Teacher Written Feedback for L2 Learners' Writing Development

Napaporn Srichanyachon

Language Institute, Bangkok University, Thailand
Corresponding author: napaporn.s@bu.ac.th

Abstract

The article focuses on the importance of teacher written feedback on L2 students' writing development including its effects on both students' language accuracy and their motivation. It discusses students' feedback preferences in terms of content, compares the methods of giving feedback, and suggests instructional practices to help teachers to provide effective written feedback for their students. Feedback can be given directly or indirectly. In order to give effective written feedback, teachers should consider their students' needs for error correction and classroom realities. No matter what method is used, it is important for teachers in ESL and EFL settings to give students a crystal clear explanation. Also, teachers should include comments of praise and encouragement in their written feedback because positive feedback can boost student motivation to improve their writing skills.

Key Words: Teacher feedback; Writing; L2

Introduction

Feedback is an essential component of any English language writing course. Ur (1996: 242) defines feedback as information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of the learning task, usually with the objective of improving their performance. Surveys of students' feedback preferences generally indicate that L2 students prefer teacher written feedback to alternative forms such as oral and peer feedback (Saito, 1994; Zhang, 1995). Mostly students from cultures that see a teacher as the only source of authority value teacher revision more highly than other methods because they have confidence in the teacher's knowledge and skill in English. Teacher written feedback or handwritten commentary is a primary method to respond to students' essays to assist students' writing development; teacher written comments on the students' drafts indicate problems and make suggestions for improvement of future papers. Through feedback teachers can help students compare their own performance with the ideal and to diagnose their own strengths and weaknesses.

Researchers have tried to find out what kinds of comments are most effective. The most common form of written feedback in L2 writing contexts has been concerned with error correction. Truscott (1996) doesn't believe in the benefits of error correction and argued that this kind of feedback is harmful to students' fluency and their overall writing quality and should be abandoned. He suggests that teachers should adopt a 'correction-free approach' in their classrooms. However, teachers in ESL/EFL settings may be reluctant to follow this advice. L2 learners may find difficulty identifying errors and using right words in their sentences due to their limited English proficiency. Research has indicated that L2 students benefit from error correction. Ferris and Roberts (2001) examined the effects of teacher feedback among university ESL student writers in terms of the percentage of errors they could revise when they self-edited their texts across three feedback conditions: (1) errors marked with codes; (2) errors underlined with no codes; and (3) no error feedback at all. They found that both

error feedback groups significantly outperformed the no feedback control group. Similarly, Lee (1997) investigated the performance of ESL college students in Hong Kong and found out that the students corrected more errors when the errors were underlined or indicated.

L2 students prefer errors marked with teachers' codes because it is easy for them to edit and improve their papers. The error correction approach seems a reasonable course of action in our writing classes, but it is necessary to make sure we implemented it in the most effective manner. In the university where the author teaches, as in much of higher education in Thailand, class sizes are rising. Forty is common in this university. In addition, students in a class have different English background knowledge. There has been much discussion within the English department about how to manage the provision of feedback. This raises the question of the value of teacher comments and whether they have a role to play in L2 writing. Therefore, the article has been written in order to address various aspects to be considered while writing comments on student papers. It also addresses the importance of written feedback given by language teachers to their students.

Students' Feedback Preferences in Terms of Content

In ESL/EFL writing classes, grammatical correction feedback represents one of the most crucial aspect of improving learners' writing. Ferris (1997) examined whether certain types of commentary were more helpful than others in assisting L2 students to revise. The findings showed that marginal comments, requests for clarification, and comments on grammatical issues led to the most effective revisions. L2 students attach a great deal of importance to writing accuracy and are eager to obtain the teacher's comments on their errors. They expect teachers to comment on their written errors and are frustrated if this does not happen (Leki 1991; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). According to Leki (1991), grammar feedback has been viewed as helpful by college level ESL students.

Although most studies show that students require teacher feedback to highlight their grammatical errors, some reveal that they also want teachers to give them feedback on the content and ideas in their writing. Sträub (1997) found that students were interested in receiving feedback on both global issues (i.e., content, organization, and purpose) and local ones (i.e., sentence structure, word choice, and grammar). The students also indicated that they preferred comments that provided advice, included explanations, and employed open-ended questions. Therefore, when giving feedback on student errors, writing teachers should also give students comments on their content and provide several tips on how to improve their writing. As Chi (1999) points out, students appreciate comments that reflect the teacher's involvement and engage them in an exchange about their writing.

Method: Direct VS Indirect Feedback

Direct feedback is a technique of correcting students' error by giving an explicit written correction. On the other hand, indirect feedback is when the teacher indicates that an error has been made by means of an underline, circle, code, etc. Both methods can improve student's writing, but a number of researchers think that indirect feedback is generally more appropriate and effective than direct feedback and brings more benefits to students' long-term writing development than direct feedback (Lalande, 1982; Frantzen, 1995; Ferris, 2002). First, indirect feedback can guide learning and help the students solve problem by themselves (Lalande, 1982). Second, students are able to express their ideas more clearly in writing and to get clarification on any comments that teachers have made (Frodesen, 2001). In addition, students feel that indirect feedback is useful in encouraging them to reflect on aspects of their writing and to develop improvements (Miceli, 2006). Indirect feedback can be done by a code representing a specific kind of error. When giving indirect feedback, teachers underline errors and use codes to indicate the type of error such as SP (spelling error), P (fault in punctuation), and VT (wrong verb tense). This

method gives students the opportunity to fix errors themselves. However, teachers should familiarize their students with the codes, so that they will not be surprised when they see teacher written comments.

