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An Analysis of Written Feedback on ESL Students’ Writing

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of written feedback on ESL students’ written assignment to shed light on how the feedback acts as a type of written speech between the lecturer and student. It first looks at two sources of data: in-text feedback and overall feedback written by the lecturer on the students’ written assignment. Looking at how language is used in its situational context, the feedback was coded and a model for analysis was developed based on two primary roles of speech: directive and expressive. Based on this analysis, the paper discusses the type(s) of feedback that benefit students the most. This study provides insights as to how the student felt with each type of feedback. It also provides insights into the possibility of developing a taxonomy of good feedback practices by considering the views of the giver and receiver of written feedback.

Keywords: Written feedback; ESL students; taxonomy of good feedback

1. Introduction and literature review

Since the early 1980’s, researchers and reviewers have been investigating response to high school students’ writing undergraduate students’ writing (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Faighley & Witte, 1981; Hillocks, 1986; Ziv, 1984). These studies reported that written feedback provides a potential value in motivating students to revise their draft (Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994; Zhang, 1995) and in improving their writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ferris et al, 1997). As a result, written feedback is the most popular method that teachers use to interact and communicate with students (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). It has been suggested by Straub (2000) that teachers should create the feel of a conversation by

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writing comments in complete sentences; by avoiding abstract, technical language and abbreviations; by relating their comments back to specific words and paragraphs from the students’ text, by viewing student writing seriously, as part of a real exchange.

Feedback can be viewed as an important process for the improvement of writing skills for students (Hyland, 1990; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). This is because written feedback contains heavy informational load which offers suggestions to facilitate improvement and provides opportunities for interaction between teacher and student (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback can be defined as writing extensive comments on students’ texts to provide a reader response to students’ efforts and at the same time helping them improve and learn as writers (Hyland, 2003). The teacher provides feedback to enable students to read and understand the problems and use it to improve future writing. Thus, written feedback is used to teach skills that are able to help students improve their writing. At the same time, it is hoped to assist students in producing written text which contains minimum errors and maximum clarity.

In order for feedback to be effective, students’ must be provided with effective feedback. Effective feedback is feedback that is focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001). When students are provided with this type of feedback, they are able to think critically and self regulate their own learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Strake & Kumar, 2010). Thus, it is understood that feedback acts as a compass which provides a sense of direction to the students and tells that writing goals are achievable.

Feedback is particularly important to students because it lies at the heart of the student’s learning process and is one of the most common and favourite methods used by teachers to maximise learning. But, little attention has been given to the specific types of responses teachers give their students in relation to speech acts and the extent to which students find these helpful. Therefore, this study investigates the types of feedback and its usefulness according to speech acts.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study uses a combination of two frameworks of speech acts which are Speech Act Theory by Searle (1969) and Language Functions by Holmes (2001). Holmes (2001) categorised language into six language functions, which are: directive, expressive, referential, metalinguistic, poetic and phatic. Similarly, Searle (1969) also categorised speech by its illocutionary acts and categorised these into five illocutionary acts, which are representatives (assertive), directives, commissives, expressives and declarations (performatives).

These two theories give a clear justification to classifying feedback as a form of communication between the provider and the receiver of the feedback. Using the lens of this stance, this study suggests that providing useful and effective feedback based on the speech functions may essentially enhance the communicative functions of feedback. In order to provide effective feedback to students, lecturers need to understand what types of feedback are useful in students’ writing and also students’ opinion of different types of feedback.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the types of feedback which are beneficial to the students. Furthermore, the study also investigated the students’ responses towards the types of feedback which are beneficial students in terms of speech function and how language is used in feedback. The questions that guided this study were as follows:

- What type of feedback did the students receive from their lecturer?
- What were the students’ responses to the various type of feedback?
1.3. Limitations of study

The first limitation was that the study focused only on written feedback on ESL academic writing. Although some of the results may be applicable to oral feedback, the findings and interpretations of this study should be considered in the context of written feedback.

The second limitation in this study is the overlapping of categories in the coding of feedback types which appears problematic in most studies that categorise types of feedback. This presents a challenge to any researcher conducting a detailed study on the types of written feedback. In order to minimize this problem, the following steps were taken: the feedback types were carefully coded using the framework from Holmes (2001) and Searle (1969), consulted with members of my peer-debriefing group to validate each criterion, and the coding was randomly checked with two independent raters.

