THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK
IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF WRITING

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Abstract: Feedback, which is not new in the practice of teaching and learning of writing, has become a controversial issue recently. An important point of debates is whether feedback is necessary. This article aims to discuss the issue of feedback by providing arguments that feedback is helpful and language learners do need it. A number of evidences for the use of feedback are provided. In terms of grammatical errors, feedback contributes to improvement in the accuracy of students' writing. On the other hand, feedback on contents provides students with hints for ideas to be developed further and helps stimulate the development of their logical reasoning. This article also highlights the issue of feedback from the perspective of the students. An emphasis on the importance of further research on feedback concludes the discussion in this article.

Key words: feedback, teaching and learning of writing

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is any information, which provides a report on the result of a certain behavior (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). Feedback is useful to examine the success or failure of performance. In the process of teaching and learning, feedback has recently become an issue of a special interest to many researchers. A considerable number of studies have discussed the types and roles of feedback in this particular field.

In second language learning, feedback is focused on almost all aspects of language elements and language skills such as grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and writing. It covers both oral and written production of learners. In studies on oral production, there is some evidence showing that feedback, either negative or positive, can help learners succeed in the process of learning. In a study conducted by Lighbown and Spada (1990), for example, it is found that corrective feedback within communicative context contributes

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to the higher level of linguistic knowledge and performance. The results of their analysis suggest that accuracy and fluency might develop well when corrective feedback is contextually provided. Feedback may vary according to the types of error and linguistic aspects that a student encounters. It may be in the form of repetition, recast, elicitation, implicit feedback, and explicit feedback. This can make learners aware of the errors they have made and can lead them to uptake and repair.

In relation to the teaching and learning of writing, feedback is also considered to be an important issue. It is believed that writing is an important skill to support other language experiences. Writing can be a means of developing ideas, reformulating knowledge and discovering personal experiences. When writing, students are expected to state their ideas clearly and accurately. In order that students understand whether they have written clearly, accurately and effectively, they need feedback. Dheram (1995) states that feedback seems to be central to the process of teaching and learning of writing. Feedback in writing is considered as an important aspect to develop students' language awareness so that they can perform effectively in the writing classroom. Taylor (1981) suggests that although regular writing does improve writing, students also require feedback in order to achieve considerable improvement.

What types of feedback should be given to students' writing? This question has invited controversial perspectives among researchers in language learning and teaching. Some researchers, such as Truscott (1996) and Kepner (1991) are of the opinion that error correction on the students' writing does not work well. However, unlike Truscott, who has a very strong opinion on this issue and who views error correction as not being useful and even harmful, Kepner appears to give a place for error correction in the teaching of writing. Kepner argues that written feedback in the form of error corrections is important to help low proficiency learners perform better so that they will not be left behind by the high proficiency students.

On the other hand, some researchers (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Lalande, 1982) found that feedback on grammatical errors on the students' composition increased their writing accuracy. Students made more improvements when feedback was given. However, what is wrong with Truscott's perspective on grammar correction in writing? Is feedback really harmful and useless? This paper, then, intends to provide some evidence that error corrections, as well as other types of correction, are still needed for the

sake of improvement on the accuracy, fluency and effectiveness of the students' composition.

FEEDBACK ON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

It cannot be denied that responding to students' errors is time consuming and tedious. In the day-to-day teaching of composition, language teachers are likely to find that errors are the most exasperating aspect of students' writing. Exercises in the classroom and low marks given to the students seem to do little to reduce the rate of errors effectively. However, it does not mean that students' composition that contain grammatical errors should be left without giving any feedback or correction, as Truscott (1996) suggests. Truscott emphasizes that grammar correction should be abandoned because of its harmful effects and arguable roles in a writing course. Truscott's strong opinion has invited some arguments from other researchers. Ferris (1999) for example, argues that Truscott has defined error correction vaguely as correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately. For Truscott, correction has many different forms but they have very little significant distinctions. This is the point that Ferris disagree. Ferris argues that in any other aspects of teaching, there are always more and less effective ways to approach error correction in writing. Everyone seems to agree that poorly done correction will not help students write; it may even mislead them. On the contrary, error correction that is selective, prioritized and clear will be helpful for student writers.

