in nature, whereby once a gap is identified, the gap needs to be closed and this closure is then identified as feedback. The idea that effective feedback closes a gap in knowledge is likewise supported by Hattie and Temperley (2007) who state that the main aim of feedback is to reduce the "discrepancies between current understandings, performance, and a goal" (Hattie & Temperley, 2007, p.86). This is reflected in their model of feedback, which introduces the terms 'feed up', 'feed back' and 'feed forward'; whereby 'feed up' refers to the notion where the learner is going, 'feed back' refers to the notion of what progress is being made to achieve a goal, and 'feed forward' refers to the notion of where they are going next (Hattie & Temperley, 2007). In short, the application of all three notions of feedback by teachers aids in ensuring that students understand where they currently stand and what steps need to be taken in order to achieve specific learning goals in a writing classroom environment.

However, for feedback to be effective and to achieve its optimum effectiveness, certain criteria need to be met by both the teachers and students. Firstly, teachers must provide effective feedback i.e. feedback which is clear, focused, encouraging and applicable in order for learning to take place (Lindemann, 2001). Effective feedback then provides the students with the opportunity to engage in a self-regulated learning process which allows them to think critically and engage in a developmental process of their writing (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Strake & Kumar, 2010).

Secondly, the students need to play their part as well; i.e. they would need to revise and amend their drafts based on the written feedback provided by the teacher in the returned draft. As feedback is usually given in a writing classroom, students are given the opportunity to not only practice and further improve their skills during the revision and rewriting period, but also seek clarification on the feedback provided. This journey helps students to achieve self-regulated learning (SRL) as they move from being novice writers to becoming expert writers, that is to move from a zone of current development (ZCD) to a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the

extent to which the provision of feedback is successful in improving writing skills is very much dependent on the students' conscientious effort to take into account the feedback provided in subsequent revisions of their work.

Types of written feedback

The types of feedback which teachers usually provide can be viewed from two perspectives: content feedback and surface feedback.

Content feedback

Content feedback focuses on students' ideas, meaning, purpose, creativity, and organization of the text. This type of feedback often points out the strengths and weaknesses of students' ideas and provides suggestions on ways to improve the text (Ferris, 2002). Examples of content feedback are as follows: "Your first argument here: 'the financial reasons are not good enough for legalization.' Focus this paragraph on this argument and develop your case" (Straub, 1996, p. 230) and "I find your argument against legalizing drugs the most convincing when you compare the number of alcoholics with the number of drug addicts" (Straub, 1996, p. 240). The purpose of content feedback is to offer guidance on students' written text and at the same time, through both elements of praise and criticism, improve and accelerate the process of learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). In general, content feedback is used to encourage students to be empowered to achieve self-regulated learning in the aspects of their thinking, motivation and behaviour during learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002).

Form feedback

Form feedback, which is also referred to as surface/corrective/error feedback addresses issues of spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and sentence structure. Examples of form feedback are "cliché," "wordy," "condense," "No!!" and circled misspellings (Straub, 1996, p. 227). The purpose of form feedback is to highlight language-related mistakes to students. There are two types of form feedback: direct feedback and indirect feedback (Ferris, 2003). Direct feedback provides the correct linguistic form or structure based on the linguistic error (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2003). This is done by circling, inserting, underlining, and crossing out unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, and providing the correct form or structure. On the other hand, indirect feedback indicates an error made by underlining or circling the error and recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line; or using a code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 2003; Robb *et al.*, 1986).

Arguments on written feedback in ESL writing

A significant number of studies have been carried out in order to determine the effectiveness of both content feedback and error feedback in improving students' quality of writing; however, conclusions reached have been varied. Three differing views are evident: one which strongly supports content based feedback as an effective form of feedback (Lunsford 1997; Sheppard, 1992; Straub 1996, 2000; Weaver, 2006), another which strongly supports error correction as the effective form of feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999; Hyland, 2003), and yet another that claims that feedback does not improve the quality of writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Goring-Kepner, 1991). Most researchers agree that feedback on content is immensely important (Straub, 1997. Studies on content feedback have shown that students improved and developed their writing in various aspects of writing, particularly in terms of language accuracy. Students themselves have attested that they "most preferred comments in the form of advice and explanations, since these comments typically are specific, offer direction for revision, and come across as help" (Straub, 1997, p. 112).

The studies by Semke (1984) and Sheppard (1992) also support this argument, acknowledging that providing content feedback is indeed effective in improving students' writing. Semke's (1984) study on a group comprising 141 first year students studying German for a period of four weeks indicated that the group which received content focused written feedback became more fluent compared to the other three groups that did not show any significant improvement in their writing at the end of the course despite being provided only form corrections, or both form and content corrections, or no corrections.