The third limitation of this research was that it did not take into account the writers’ revised work because the research did not look at the gain score of the students and what changes had been done in their revised essays. Instead it looked at the usefulness of the written feedback in terms of speech acts and aspects of writing. Thus, the researcher could not compare between the first draft and the final draft in order to see the changes applied in the students’ final draft based on the feedback.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context

The present study was conducted in a writing skills course at a private university in Selangor, Malaysia. The course was a compulsory subject offered to undergraduate students and the reason this class was chosen because students were asked to complete a written assignment (1000-1200 words) which involved drafting and revising based on their lecturer’s feedback. The duration of the course was one semester which lasted for 15 weeks. Throughout the course, students were exposed to different theoretical models of writing and had to compare and contrast different written discourse systems before applying the principles of effective writing to enhance readability in their written text by focusing on signaling, signposting, and topic strings.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were 15 Malaysian students and they were Malay, Chinese and Indian. The students were a mixed-gender between the ages of 19 to 20 years old. In terms of language, for some of the participants, English is their first language while for the others English is their second language. The students were in their first year of their studies (first semester).

2.3. Data Collection

The data for this study was obtained from two research sources: (1) written drafts and (2) interviews with the students. These two sources are important in this study as it provided detailed information on the usefulness of each type of feedback.

2.3.1. Written Drafts

The drafts of the research paper were collected from both lecturers once they had finished commenting on them which was in week 10; copies of the research papers were made and were returned to the respective lecturers within a period of two-days. In the drafts, the lecturers provided students with written feedback on how to improve their research paper. Two types of feedback were provided: in-text feedback and overall feedback. The in-text feedback included all comments written by the lecturer in the text and it was mostly written in the margin of the text. The feedback given was considered as spontaneous thoughts of the lecturers and it acted as a dialogue between the
students and their lecturers. The overall feedback was in the form of a letter like text. For the overall feedback, both
lecturers summarized their main concerns and put forth a more general feedback on the written draft. The in-text and
overall feedback was transcribed word for word in order to have a comprehensive list of the lecturers’ comments.

2.3.2. Interviews

The interview took place in week 16 of the semester after their feedback was compiled from written drafts. Each
interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken by hand.
During the interviews, the students had their original research drafts with them while the researcher had photocopies
of it. This made it easier to discuss their responses to specific comments and cross-reference their revisions, based
on the suggestions made by their lecturers. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim for analytical purposes.

3. Development of a Model for Feedback Analysis

The study was guided by the constant comparative method set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by considering
open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Analysis occurred at the same time as data
collection. The data from the written text was arranged and coded into categories. The feedback were categorised on
how the feedback was given according to speech acts functions (Table 1).

First, the coding categories for speech acts framework were identified through the reading of the written text.
The main functions of the feedback types were derived from the speech acts/language functions and the sub-
categories were adapted from earlier studies (see Ferris et. al., 1997; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). The in-text and
overall feedback were read through individually to develop a system of categorization. In order to develop an
appropriate categorization, it took several rounds of individual categorization followed by intensive discussions with
two other post-graduate students and a senior lecturer until a consensus on an appropriate categorization model was
reached. The data was analysed based on what the comments did to the students, hence it was appropriate to analyse
the feedback based on the coding of the two functions of speech: directive and expressive (Holmes, 2001; Searle
1969).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Function</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>instruction</td>
<td>• Preview your points here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>clarification</td>
<td>• How does this support your stand? Make it clear to your reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>approval</td>
<td>• Well supported with the literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>disapproval</td>
<td>• I’ve stopped reading here as I don’t see a flow of argument!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Overview of the feedback

The findings from the written drafts indicate that two forms of feedback which were commonly received by the
students are directive and expressive feedback. A total of 366 instances of feedback were found from the students’
written drafts. The majority of the written feedback fell into the directive category (77%) (see Table 2). Directive is
an act which commits the receiver of the message to do something (Holmes, 2001; Searle, 1969). The remaining
feedback fell into the expressive category (23%) and expressive is an act of the speaker which expresses his/her
feelings (Holmes, 2001; Searle, 1969).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Number of feedback</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 or exceed 100 due to rounding. This is applicable to all the
tables in this document that include frequencies.
In this study, the students found directive feedback to be useful and they liked it most compared to the other categories of feedback. Directive feedback is specific and well-focused. The feedback the students received were mostly directive in nature, telling students exactly how to improve their writing: ‘Structure your argument - heading/sub-heading to improve readability’ and ‘Preview your main points here’ are examples. It can be concluded that the students themselves were unskilled students and they valued explicit feedback. This finding concurs with Ziv (1984) study which found that students learning to write need specific directions from their teachers on how to progress and meet their writing goals.

