THE INFLUENCE OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON THE WRITING SKILL PERFORMANCE OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Written feedback has been conceptualized as a form of communication between the instructor and the learners in the educational context. The written feedback helps to improve learning through knowledge construction and practice. It was to this background that I undertook this research to examine the influence of written feedback on the writing skill performance of high school students. Using a descriptive design, the study was undertaken in Kumasi Metropolis. Utilizing 350 participants, I analyzed the data with SPSS 25.0. The findings of the study revealed that students have a positive perception towards written feedback, the communicative function of the teachers' feedback was both expressive and metalinguistic, and there was a positive effect of the written feedback from teachers on students writing performance. Hence, it was confirmed that written feedback influences writing skills.
Keywords: Written feedback, Communication, Writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Within the theories of learning and practice, feedback has proven to be very significant. Attitudes towards feedback have evolved beginning in the late 1950s. Truscott's research in 1996 generated considerable attention to feedback as he described it as harmful and redundant. According to Hyland (2003), feedback is any elaborative comment on learners' texts to help

them improve their knowledge. In the teaching context, feedback refers to "…post-response information which informs the learners on their actual performance to help them determine if their competence corresponds to the learning aims in the context" (Narciss, 2008, p. 292).

Writing is not just a way or means to learn grammar and vocabulary, but also a skill in itself (Weigle, 2002). This means that as a skill, the proficiency level of writing can be increased. This can be achieved by using a corresponding measure, written feedback (WF), to enable students to better their writing skills, grammatically, by the teacher using meaningful sentences or words to draw their attention to errors, correction, or encourage them. It is important to state that although other forms of feedback (peer feedback and oral feedback) exist, the long-established teacher WF continues to play an important role according to the researchers (Ferris, 1999; Kroll, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Ferris (2007) conditioned that teacher WF can in worst-case scenarios be insensitive or even hostile. However, with all the shortcomings of teacher WF, it continues to be a convenient medium of communication used in all levels of education. Hennessey and Forrester (2014) found that WF was successful in helping students revise their writing; it also increased students' quality in doing their tasks.

Hyland and Hyland (2008, p. 84) criticize the effectiveness of teacher WF by seeing it to be "frequently misunderstood, vague, inconsistent and authoritarian, overly concerned with error and often functioning to appropriate or take over students' texts by being too directive". Written feedback given by the teacher to the students is almost always misinterpreted or misunderstood by the students and they barely put it into practice. The issue of WF has gained much attention based on arguments; but most researchers, (for example, Kroll, 2001; Ferris, 2006), agree on two things: the importance of WF and the value ESL students place on it. WF is effective in a discourse when the student understands it and willingly acts on it. The teacher uses WF as a special form of communication tool to interact with students. In the learning environment, "the human encounter between the teacher and student is often a more powerful teaching tool than the academic content, the grade, the data analysis and the hours spent picking apart the curriculum" (Schrek, 2011, p. 5). So, the teacher uses WF as a tool of encounter to establish a rapport and an interpersonal relationship with the students. Concerning the research of Higgins et al. (2001), I believe that the difficulty in understanding the WF sometimes dwells in the language frame or context. WF should not be teacher-centered in terms of understanding and effectiveness.

In Africa, Koen, Bitzer, and Beets (2012), after conducting a study at the University of Free State in South Africa, suggested that feedback is not inherent significant to improve learning, but the comprehension of students of the feedback while acting on it makes it relevant to learning. Kekic and Kelemework (2014) study recommended that teachers should equip themselves with relevant theories in giving feedback to students. In Ghana, Gborsong, Awiah, and Appartaim (2018) conducted a study at some selected colleges of education to investigate the teachers, written feedback commentary on students, project work. Pedagogically, they suggest that it may be a good idea for teachers or supervisors of writing to consider their responses and ways of making their written feedback clear to the students since they analyzed some feedback that was vague and misinterpreted. It is against this background that I set out to examine the influence of written feedback on students writing skill performance.