One of the studies that Truscott refers to supports his thesis about the ineffectiveness of error correction, is the study by Kepner (1991). Kepner found that message-related comments on the students' journal writing is more effective than the feedback on surface grammatical errors. However, in Kepner's study, there was no rewriting, so Kepner could not compare the performance of the students before and after they were given feedback. A possible explanation of Kepner's finding could be that the students might not have paid attention to the errors pointed out because they were not required to rewrite their journal. Therefore, although they consistently received feedback on their writing, it did not help them because they might not have referred to the feedback given to them. Leki (1990) reported that students did not pay much attention to the teachers' comments, and they did not understand the comments. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret that error correction in Kepner's study did not play any role at all in improving students'

writing. Error correction and explicit rule presentations on the students' paper do play a role in promoting the accuracy of the student's writing, but the students have to rewrite their paper after receiving feedback to show their awareness and understanding of the mistakes they have made.

Truscott also refers to a study by Fathman and Whalley (1990) who examined the process of revision in the students' compositions. Truscott's claim to this study is that it does not address the question: Does grammar correction make students better writers? It is true that Fathman and Whalley did not address this question. The purpose of their study was to find out the effectiveness of a teacher's feedback that focuses on form and on content in improving students' writing. They found that grammar and content feedback positively affects writing. The identification of the location of errors by the teacher appears to be an effective means of helping students correct their grammatical errors, which in turn improve the accuracy of their writing. The question of whether grammar correction makes students better writers has been answered, that is, at least students improve their composition on the level of sentences, so that it does not impede communication. Hendrickson (1978) suggests that the errors that should be corrected are those, which impede the intelligibility of a message. Grammatical errors in the student's composition sometimes cause a reader to misunderstand a message and sometimes make a sentence incomprehensible. Furthermore, Hendrickson argues that the least comprehensible sentences are those containing multiple errors. Therefore, what is wrong with error correction? Why should it be abandoned if it helps students make their sentences more comprehensible?

Without intending to overlook Truscott's work that tried to convince us to abandon grammar correction, it seems that his work does not provide sufficient evidence to support that error correction is not helpful at all. There are still other studies, which provide the same findings that grammar correction is still needed. In a carefully conducted experimental study Landale (1982) found that the group, which was given information on the kind of error made significant improvement over the group whose errors were simply corrected. In this case, Truscott once more claimed that Lalande did not compare the effect of correction with non-correction, but rather compare the effects of different forms of correction. As a consequence, Landale found that the experimental group performed better than the control group. However, Truscott strongly claims that "better than" could just as well be read "less harmful." The argument that the words "better than" the same as "less

harmful" is arguable. In Lalande's study, it was clearly shown that error correction provided by teachers on the students' composition gives positive effects. It does lead to improvements.

The arguments on feedback on the student's composition do not end at this point. It can be seen that grammar corrections, although Truscott suggests it be abandoned, still positively affect the accuracy of student's writing. Some studies discussed previously show that there was no reason to consider that grammar correction is harmful. The fact that grammar correction may be less effective than other types of correction may be true. However, it does not mean that grammar correction has no place in a writing course and has to be abandoned. It is true, as Ferris (1996) said, that there is always a 'more' and 'less' effective approach that can be used to respond to a student's writing. Other approaches that can be used effectively in responding to a student's composition can be seen in the following discussion.

FEEDBACK ON CONTENTS

Having discussed the role of error correction on the student's composition, it is clear that grammar correction is still one of the necessities to improve the accuracy of a student's writing. Another type of feedback that has a great influence on the improvement of the student's writing is that of feedback on content. There are a number of studies that provide evidence that feedback on the contents of a student's composition leads to further improvements.

Kepner (1991) attempted to identify specific types of feedback or teacher responses, which are most helpful in second language writing. Kepner compared a group receiving surface error-correction and another group receiving message-related comments. The result of the study indicated that the students who received message-related comment feedback performed better than those who received error correction feedback. Although this study showed that feedback on content is more superior than that on error correction, this study has indicated that in order to make students improve their writing, they need feedback. Feedback on content is one of the alternatives.

Another study which showed that feedback on content can lead learners to improve their writing is that of Semke (1984). Semke found that L2 student writers who received content-focused feedback on their writing spent more time writing and became more fluent than those whose writing

received error corrections. This finding suggests that feedback on content in the students' writing enhances the progress of the students' writing. Like Kepner (1991) and Truscott (1996), Semke did not see that error correction works well in improving a student's writing. Semke's finding supported the theory that grammar correction does not improve writing skills, nor does it increase total competency in the language. However, referring to the purpose of writing, it is clear that the main focus of writing is not grammar; it is how to express an idea in a piece of writing. Therefore, it is natural that the students made improvements in their writing skills when they were given feedback on content. A group who receives feedback on grammar only, naturally, may make improvement in their grammar only, but not in their writing skills. People who are good in grammar are not always good in writing.