However, the finding of this study differed from what previous response theorists suggest as best practice (Lunsford, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1996, 2000). It has been suggested that teachers should write fewer directive comments and embrace facilitative comments instead because facilitative comments give students more control, ownership, and responsibility (Lunsford, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1996, 2000). But this is not the case with these students as the feedback provided the students with developmental experiences as they were able to revise their essays based on the feedback given as the feedback made them aware of their weaknesses and strengths of their writing skills.

4.2. Breakdown of the sub-categories of feedback

Table 3 shows the breakdown of the sub-categories of directive and expressive feedback. Five sub-categories of feedback were evident from the data which are directive-instruction, directive-clarification, expressive-approval, and expressive-disapproval.

Table 3: Frequency of Sub-Categories of Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Feedback</th>
<th>Number of feedback</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive-instruction</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directive-clarification</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive-disapproval</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive-approval</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 or exceed 100 due to rounding. This is applicable to all the tables in this document that include frequencies.

4.2.1. Directive: Instruction

The most commonly received feedback was directive-instruction feedback (52%), see Table 3. Instruction feedback instructs students to make changes which are necessary for the text. They found directive-instruction to be useful in their revision as directive-instruction provided them a sense of direction because they knew exactly what was needed to be corrected. One of the student mentioned that “I feel very happy because my lecturer provides me a way on how I can improve my writing when she said like, ‘tell me what Big Five means, then explain how it concerns to the matter you described’.” So he is like in a way trying to tell me how to revise what I have written before and see whether the ideas are related to this particular paragraph.” Thus, this clearly shows that feedback offers a sense of direction to the student (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The students also mentioned that they knew what and where had they gone wrong in their writing and how they can improve it through instruction feedback as one of them said, “She highlighted the things which are not right and told me how to correct the work”. This supports Hattie & Timperley (2007) claim that a teacher who provides effective feedback is one who highlights information about how the writer can progress or proceed with the task. It also further supports Ogede’s (2002) view that directive, specific comments save students from a “gloomy future” (p. 108). He also argues that directive comments are effective because students need their teachers to share their knowledge about effective writing by telling in clear, certain terms that “rigorous commentary holds the key to the needed remedial action… the instructor cannot afford to leave the students with an impression that the suggestions offered to improve their writing are optional” (p. 108).
4.2.2. Directive: Clarification

The second most common type of feedback was directive-clarification feedback (24%), see Table 3. Clarification feedback is comments that seek further information from the students in terms of asking for a clearer explanation of what ideas have already been mentioned in the paper. Directive-clarification feedback provided specific directions to students on how to revise their essays. The writers understood what was being addressed in clarification feedback and were clear on what they were supposed to do upon reading the clarification feedback. This supports Straub’s (1997) study which found that students preferred comments which are “specific, offer direction for revision, and come across as help” (p.112). Most clarification feedback begins with a question followed by a short explanation on what was wrong with the sentence or paragraph. Examples of clarification feedback are ‘How does this support your stand- make clear to the reader’ and ‘Why do you think all these are effective - there are also researchers who indicate the negative effects of group work’. It also supports Lindemann’s (2001) claim on effective feedback which should be focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging. Hyland & Hyland (2006) mentioned that in order for improvement to take place, feedback should be loaded with information. Thus, it can be concluded with Ryan’s (1997) view on lecturer’s feedback that the feedback helped the writers to understand how well they were writing and how they might further develop their writing.

4.2.3. Expressive: Disapproval

Expressive-disapproval feedback was the third commonly provided feedback (19%). The students in this study valued disapproval feedback, which highlights the negative points of their essay. They welcomed disapproval feedback because they found it constructive and it helped them improve their writing; additionally, it also increased their self confidence in their writing (Goldstein, 2004). One student mentioned that disapproval feedback “…doesn’t affect me as I’m more concerned about what he thought about my paper” because she believed her lecturer had the best interest of her writing in mind; hence, she viewed the comments as constructive to her rewriting. This finding contradicted with the students in Weaver’s (2006) study who reported that receiving too many negative comments was demoralizing, while the students in Straub’s (1997) study believed the effect of a critical comment depended on its tone. The students did not mind having problems in their writing pointed out but they were simply against having them pointed out in highly judgmental, harsh, or authoritative ways. One of the students pointed out that “His feedback is constructive, so to me this is not damaging” and he mentioned that “this is not something to be sensitive about because for me I take criticism positively. If it is good for me then I should be able to accept it”. On the contrary, this finding supports Button’s (2002) study which argued that students appreciate and benefit from constructive criticism. In Button’s study, she found that her students benefitted from constructive criticism as they students consistently identified their best learning experiences as those that challenged them beyond their current abilities. As a result of this, the students realised that feedback itself is a process of discovery as they were able to discover new meaning from disapproval feedback.