Statement of the Problem

Feedback generates a form of interaction between the teacher and the student. There are many pieces of research (example, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Hyland, 2003; Marefat, 2005; Sheen, 2010) on how to give oral feedback in written discourse; however, the effectiveness of oral feedback for improving student writing is still uncertain (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The performance of students in the English Language in terms of writing skills has been described in various unpalatable terms to reflect the concern of people about its falling standard (Mireku-Gyimah, 2014). The desire to read the literature and conduct this study was a result of my personal experience when I visited an S.H.S. in Kumasi to submit my off-campus teaching practice letter. A teacher was complaining as to why the students kept repeating the same errors he comments on or whether they do not understand the written feedback.

Reading the literature on written feedback, I identified content and geographical gap. There have been researches (Ferris, 1999, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006) which were generalized to ESL countries, Ghana inclusive, on the 'Concept of Written Feedback' concerning the teacher written feedback and ESL students writing skill; whereby the perspective looks at the communication between the teacher and students through the written feedback in knowledge construction and practice. Most of the studies (such as Dzontoh, 1996; Adu-Darko, Appiah & Boahen, 2008) conducted have been on error analysis of students' writing skills in Ghana generally; and on written feedback (Gborsong et al., 2018) at the tertiary level which has created a gap in terms of content and location. In Ghana, as an ESL country, this study was conducted to look at the perceived influence of the English Language teachers' written feedback on the writing skill performance of S.H.S. students in the English Language in the Kumasi Metropolis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of written feedback on students' writing skill performance in the English language.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions;

1. What are the communicative functions of the written feedback among teachers in S.H.S.s in Kumasi Metropolis?
2. What are the perceptions of students in S.H.S.s in Kumasi Metropolis towards written feedback?
3. What are the perceived effects of teachers' written feedback on S.H.S. students' writing skills in the Kumasi Metropolis?

Significance of the Study

In the first place, the study contributes to the knowledge of teachers about how to write effective feedback to improve the performance of students in the English Language. Teachers know how not to make written feedback vague, inappropriate, or teacher-centered. Also, the study contributes to the formulation of educational policies on teachers' effective practice and usage of written feedback in the English Language. This study helps in the formulation of policies to make written feedback an important task for the teacher in written discourse by the students. Furthermore, the study significantly aids ESL learners in understanding the information and communicative function of written feedback by the teacher. Students will acquire knowledge in understanding the written feedback by the teacher as to whether it was knowledge exchange

or activity exchange. Lastly, the findings of this study provide the momentum for further studies on writing skills.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This portion of the research reviewed works by authors, writers of articles in magazines, and journals that related to the explanation of the theory and concept that were found in the research problem or relevant to it and helped put the study in its proper focus.

Theoretical Review

In this chapter, I reviewed the theory on which my research is founded. The theoretical review specifically covered the Social Constructivist Theory by Lev Vygotsky.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory views learning as an active process through which knowledge is constructed. Learning, which is an active social process, occurs through an interaction between the teacher and learner pivoted on language usage. This theory offers an important space for the teacher and student to interact. This active interaction helps in the development of skills and learners progress towards their potential level. I considered this active interaction is in the form of written feedback. The development of skill (in this study, writing skill) occurs in what Vygotsky termed as the Zone of Proximal Development (hereinafter, ZPD).

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines the ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Teachers or peers on a higher level of achievement can guide, motivate and support those on a lower level of achievement. I associated the theory with collaborative learning through practice to develop the skills and knowledge of learners. According to Martinez (2010, p. 14), the ZPD "recognizes that individuals often exhibit higher levels of skill through the assistance and encouragement …". I am of the view that with the help of most importantly teachers, students can increase their writing skills to a more advanced level.

I agree with Costino and Hyon (2011) on the assertion that Social Constructivism in ESL writing is more pragmatic; in that, it steers learners towards meeting their immediate needs such as understanding tasks or assignments and structuring appropriate write-ups, involved in completing their academic writings tasks, but I argue that it is the quality, timeliness, and effectiveness of the teacher-learner interaction through the WF which is crucial in improving the writing skill of learners.

