The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

Effects of Different Kind of Direct Feedback on Students' Writing

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Abstract

Error feedbacks can help students in their writings and one of these questions is that whether teachers should use or not use error correction and feedbacks in writing classes. This study analyzed the holistic use of verbs considered as errors in the writings of upper intermediate international students studying in University Teknologi Malaysia. This study is a quantitative research with experimental design. Three different treatment groups received three different kinds of direct feedback: Direct feedback with written meta-linguistic explanation, direct feedback with oral meta-linguistic explanation, and direct feedback only. T-test was carried out to identify the effectiveness of each type of direct feedback on errors that had helped the more advanced students improve their writings. The results show that all types of direct feedback were effective but different types of feedback can be ranked in terms of importance.

Keywords: Error correction; direct feedback; international students' writing

1. Introduction

In the process of learning, especially something new, there is always the possibility of making mistakes. In the history of language acquisition and learning, students and learners face so many difficulties in the process of learning. One of the most important difficulties is eliminating students' linguistic errors. When errors occur in the second language acquisition, we face another problem called error correction which always confuses teachers because they don't know whether this error must be corrected or not and if so when is the best time to correct it.

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Researchers have always been debating on the best practices for teaching writing to second language learners. There have been debates among teachers and scholars on how error feedback can help students in their writings. Although many studies have been done in this field, teachers can see many options as an effective error correction technique yet it remains unsolved. One of these questions is that whether they should use error correction in writing classes or not. And if so what kind of error correction is suitable to improve specific parts of writing.

As a result of this debate, many ESL/EFL teachers do not know exactly how to help their students with writing. However, there is an important question of whether error feedback can be useful for students' writings or not. Error correction sometimes seems useless and it is a waste of time regardless of teachers' time and efforts [1, 2]. For instance, some students make the same error in spite of the teacher's effort who has done many corrective feedbacks. Therefore, in this case, many teachers are not sure about the effect of error correction and whether to apply it or not [1,3].On the other hand, some other students whose language is developing want corrective feedback from their teachers and are sure that this feedback will improve their writings [4, 5].

As such this study aims to look into error correction in a different aspect; it attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:

1- Do direct error correction methods improve the accuracy use of verbs in writing among international students of UTM?
2- What kind of direct error correction method has the most effect on the correct use of verbs in writing among these students?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Effects of different teaching methodologies on error correction

In the last few decades, different theories about teaching English as a second language have affected the way of teaching writing. Raimes [6] has summarized the change of attitude in teaching writing based on different second language acquisition theories. Before 1970s, teachers believed in behaviourism and they adopt structuralism as a major governing rule in their teaching methods. Subsequently, these teachers taught writing by the very same rules of structuralism and the most crucial thing in writing was to avoid any grammatical error. In this situation, students were given controlled writing exercises without paying any attention to content. Teachers spent a lot of time to correct students' errors and usually this was done through direct corrective feedback.

Since the 1970s, teaching methodology has shifted to communicative language teaching (CLT) and it has become the most prominent method for EFL/ESL teachers. As a result of this change, teachers apply a different method for teaching writing. Contrasting with previous behaviourist teaching techniques, teachers do not pay attention to grammatical errors as much as before because the main criteria for assessing students' writings deals with content or meaning of the writing. In other words, teachers' main concern in error correction was based on to what extent students can convey the meaning and how they follow organizational patterns to write a composition. The popular technique in this method is to give free writing to students.

As a result, the proponents of CLT who believe in process approach do not agree with the effect of overt grammatical error correction and state that this may hinder learners from fluent writing [1, 2]. Zamel [2] did a research to find out whether error correction has any influence on grammatical accuracy in composition or not. For this reason, he compared two groups of students, the first group was given correction on grammar and the second group was provided corrective feedback with only content. The findings of her research indicated that there was no significant difference in respect of grammar accuracy between the two groups. With reference to content improvement in writing, the second group which was given corrective feedback on content outperform the first group.

From abovementioned paragraphs, it can be said that corrective feedback is a crucial characteristic of any English language writing course. In this respect, the most important common methods for feedback include two major categorizations: feedback on content and feedback on form. By the prevalence of the process approach in writing that requires teacher's feedback on content, the traditional approach that gave feedback on form is losing its power but there is still a need to focus on both kinds of feedback: form and content.