Similarly, Sheppard (1992) who based his research on 26 ESL freshman college students found that the group that received content feedback performed better in terms of sentence level compared to the group that received feedback on errors in the form of oral and written feedback as the former revised their draft using complex sentences that developed their writing content. This suggests that feedback on form appears to have little effect on improving students' ability to write accurately, indicating that too much emphasis on forms may cause students to stay away from certain structures of language. Thus, the results of the abovementioned studies suggest that error correction does not necessarily improve students' competence in writing, particularly in the absence of content-based feedback.

On the other hand, there is a debate on the effectiveness of form feedback. Truscott (1996) argued that teachers should not comment extensively on surface issues because in doing so, they send students the wrong message. This is related to the metalinguistic function, whereby teachers must be careful with what type of feedback they give to the students as feedback that is given incorrectly may cause students to think that surface issues are more important than content, organization, creativity and insight. This is reflected in Truscott's (1996) review article entitled 'The Case against Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes' which led to a series of debates in this field. He critically reviewed previous studies on feedback and argued that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned. He also claimed that the notion that ESL learners held a high value for grammar correction is a false belief, so teachers did not need to adapt their instruction to it.

Conversely, there is a second argument which supports form feedback as it does improve students' quality of writing. Many researchers have argued that accuracy of language is important for a good piece of writing and that grammar correction is necessary in a writing class (Ferris, 1999; Hyland, 2003). This view is further supported by Ferris (1999) who recommends that errors must be marked and highlighted clearly in order for the students to develop their linguistic competence. Hyland's (2003) study on ESL students also yielded results that the students did improve in their writing as form feedback made students aware of their errors and these were used in their revision process of subsequent written drafts; thus, improving their writing skills and causing them to value form feedback.

Ferris (1999), a strong opponent of Truscott's argument that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned, refuted Truscott's claims by providing reasons as to why teachers should continue with error correction in L2 writing classes. Ferris argued that firstly, surveys in previous literature showed that students wanted error correction. Secondly, the absence of any form of grammar feedback might frustrate the students, particularly when rubrics and written examinations allocated considerable weight on formal accuracy. Lastly, error correction could help students become more self-sufficient in editing their own work.

There are also arguments within proponents of form feedback with regards to the effectiveness of both types of form feedback, i.e. direct and indirect feedback. Robb *et al.* (1986) found that there is no difference in revision between the two types of form feedback in his investigation of 134 EFL Japanese college students. In contrast, Ferris and Helt (2000) found indirect feedback to be the most effective feedback in the revision of 92 ESL learners in a university in the United States. However, Chandler (2003) and Bitchener (2008) found that direct feedback had a positive effect on ESL learners. Bitchener's (2008) study of surface feedback using the English article system with ESL students led him to conclude that direct feedback had improved the students' application of the English article system, with the accuracy level remaining constant even after two months without further feedback. Therefore, studies into the effectiveness of direct and indirect form feedback seem to be inconclusive.

The third and final argument proposes that feedback does not improve the quality of writing. According to Goring-Kepner (1991), feedback on both content and form is ineffective. Her study, that comprised 60 students taking Spanish as a foreign language course for a period of one semester, took into account the students' levels of verbal ability. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in terms of accurate use of structures between both groups receiving form and content feedback.

This argument is further supported by Fathman and Whalley (1990) whose study indicates that feedback itself does not necessarily improve subsequent drafts. Their study which involved 72 students enrolled in intermediate ESL college composition classes at two different colleges considered the factor of not providing feedback; i.e. students were given just one type of feedback, or both types of feedback or no feedback whatsoever. Their research findings suggest that although form and content feedback affect rewriting positively regardless of whether the feedback is given alone or simultaneously, students who receive no feedback from the teacher also recorded high scores in the rewrites. Thus, it is claimed by Fathman and Whalley (1990) that it is not teacher feedback but rather, the process of rewriting that ensures a better subsequent revision.

Regardless of the differing conclusions that researchers have reached on identifying the most effective type of feedback, it is evident that students do see value in receiving feedback. Dheram (1995) found a positive correlation between students' reactions and teachers' feedback whereby the five ESL students he had investigated, expressed their desire for teacher feedback to help them write effectively. This is because feedback and revision are viewed as necessary tools in the writing process, which eventually lead to a discovery of new meanings in the process of writing. Students were also equally interested in getting responses on content, purpose and organization of their writing as well as sentence structure and lexis (Straub, 1997).

Further considerations in providing effective written feedback

In order for feedback to promote an improvement in the quality of ESL students' writing skills and encourage the learning process, *effective* feedback is required. An understanding of what constitutes effective feedback based on students' perspectives would most likely aid teachers to adjust the way they provide feedback, regardless of whether they are providing content feedback or form feedback. These considerations will be discussed in relation to some of the research studies done over the years. Firstly, the student's cultural background is an important factor to consider as it does affect the way a student perceives the intention of the teacher's feedback. Students from an Asian culture tend to be more sensitive towards critical feedback. This is evident in a study carried out by Ridsdale (2000) who studied international postgraduate students' perceptions of the feedback they obtained for their

written drafts. Ridsdale (2000) found that students from an Asian cultural background felt that their supervisors were not interested with their work due to the tone, jargon and complex language used in the feedback. In addition, they reacted negatively to their supervisors' feedback as they perceived the feedback to be overly critical, and judgmental rather than developmental. This could perhaps be addressed by taking into consideration the suggestion by Straub (2000) to create a conversation feel with students in the feedback. This helps to not only establish a better relationship between teacher and student, but also increase the value of feedback. Thus, effective feedback takes into account the students' cultural background in order to ensure that the way feedback is given is not perceived negatively by the student due to cultural differences.