Barnard and Campbell (2005, p. 85) state that "teachers need to be provided with an appropriate theoretical foundation - as well as technical expertise – both before embarking on, and implementing, an innovative approach to teaching writing". In this sense, I am of the view that WF should form a core portion of the curriculum design to help develop the learners and not just be a one-time activity issued from the teacher to the learner for an immediate effect to fulfil an immediate task.

The proposed theoretical framework shows the recurring interactions between the teacher and the learner concerning writing skill development. The illustration showed the provision of written feedback on the writing task of students after their first response based on the current competence which the learner applies the scaffold – written feedback, in the next response based on their future competence for improvement in their writing skills. The writing task occurs within the ZPD which is challenging to learners based on their current competence in writing

skills. The written feedback (scaffold), which is formative, timely, and direct, helped the learners to develop their writing skills to respond again to a writing task. There was an improvement in their writing skill performance concerning the writing task.

Conceptual Review

Here, I reviewed the concept on which this research is founded. Mack (2009) defines WF as any comments, questions, or error corrections that are written on students' assignments. I argue that Mack's definition is narrow because he excludes other forms of writing tasks such as tests, examination scripts, and draft works. Giles, Gilbert, and McNeill (2014a) stated that WF is an essential component of the learning and teaching cycle. Furthermore, Hattie and Timperley (2007) asserted that WF is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, and its effect has been well-recognized in articles on teaching and learning. WF is intended to improve writing accuracy and as such, it is one of the essential, but challenging tasks of classroom instruction; one reason being the relatively large number of students in a classroom. Hyland and Hyland (2006) see teacher WF as purely informational with its position as a medium for the teacher to channel responses and advice in assisting students' improvement. The WF plays a role in the students' affective and cognitive domain of learning. Hence, I assert that teachers should try to discuss their WF with their students as this will promote effective improvement and revision. Another important issue in WF is the choice of the feedback focus; that is, teachers have to decide whether the feedback should emphasize form, content, writing process, or the significance of the correct final draft (Makinen, 1995). Giving a good WF requires an understanding of the English Language.

Brookhart (2008) outlines some ways to give effective WF to students. 1. Clarity; she states that clarity is important; students need to understand the feedback information as the teacher intends it. I agree with Brookhart because students have a different arsenal of vocabularies, previous knowledge, and experiences. Hence, the WF must be in a simple language structure that is clear to understand. 2. Specificity; Brookhart (2008) asserts that demanding how specific to make your feedback is a matter of the Goldilocks' principle: not too narrow, not too broad, but just right. As stated by Hyland (2003), WF should not be vague. Narrow or broad WF is just as bad. 3. Tone; Brookhart defines tone as the expensive quality of feedback message, and it affects how the message will be "heard". The diction and style play an important role here. The tone must let the student understand that s/he is an active learner. I am of the view that just as questioning is important and core in learning, the WF's tone should be usually in a question form and promote active learning.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

I did a review of the relevant literature as I related specifically to the formulated research questions which guided the study. For convenience purposes, each research question constituted a subheading in this section. They were as follows;

Students' Perception of Written Feedback from English Language Teachers

Perception relates to the affective nature of an individual. Michaels (2000) defined perception as the detection of information when a learner receives new information, s/he expresses a positive or negative feeling towards the information.

Seker and Dincer (2013) conducted a study titled "An Insight to Students' Perceptions on Teacher Feedback in Second Language Writing Classes" to investigate the perception of students on written feedback. The data for their study were gathered using a Likert-type

questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with students (n = 457) and English Language teachers (n = 11). They analyzed their data quantitatively using SPSS 17.0 and qualitatively following content analysis. Their study revealed that students showed positive affective dispositions towards the teacher's written feedback. The students generally felt cared for and improved.

In the University of Zaira, Amara (2015) conducted a study to examine Arabian learners' perception of teachers' written feedback commentary in an ESL writing classroom. He used the qualitative research method to conduct the exploratory investigation. He discussed that students appreciated and showed strong feelings towards comments on their essays. He also states that it helped the learners to write more efficiently and effectively. I believe the positive written feedback fostered the appropriate language behavior (writing) of the students. He provides pedagogical implications of his research that teachers should provide well-written feedback comments that relate to specific errors. Also, teachers' written feedback should carry a clear message. I believe that this pedagogical implication is to buttress Hyland's (2008) assertion that the teacher's written feedback can be vague, authoritarian, and misinterpreted. He concludes that teachers need to consider how their written feedback is perceived and presented since it has a significant effect on students' learning.