2.2 Feedback on Form Vs. Feedback on Content

Opponents of feedback on form, Truscott and Kepner [7] are two researchers who are against grammar error correction. These two researchers do not accept grammar error correction and even think that it may be harmful for students' writing so it is not useful and it should be abandoned. On the other hand, there are other researchers who are in favour of feedback on form and think that it will improve student's accuracy in writing. The studies of Fathman & Whalley [8] and Lalande [9] are two examples which proved the efficacy of grammar error correction. Since then many researchers have conducted more research to know why Truscott proposed that error correction is not useful.

2.3 Direct vs. indirect feedback

Other studies have compared direct and indirect feedback methods [10, 11]. For these kinds of studies, there is no common conclusion about the findings. Some of these findings indicate that direct feedback is more effective whereas the other studies emphasize the effectiveness of indirect feedback over direct feedback. The ones which support direct feedback include studies of Ferris & Roberts [12]; Ferris et al. [13]; Komura [14]; Rennie [15]; Roberts [16] while other studies report that the role of indirect feedback is as important or at least the same as direct feedback [9, 11, 17, 18, 19].

2.4 The efficiency and usefulness of error correction

The inefficacy of error correction on grammar accuracy according to Ferris [4] and Leki [5] who examined different kinds of error correction to find out whether error correction is effective for students' second language writing, and they found out that explicit error correction (especially grammar, spelling and form error corrections) has a little positive effect on students' composition. Comprehensively, to evaluate the studies investigating the efficiency of error correction we can refer to two major standpoints. In the first one (as mentioned before), Truscott [3] set the case against grammar correction in 1996 by publishing the article "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes". He analysed three studies by Kepner [7], Semke [1] and Sheppard [20] and then he claimed that there is not much evidence to believe that error correction can improve students' writing in terms of accuracy. To his claim he described two important reasons: error correction researchers have underestimated the role of SLA theory about the gradual acquisition of structural rules and structures by students and the issue of practical problems of teachers and students face while giving and receiving error correction in terms of willingness and ability. He then adds that error correction takes a lot of time and energy from writing classes.

On the contrary, the second perspective includes other studies which opposed the Truscott's idea [4] about inefficacy of grammar error correction. For example, Ferris [21]; Ferris & Roberts [12] have done research about error correction in second language writing based on Truscott's research. The researchers examined two groups of students because they wanted to investigate the influence of grammatical error correction on students output. One of the groups received form correction while the other group is the control group. The average of the result revealed that student's writing in experimental group improved through the feedback on form correction, but the

control group didn't have any improvement in output (writing) since they were not provided with any kinds of corrective feedback on form.

2.5 Error feedback by teachers

Apart from all these types of error feedback, various researchers have found that error correction should not be comprehensive i.e. teacher should not mark all student errors. Zamel [2], [22] claims that writing teachers should not become grammar teachers by correcting all the students' errors but rather teachers should pay attention more to other important aspects of writing. There is a statement by Hairston [23] who reminded us that teachers should not be "composition slaves". The research evidence for Hairston's claim is the studies by Enginarlar [24]; Ferris [21]; Mantello [25]; and Reid [26] which state this fact that too much error correction can be frustrating and exhausting for both students and teachers.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Design

12 international postgraduate students with IELTS band 6 participated in this study. These students are currently studying in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and are completing their Masters in Computer Science. This study is a quantitative research with an experimental design. In this study there is no control group as the aim is to investigate the improvement of students' writing by comparing different kinds of direct feedback. In this case students are divided into three different treatment groups receiving three different kinds of direct feedback including direct feedback with written meta-linguistic explanation, direct feedback with oral meta-linguistic explanation, and direct feedback only. The number of students in each group is four. Targeted error in this study is the appropriate use of different form of verbs.

3.2. Treatment

Students are required to write six essays of 300 words on a given topic. The first and the last essays are in the form of pre-test and post-test. Another four essays are written during the treatment. After completing an essay, students' essays are corrected according to their specific feedback group and then essays are given back again to students for the purpose of rewriting. As for the first group, students are given direct feedback plus written meta-linguistic explanation of each error on the margin besides each line. The second group receives direct feedback with 10 minutes of meta-linguistic explanation on the errors. The third group just receives direct feedback only.

3.3. Error correction procedure

In the first students' essays of 300 words used as their pre-test, the average number of tenses which they used in their essays was 50. Then, each tense error is given a value that equals to 2 points out of a maximum of 100. There are also situations which making an error just reduce 1 point from students' scores. For example instead of writing *"He will come this evening"* one student wrote *"He would come this evening"*. In this case, because of misusing the auxiliary verb, just 1 point is reduced from the score. The other situation which reduces 2 points is making error on the main verbs. For instance one student wrote *"My brother did not came with me"*. This kind of error shows that the student is not aware of *not* using the past tense with *"did"* or *"did not.*
Students' spelling mistakes were not counted or given marks even though these mistakes are directly corrected in their essays.