Secondly, written feedback should be specific and clear in order to help students to discover the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. Studies conducted by both Straub (2000) and Cohen (1987) highlighted students' preferences for feedback which provides direction to help them organize their written text. The students appreciated feedback that is written in complete sentences, given in relation to specific words and paragraphs from the students' text, and devoid of vague, indirect feedback such as abstract, technical language and abbreviations, which were deemed as 'confusing' and 'not clear'. The lack of clarity in feedback causes students to be unsure on what to do with the feedback in their subsequent revision (Leki, 1992). Furthermore, Leki (1992) pointed out that written comments may sometimes be rejected or disregarded due to the teacher's handwriting which could be hard to read. Bardine (1999) also discovered that L1 sophomore high school students were "very vocal" (p. 5) about wanting more comments that were specific, thorough and well-explained. Thus, all factors contributing to the clarity of the feedback should be given due attention. As suggested by Saito (1004), in order for feedback to be achieved, ESL teachers should clearly state the purpose of their feedback, the strategies that students could use for handling the feedback, and the benefits that students would derive in order for the feedback to be understood and valued by students.

Clarity of feedback is often achieved when direct comments are provided. Hyland and Hyland (2001) argue that teacher feedback can sometimes be problematic because students often fail to understand their teachers' indirect comments. Their study provides a text analysis of the teacher's written feedback given to ESL students by its functions as praise, criticism, or suggestions. They explored the teacher's motivations to use mitigation strategies that soften the criticisms and suggestions on student writing with the use of hedges, question forms, personal opinions. Even though they recognize the importance of such mitigation strategies to minimize the force of criticisms and enhance effective teacher-student relationships, they claim that being too indirect can lead to students not understanding or comprehending the comment. However, greater considerations have to be given to the use of direct and indirect comments in feedback as many factors come into play. While direct comment may provide more clarity and direction to students, it may be perceived as being over critical and judgemental within certain cultural groups. Thus, a more flexible approach has to be adopted by teachers in order to give consideration to the kind of feedback that is most beneficial and suitable for a particular student or group of students.

Thirdly, the value attributed to the feedback by the students is another important factor to consider. A considerable number of studies on L1 and ESL students' responses to teacher have indicated that students appreciate and benefit from teacher feedback (Cohen, 1987; Dheram, 1995; Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 2002; Straub, 1997). Most students found teacher feedback on their drafts helpful and made use of it to improve their writing (Ferris, 2002). More specifically, the results of a study by Hyland (2003) to investigate how ESL students made use of form feedback in their writing texts showed that majority of the students valued their feedback. The feedback created awareness on the errors they

made, which in turn led to the necessary revisions of their written drafts that eventually resulted in an improvement in their writing. It is also noted that despite the fact that the study conducted by Hyland (2003) focused on form feedback, the students said that they would have welcomed any feedback on content as well. Similarly, Weaver (2006) who investigated how Business and Art & Design college majors viewed their instructors' feedback found that students wanted their teachers to give them more guidance and suggestions on how to improve on future work.

A final consideration would be that a positive outcome is achievable if both teacher and student play their part in the process of writing and revising. Enginarlar (1993) found that ESL students viewed the feedback provided on errors as a shared responsibility between themselves and the teachers. Teachers play their role in providing effective feedback to the students and students react positively to the errors in their subsequent revisions. However, this only happens when the students understand these errors, thus reinforcing the need for effective feedback. Consequently, the feedback did not only play an important role in students' improvement in text quality and writing proficiency, but also assisted students in making judgments on how well they progress in their own writing.

Conclusion

Feedback plays an inherent and crucial part of ESL writing through the numerous studies conducted on feedback and its impacts on student writing (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Goldstein, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The findings of the studies above suggest that in order for effective learning of writing to take place, students must be provided with feedback which is clear, timely and loaded with information regarding their writing performance. This is to avoid students from being disappointed and frustrated in their writing process and to ensure learning take place by providing helpful and effective feedback. Additionally, two main functions of feedback in the learning process can be noted: 1) it helps students identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing performance, and 2) it provides helpful information in students' revision process. This is to ensure that students understand how to revise their writing and avoid writing pitfalls in order to improve their writing. Furthermore, feedback helps students to be aware of the writing expectation in terms of the content and language of their subject matter, improves their behavior in thinking toward their writing task, and ensures that they meet their writing objective(s). Therefore, it can be concluded that the type of feedback and the way the feedback is given play a major role in ensuring students achieve their writing goals and develop as skilled writers.

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