Communicative Function of Written Feedback among English Language Teachers

Gborsong et al. (2018) in their study termed their analysis of the communicative function of the written feedback as linguistic form (speech function) which were statements, questions, exclamations, and imperatives – with subcategories of asking for information make, make a suggestion and give information. Their findings showed that the frequent linguistic form (communicative function) of written feedback was the statement (116) with a percentage of 34.5%. Their findings supported the research study, Ferris et al. (1997), that teachers should avoid being overly directive and critical in their feedback.

Leng (2013) researched to analyze the communicative function of written feedback on ESL students' writing in Taylor's University, Malaysia. He categorized the communicative function of the written feedback into two main functions: Directive and Expressive. He presents that majority of the written feedback fell into the directive category (77%). The directive feedback was specific and well-focused. Leng's findings indicated that the written feedback was helpful and useful in their revision which promoted self-regulated learning. He provides an educational implication that there is a need for the training of teachers in the area of providing effective feedback to students.

Effects of Written Feedback on Students Writing Skills in the English Language

Razali and Jupri (2014) in their study explores the effects of teacher written feedback on undergraduates' writing in an English L2 classroom at University Malaysia Perlis. They used a mixed method research design to obtain their data. A questionnaire was the main instrument for the data collection. Their study revealed that teachers' written feedback has a positive effect on students' writing skills.

A study by Baghzou (2011) was conducted to find out the effects of the implementation of written feedback on learners' performance in writing. She used the experimental research method where participants of 60 second-year students of the University of Klendela, Algeria were randomly grouped. A pre-test was conducted on the same conditions for both groups. The experimental group had a writing activity in which they benefitted from written feedback and

the control group had no written feedback. A post-test was conducted to compare the results of both groups. Baghzou presents that there was a significant difference between the control group and the experimental group. The results of the written feedback had a positive effect in improving the students' performance in writing. I conducted similar research to find out whether written feedback affects S.H.S. students in the Kumasi Metropolis.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design was used in the study. This study was carried out in the Kumasi Metropolis of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The target population comprised all senior high schools (that is twenty-two schools) in the Kumasi Metropolis. The study made use of 377 participants of which 325 were students and 25 were teachers. The instrument for the data collection was a questionnaire. The items were in correspondence to the research questions. The data was analyzed using with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 25.0).

DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Features of Respondents

This section looks at the personal characteristics of 25 teachers from whom data was collected. Their characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Features of Respondents

Variable	Subscale	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	72
	Female	7	28
Qualification	Diploma	4	16
	First Degree	19	76
	Second Degree	2	8
Years Taught	1 – 10 Years	10	40
	11 – 20 Years	7	28
	21 – 30 Years	4	16
	31 – 40 Years	1	4
	41 – 50 Years	3	12

Source: Field data, 2021

As can be seen from Table 1, out of the 25 teachers of English Language, 72% were males with only 28% females. This presents the general notion that the English Language is a subject predominantly taught by males.

Also, it is clear from Table 1 that the minimum professional qualification of the teachers of English Language was Diploma and the highest qualification being 2nd Degree. It was realized that the mode for the professional qualification was 1st Degree (76%), followed by Diploma (16%) and 2nd Degree (8%). Inductively, this shows that most of the teachers of the English Language in the Kumasi Metropolis are qualified academically and can handle the subject.

Finally, Table 1 further indicates that most of the teachers have taught between 1 – 10 years (40%); followed by 11 – 20 years (28%); 21 – 30 years (16%), 31 – 40 (4%) and 41 – 50 years (12%). Applying the criterion by Steffy (1989), on how experienced or inexperienced a teacher is based on years taught, we claim that teachers of the English Language in the Kumasi Metropolis have the requisite experience to teach. This can greatly impact the teaching of the subject positively.