4. Analysis of findings

Data is collected from two essay writing tests. The first one is in the form of pre-test and the second one is in the form of post-test. The mean of students' scores from the pre-test essay is compared to their post-test essay in each individual group to investigate whether there is any change in each group or not. After that, by comparing the results of each individual group with the two other groups, it will indicate which of these treatments is more effective.

Table 1: Direct feedback with written meta-linguistic explanation

Student	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
Student A	*75/100*	77/100	+2
Student B	*82/100*	83/100	+1
Student C	*86/100*	86/100	0
Student D	*79/100*	80/100	+1
Mean (out of 100)	**80.5/100**	**81.5/100**	**+1**

As it is seen in table 1, the participants improved their writings in terms of appropriate use of words by the average score of 1 out of 100. However, one participant was not successful in having progress, maintaining the same score as the pre-test. The average of this group in pre-test is 80.5 whereas the post-test is 81.

Table 2: Direct feedback with oral meta-linguistic explanation

Student	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
Student E	*77/100*	81/100	+4
Student F	*79/100*	83/100	+4
Student G	*84/100*	85/100	+1
Student H	*80/100*	82/100	+2
Mean (out of 100)	**80 /100**	**82.75/100**	**+2.75**

All the participants in group 2 enhanced their performance by the average score of 2.75 out of 100 and the top improvements belong to participant E and F by increasing their post-test scores by 4. This group is the best comparing the two other groups in which all the participants in group 2 had better post-test scores.

Table 3: Direct feedback only

Student	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
Student I	*83/100*	83/100	0
Student J	*78/100*	80/100	+2
Student K	*82/100*	83/100	+1
Student L	*84/100*	87/100	+3
Mean (out of 100)	**81.75 /100**	**83.25/100**	**+1.5**

Group three is standing in the middle and the participants in this group enhanced their performance by the average score of 1.5 out of 100. As like as group 1, there is one participant who could not have any improvement in terms of using appropriate verbs. The best record in this group belongs to participant L whose post-test is better by difference of 3 scores comparing to the pre-test.

5. Discussion

Based on the findings above, it can be said that though teachers should correct students' grammatical errors in writing classes, the most important thing in the process of error correction which makes it more effective is that it is done in a long period of time. Secondly, to apply error correction in writing classes, we should consider what the aim of writing is. If students are required to write for communicative purposes and delivering the message that is just to convey the meaning, then purpose of error correction should be dealing with errors which result in misunderstanding of meaning. If the purpose of writing is to follow the structural rules, then it is better to focus more on grammar rather than meaning. So, we cannot say that these two aspects of error correction are separable.

Another issue which should be discussed is the role of other variables in determining the effect of error correction treatment. For example, since the participants are exposed to an ESL (English as Second Language) setting in universities in Malaysia, then it is not clear that the amount of English input which they get from their classmates, lecturers, and friends have an active role in increasing their ability for correcting errors. In this situation, participants should be isolated for the sake of not having any relationship with outside variables which is almost impossible.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study (Appendices: table 1, 2, and 3) show that all kinds of direct error correction methods were almost effective and help students to improve their writing in terms of using accurate form of verbs. However, the amount of this improvement is not significant for all the three groups. Comparing three different treatment groups, it is clear that direct error feedback with oral meta-linguistic explanation is more effective than the two other groups by increasing the average of students' score by 2.75 %. The next rank belongs

to group three (direct feedback only) which their overall performance enhanced by 1.5 %. Finally, the first group (direct feedback with written meta-linguistic explanation) just improved their performance by 1 %.

The overall results show that all participants' pre-test mean is 80.75 whereas the post-test mean is 82.50. In other words, total participants' performance in using appropriate verbs has increased by 1.75% which means that the treatment was effective and almost all of the participants (10 out of 12) could improve their performance in using verbs though the amount of this improvement is not significant.

As for this study, findings show that students had improvement by enhancing their performance of using appropriate verbs but the amount of this improvement was not noteworthy. The reason can be referred to lack of enough time since the participants got the instruction of corrective feedback in just two weeks. Therefore, there is a need to do this research in a longer run of time i.e. six months to one year. In this case, the findings have more reliability and the researcher can be sure that the result of treatment is indeed related to the error correction instructions which were given to participants.

Acknowledgments

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