Indirect teacher feedback is very useful when it incorporated with student self-revision, but lower proficiency students may be unable to identify and correct errors even when they have been marked for them. Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) investigated the relationship between teacher-written commentary and what L2 students do as a result of it. Their data showed that students who were especially weak looked forward to receiving feedback that acknowledged what they were doing was in line with the assignment. Ferris (2006) found that students utilized direct feedback more consistently and effectively than indirect types, partly as it involves simply copying the teacher's suggestion into the next draft of their papers. Thus, direct feedback can be more beneficial to students in some contexts, especially when revising syntax and vocabulary (Miceli, 2006). According to Ferris (2002), direct feedback is appropriate, however, (1) for beginner students; (2) when errors are 'untreatable', i.e., errors not amenable to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice and (3) when teachers want to draw students' attention to other error patterns which require student correction.

The danger of direct feedback is that teachers may misinterpret students' meaning, and students may express confusion and dissatisfaction with teachers' feedback. When students have different opinions from the teacher's response, they may resist to revision and feel a teacher's feedback is invalid or incorrect. Consequently, in facilitating teacher feedback in L2 writing, teachers need to consider students' English background knowledge and indicate their needs for error correction. Direct feedback seems to be appropriate for students with weak English skills. However, when giving direct feedback, teachers should also give them clear explanations about grammatical errors so that they can deepen their English knowledge. Also, a combination of direct and indirect feedback can be used for students

in large mixed ability classes.

The Role of Teachers in Providing Effective Feedback for L2 Students

According to Barkaoui (2007), teachers need to: a) motivate students, b) model effective revision strategies, c) raise students' awareness about the importance of (re)seeing their texts from the reader's perspective, d) encourage students to reflect on and self-assess their own writing, and e) use appropriate writing tasks and activities for teaching and assessment. Feedback can serve as guidance for eventual writing development as far as students are concerned (Hyland, 2003). So, teachers should offer self–correction opportunity for their students by providing indirect feedback on student's grammatical errors. Chandler (2003) examined whether teacher feedback in the form of underling errors could help East Asian college students improve their writing accuracy and whether the effects would last over one semester. The results showed that formal accuracy of student writing improved significantly if the participants were required to correct their errors than if they were not.

Marking mechanical errors is not enough since it can be frustrating. Corrective feedback should be combined with classroom discussions, and teachers' use of referential or open questions should be applied. As Ellis (1994, cited in Tribble, 1996) points out, open (information seeking) questions may result in more meaning negotiation and more complex learner output. Teachers should give information that a student can use and create environment in which students can explicit requests for particular kinds of help. Rae and Cochrane (2008) studied the student perspective of written assessment feedback and found out that students required the assessment item to be clearly presented, assessment criteria to be communicated before they commence their assessment, and instruction on how to make best use of the feedback they receive. To help students improve their abilities to revise, instructors are advised to provide specific guidance.

The Power of Teacher Written Feedback

Feedback is "a key element of the scaffolding provided by the teacher to build learner confidence and the literacy resources to participate in target communities" (Hyland and Hyland, 2006: 83). It may serve not only to let learners know how well they have performed but also to increase motivation and build a supportive classroom climate (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Teacher written feedback can serve as a powerful tool to motivate students in the writing process if done well. According to Brookhart (2010), feedback includes two factors: cognitive and motivational factors. It gives students information they need so they can understand where they are in their learning and what to do next—the cognitive factor. Once students feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their own learning—the motivational factor.

Writing teachers should not simply respond to grammar and content but should include comments of praise and encouragement in their written feedback. Mitigation has been found to improve the confidence of students and lead them to be responsible for their writing (Weaver, 2006). To support effective written feedback, teachers should keep in mind that positive feedback is considered 'positive reinforcement' whereas negative feedback is considered 'punishment' (Brookhart, 2010: 11). Thus, teachers should be polite and mitigate their written feedback.

Conclusion

Teachers should be aware of the importance of providing effective feedback for the development of L2 learners' thinking and writing. Feedback can encourage and advance student learning if it focuses on 'growth rather than grading' (Sadler, 1983: 60). To make use of its full potential, students must be able to self-manage learning and lecturers have a role in encouraging and motivating this ability within students (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Thus, teachers may present themselves as helpful facilitators offering support and guidance.

To give effective feedback to students to improve their written accuracy, classroom realities and the preferences of students must be considered. In L2 writing classes, students need teachers to check about the mistakes they made. When teachers give feedback, they should show students examples of how they can apply to improve their writing and give them the opportunity to talk in class to express their ideas and to discuss any challenging analytical issues. In addition, written feedback must be done politely. Remember mitigated commentary can be used as a tool to increase student motivation, engagement, and interest.

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