4.2.4. Expressive: Approval

Expressive-approval feedback was the least received type of feedback by the students (5%). Approval feedback refers to feedback which highlights the strength of the essay drafts. The students in this study valued approval feedback because it provided them a dose of motivation in their rewriting. One of the students mentioned that “I didn’t know that I could write, since this is my first semester. And I will remember the good things which I’ve done in this paper and apply them for my future writing”. Approval feedback motivated the students in their revision and showed them what was working and what was not working in their paper. A student highlighted that “Ok, this is like a plus point …. and I’m quite glad that he actually pointed out not only the weaknesses on this paper but he also pointed out the strength” when she received approval feedback from her lecturer. This substantiated Bardine’s (1999) view that students use positive feedback to help them select effective aspects of their text which they can model after for future writing. In Bardine’s (1999) study, he exposed how the students who received positive feedback on their papers gave them the opportunity to see what they were doing well and enabled them “to reproduce successful parts of papers in future drafts and essays” (p. 7). When the students were able to produce successful drafts, it boosted their confidence and increased their enjoyment of writing. This clearly shows that the feedback provided “information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to
It also further supports Beedles and Samuels (2002) study, which found that a few of their surveyed students considered praise helpful in their writing. Similarly, Gee (2006) discovered that students who received praise increased their confidence, pride, and enjoyment in their work. Praise feedback does inspire and motivate writers to write better as teachers often have the potential to motivate students to revise their drafts (Leki, 1991) and improve their writing skills (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995).

5. Conclusion

The findings from this study clearly indicated that the written feedback provided to the students was helpful and useful in their essay revision. The reason was that the feedback was clear, direct, and information loaded. Hence, the feedback offered a sense of direction to the students (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The feedback was also effective to the students because they were able to attend to the revision of their second draft well which further supports Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim that effective feedback provided with the correct load of information can impact a student in the revision process. The feedback provided not only was clear and effective, but it also alerted the students about their current writing skills and how the feedback can further develop their writing (Ryan, 1997). The students were able to advance with their essay revision because they were provided with constructive feedback which inspired them to revise better and at the same time, build their self confidence in writing (Goldstein, 2004).

Secondly, the element of motivation was also present in this study. Motivation is an important feature of feedback in the concept of active learning (Butler, 1988). The lecturer’s feedback inspired and motivated the students to write better because a lecturer often has the potential to motivate students to revise their drafts (Leki, 1991) and improve their writing skills (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995). This indicates that feedback and motivation works hand in hand. In this study, the lecturer’s feedback played an important role in motivating and encouraging the students to revise through constructive feedback. The constructive feedback inspired them to write better revised drafts; hence, increasing their self confidence in their writing (Goldstein, 2004).

Lastly, the feedback also enhances self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Self-regulated learning seems to take place when the student receives feedback on a draft from the lecturer, and he/she is expected to revise and make the relevant amendments based on the written feedback that was provided. The written feedback gave them new ideas and made them understand what the lecturer wanted in an essay that reflects their ideas clearly. It should be noted that feedback offers a sense of direction to the writer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Therefore, it can be argued that without well directed feedback, the students may not have been able to comprehend the feedback and achieve their writing goal which is to produce an improved version of their essay. It can be concluded that the written feedback provided has a great impact on the students’ writing and also on their attitude towards writing (Leki, 1990).

6. Implications

Three implications emerged from this study and they are based on what the students in this study found both useful and lacking in the written feedback. The implications are to write enough information in the feedback, to provide instruction feedback and to provide specific praise feedback.

Firstly, lecturers could write enough information in their comments. When lecturers give feedback, they should “say enough for students to understand what you mean” (Lunsford, 1997, p.103). This clearly shows that in order for the feedback to be effective, the lecturers must provide feedback which is information loaded in order for the students to respond and act on it (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a).

Secondly, lecturers could provide instruction feedback when providing feedback to students. It is found in this study that the writers liked directive-instruction feedback as they benefitted much from it and gave them a sense of direction (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). As students would like to know exactly what is working and what is not working in their paper (Ogede, 2002).
Thirdly, lecturers could provide approval feedback which is specific. As discovered in this study, some of the students did not know the reason why their lecturer praised their writing. Therefore, lecturers should provide specific praise to encourage students to know what they did well in the paper and use it for future writing and boost their confidence in writing (Straub, 1997).

In addition to the above implications, a need for training in the area of providing effective feedback should be provided in order for lecturers to provide effective feedback to their students. Universities could provide lecturers with workshops and talks on providing effective feedback to students. As this study shows that written feedback assisted the students in their essay revision and they wanted written feedback which are specific and information loaded.

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