This section looks at the personal characteristics of 352 students from whom data was collected. Their characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Personal Characteristics

Variable	Subscale	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	169	48
	Female	183	52
Age	14 – 18 Years	228	65
	19 – 23 Years	124	35

Source: Field data, 2021

There were 352 respondents (students); of which 48% were males and 52% females. This presents the view that there are more female students in the Kumasi Metropolis.

Also, it is clear from Table 4 that the majority of the S.H.S. students fell in the age category of 14 – 18 years (65). It is assumed that by age of 19 students should be in the final year at the second cycle of education, but from Table 2 most of the students are underage. This is likely to have a physiological and psychological impact on the students at the tertiary level of education. This section presents a brief data analysis. The data collected concerning the research questions were represented in frequencies. Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 present the specified results.

Table 3
Communicative Function of Written Feedback

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Students	0	3	101	124	97
Teachers	0	1	9	12	3

Table 4
Effects of Written Feedback

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Students	0	3	67	117	138
Teachers	2	0	14	8	1

Table 5
Perception on Written feedback

Perceptions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Positive comments	210	96	12	7	0
Vague	2	37	56	122	108
Effective and time-bound	137	63	86	35	4

Table, 3, Table 4, and Table 5 interpretation is based on the formulated research questions to be investigated. With the data provided in the tables, Table 3 answers research question one, Table 4 aligns to research question 3, and Table 5 answers research question 2.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

This chapter deals with the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.

Summary

The study was conducted to determine the English Language teachers' written feedback and the perceived influence on senior high school students' writing skills in the English Language in the Kumasi Metropolis. Four research questions were formulated to guide the study and the descriptive sample survey design was used in this study. The study was limited to the Kumasi Metropolis and made use of 352 students and 25 teachers of English Language. The instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire and it was subjected to validity and reliability test before data collection. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies,

percentages, standard deviations, and means. Below is a summary of the main findings of the study.

Key Findings

Firstly, it was discovered after the data analysis that S.H.S students in the Kumasi Metropolis have a positive perception towards the English Language teachers' written feedback. This finding confirms the study conducted by Sever and Dincer (2013). Secondly, to ensure data triangulation, data analysis was done on the responses from teachers and students. For the teachers, the data analysis indicated that teachers of the English Language in the Kumasi Metropolis provide written feedback on students' writing activities with a metalinguistic communicative function. My finding conflicts with Gborsong et al.'s (2018) assertion that teachers are overly directive in giving feedback. However, data analysis for the students' responses indicated that the communicative function of the written feedback of the teachers of the English Language was expressive. The reason being that the metalinguistic communicative function revealed the teacher's feelings towards the students' writing. Finally, with regards to the perceived effects of the teachers' written feedback on the students' writing skills, data analysis was carried out for the responses from teachers and students. To the students, there was a significant improvement in their writing skills. As much as the findings correspond to that of Baghzou (2011), to the teachers, the perceived effects of the teachers' written feedback on the students' writing skills were neutral.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the findings of the study. First and foremost, students in the Kumasi Metropolis have a positive perception of written feedback. They expect written feedback from the teacher to know their progress in writing. They understand it as a form of special attention from the teacher, hence, pay close attention to it. Also, teachers of the English Language provided written feedback with a metalinguistic communicative function. The S.H.S students in the Kumasi Metropolis understand the teachers' communicative function to be expressive. In addition, there is a significant improvement in the students' writing skills which reflects the effect of the teachers of English Language written feedback on students' writing skills.

Recommendations

It is recommended, based on the findings, that teachers of the English Language should regularly provide written feedback on students writing activities. The feedback should not be a one-time activity from the teacher to the learner. Responding to students' writing is thought of as an essential part of successful writing. Also, the government should incorporate written feedback as a form of pedagogy into the curriculum. This will elicit a positive implication on the students' writing skills in the English Language. It is recommended that teachers of the English Language should endeavor to explain their written feedback to the students. I acknowledge the challenge of the geometric increase in class size, however, this improves teaching and learning effectively. Finally, the students should put into practice the written feedback that is provided by the teachers to improve their skills performance.

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