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The significance of teacher feedback in EFL writing for tertiary level foreign language learners

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted at SEEU (South East European University) in FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) analyzing the effect of various types of teacher feedback on student journals in an EFL course. The study was conducted across one semester (15 weeks), in the year 2011. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 25 subjects who participated in this study were students from the English Department of the Languages Cultures and Communication Faculty. Different type of teacher feedback based on Ellis (2005), Hyland (2010) and its effect on error correction from a student perspective was analyzed. Journals were collected at regular intervals and subjected to a modified content analysis (Newnham, Pantebre & Spark, 1999) to identify the main effects of teacher feedback in journal writing. Semi-structured interviews with students were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of content analysis.

Keywords: culture; peer feedback; perceptions; teacher feedback; writing

1. Introduction

In an earlier paper Kamberi, (2010b), it was argued that journal writing was a very useful way to foster student critical thinking skills, learner autonomy, improve their writing skills and language proficiency. Therefore, I have continued to use journal writing in the following semesters. However, when it came to feedback, it was difficult to choose the ‘perfect’ and most effective way to respond to student writing, in this case, to journal writing. One issue that teachers keep asking themselves is about how to provide feedback on student writing and how effective each type of feedback is. Ellis, (2008)

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suggests various strategies for providing feedback, and analyzes student responses to the various types of feedback by focusing on linguistic errors. Guenette, (2007), cited in Ellis (2008) also states that teachers need to investigate various types of feedback and their effect on student writing and error correction. Following Ellis’ and Guenette’s suggestions, I have tried to use various types of feedback but have not yet been able to identify which one contributed the most to error correction and improvement in student writing.

This paper seeks, therefore, to analyze various types of feedback and their effect on student writing from the student perspective because what teachers believe to be effective, may not be perceived by students to be very effective. This paper offers tentative suggestions about the significance of various types of feedback from a student perspective.

2. Literature Review

In the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (2002), feedback is defined as “comments or other information, that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teacher or other persons” (p.199). Feedback has been a concern of various researchers for centuries Hyland, (2010); Brookhart, (2008); Casanave, (2007); Kroll, (2003), Ferris & Hedgcock, (2004), Reid, (1998), Leki, (1991).

Journal writing, as Jordan, (1997), in Kamberi (2010b) has observed, helps teachers to better understand their students by offering insights into the learner’s experience; they give us “a sort or introspection...”, (p.34), which provides direct and immediate feedback for teaching improvement and therefore, are an excellent tool for the teacher since they give feedback on student success and failure. In addition, Edwards (1998) has observed that “… journals allow the teacher to tailor responses to the language needs of the students” (p.112).

3. The foundation of this paper

In an effort to help my student learn better, more easily and improve their writing skill, I used a mixed approach in providing feedback. The types of feedback were based on Ellis (2008) and Hyland (2003). This paper confirms the significance of various teacher feedback in EFL writing for tertiary level foreign language learners in the context of Macedonia. Moreover, the study offers empirical evidence for the importance of teacher feedback to writing in an EFL context from the learner’s perspective. From the multi-cultural perspective of FYROM undergraduate education, it provides practical evidence for the value of teacher feedback in foreign language learning and critical thinking development for learner, teachers, researchers, policymakers and curriculum developers. Equally importantly, it suggests that students bring different preconceptions to the reading of their feedback. These preconceptions appear to be strongly associated, as has been previously identified (Kamberi, 2010b) with their understanding of how they learn.

4. Research questions

Based on my professional teaching experience and informed by the emerging findings in the literature review, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

1. What type of feedback do students believe to be more useful in EFL writing?
2. What are student perceptions about the various types of feedback?

3. What is the reason for their choice?

5. The study

The study was conducted across one semester, in the year 2011. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 25 subjects who participated in this study were students attending my English Language Skills course in the English Department of the Languages Cultures and Communication Faculty (n=25).

5.1 Subjects

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the participants who participated in this study (n=25) ranged in age from 19 - 21 years old with one student aged 25. Females constituted 80% of the sample group with the remaining 20% being male.

5.2 Instrumentation

Journals were collected at regular intervals and subjected to a modified content analysis (Newnham, Pantebre & Spark, 1999) to identify the effect of teacher feedback in student writing and from a student perspective, semi-structured interviews with students were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of the content analysis.

5.3 Data collection and analysis

The journals were written on a regular weekly basis and students were expected to write either about different topics covered in the class or, sometimes, about a topic of their preference. Students were provided with various types of feedback for the purpose of improving their writing skills. The strategies for providing corrective feedback, as identified by Ellis (2008) and Hyland (2003), included direct, indirect, metalinguistic, focused/unfocused, electronic, and peer feedback as well as mini-conferencing. Unlike Ellis’s (2008) focus on only linguistic errors, as mentioned previously, the focus of the feedback was extended, as Ferris (2003) suggested, from sentence-level to include various parts, ideas and organization as well. One feedback strategy was used on a first draft and another on the revised response. In this way, students were encouraged to make sense of the feedback and see if they could identify the error or mistakes they had made. In the end, students were interviewed based on their writing and their teacher’s feedback.

5.4 Results

Applying a modified content analysis as suggested by Newnham, Pantebre & Spark, (1999), Fraenkel, & Wallen, (2003), findings from the study identified a range of positive and negative effects deriving from teacher responses to student writing which will be explained in detail below.

While recognizing that the sample was too small to generate meaningful quantitative conclusions, the analysis of student’s writings did not show any substantial difference between the various feedback approaches. When students were given direct feedback, they corrected those mistakes in
the next paper but it could not be established that this had a long term effect. On the other hand, the indirect feedback seemed to be more confusing as students kept coming and asking what the various signs meant. Only the more successful learners could make sense of the indirect feedback. It was evident that students would either erase the whole sentence when it did not make sense or they would repeat the same mistake. It can be said that the same observations resulted from the metalinguistic approach. From analysis of the focused and unfocused approach, it was difficult to come to any conclusions. Instead, it can be inferred that the majority of students were able, for example, to pay more attention to introductory and thesis statements. The electronic feedback seemed to be successful because students accepted the second chance offered to correct and send it back. Regarding peer feedback, the most difficult part was to make students accept feedback from their peers and take it seriously. However, those who were paired up with more successful learners used their feedback and improved their writing on the following draft. Based on student responses, the most valued feedback strategies were Direct Corrective Strategy and Individual mini-conference, whereas the least valued were the Metalinguistic, Electronic, and Peer feedback.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The results of the study have shown that feedback is an important tool in learning and teaching a foreign language. From the various feedback strategies used in the study, from a learner’s perspective there were mixed perceptions on which strategy was the most effective in error correction.

This study has shown that the majority of the students participating in the study prefer teacher feedback compared to peer feedback. From all the feedback strategies that have been used in the study, the most preferred by students seems to be direct corrective feedback since students want the correction to be there. Even though Hyland (2010) has analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of using peer feedback by stating that it is a social process, collaborative learning, interaction and learning among peers, getting feedback from multiple sources, critical thinking and decision making, and disadvantages he mentions students ‘inexperience and their ability to focus only on surface level features (p.198).

This study has confirmed Hyland’s (2010) claim since the majority of the students did not value peer feedback, as a result of inexperience, cultural and educational background of the students’, and schools of Macedonia still being traditional in their sense. However, Ferris concludes that teachers should not abandon teacher nor peer feedback while Reid (1993) claims that students need to be taught peer feedback even though it takes time and effort.

However, several major explanations for these results deserve further consideration. For example, how much students have learnt and improved their writing is still unclear and difficult to measure. Even though students claim that they have learned a lot and the journals are the proof, further discourse analysis of case studies over a longer period of time is suggested. Similarly, there is some evidence that the way students believe they learn best affects the way they receive and apply feedback. Again, further study of this observation seems likely to yield useful information for the most effective types of feedback.

References