On the contrary, those who are good in expressing ideas in writing are not necessarily good in grammar. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness in writing, it is required that student writers are competent not only in conveying idea but also in expressing the idea in a good, accurate language. Student writers need both grammar and content to satisfy their writing needs. In Semke's study, however, it is not shown how the students performed in grammar after receiving feedback in grammar. This may be because the students in the group received feedback on all the errors they made. The teachers did not seem to be selective. The grammar correction may be more effective if it is selective. As Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) found, less detailed feedback on the students' writing worked more accurately. They stated that when correction was not detailed enough, student writers could assimilate it into their current grammatical system.

To support the idea that both grammar correction and feedback on content in the students' composition are necessary, Fathman and Whalley (1990) provided further evidence. In their study, the students who received feedback only on content improved their content scores, but they still made more grammatical errors in their revision. When feedback on grammar and content were given, all students improved their grammatical accuracy and more than 70 per cent of the students improved the content of their writing. Therefore, focus on grammar does not negatively affect writing. This suggests that students can improve their writing in situations where feedback, both on content and form, are given simultaneously.

In light of the two different types of feedback discussed above, it seems that the argument on whether feedback on grammar only or feedback

on content only will never come to one conclusion. Those who find grammar correction to be an effective way in improving student writing may still continue to do it. Cohen & Cavalcanti (1990), for example, found that in an EFL Institute study, the focus of teacher feedback is still on surface level errors, such as mechanic, grammar, and vocabulary. Whereas, in University EFL study, the focus of feedback is mostly on content, that is, developing logical reasoning. Those who believe in one type of feedback tend to continue doing so. However, it has to be remembered that students have their own preference on how they like to be corrected. Some students may not prefer to be corrected on their grammatical errors, while some others may need this kind of correction. In short, the types of feedback and its role in the teaching and learning of writing has to take the students' preferences into consideration.

STUDENTS' PREFERENCES

The above discussion has shown that both feedback on grammar and feedback on content are necessary to increase the quality of student writing. Although there are some studies showing that grammatical error correction is less effective, it is not the reason to abandon this type of feedback. In fact, there are still many teachers who prefer to respond to the grammatical errors that their students make in their compositions. The correction may be made spontaneously or deliberately. In a study conducted by Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990), it was shown that teachers still prefer to correct grammatical errors. The problem is thus on the part of the learner's preference. Because of individual differences, it is sometimes difficult to decide what specific feedback is appropriate for an individual student. Some students may prefer to receive feedback on their grammatical errors and some others may prefer to receive feedback on the content of their writing. Cultural differences may also affect the preference of the types of feedback they like. Students in one culture, for example, may feel embarrassed when they are consistently corrected, while students in other culture may not feel so. In relation to the differences of classroom context, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz (cited in Ferris, 1995) reported that foreign language learners paid more attention to form, whereas second language learners were interested in teacher's feedback both on content and grammar.

With regard to a learner's preference, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) found that there was a mismatch between what teachers and students thought

about the aspect of writing emphasized in feedback. In order to solve this problem they suggest that both parties, that is, teacher and students, should have an agreement on the areas to be responded, whether on grammar, organization, or content. In the study focussing feedback on grammar, 5 of 11 students preferred feedback on content, 3 on organization, 2 on grammar and mechanics, and 1 on vocabulary. In the study focussing feedback on content and organization, it was found that 6 of 13 learners would like more emphasis on content and vocabulary, 5 on organization, and 2 on mechanic and grammar. This finding indicates that sometimes the feedback a teacher gives to the students does not fit with the need or the preference of the students. Therefore, both the teacher and the students should agree on the types of feedback to be given.

Dheram (1995) also carried out a study, which attempted to discover what ESL learners like to have emphasized in feedback: grammar or content. Unfortunately, it seems that this study has not been completed. Dheram provided some research questions but the answers to the questions were not available in the text. Dheram suggested that content should be recognized as the first priority. However, no evidence was found in Dheram's study that ESL learners prefer to receive feedback on their language use or on the content of their writing. However, believing that feedback could encourage students to write better, Dheram proposed peer feedback and revision as the ways of improving student writing.

Another study, which provides student's reaction to the feedback they receive is that of Ferris (1995). Ferris found that the students received and paid the most attention to comments on grammar than any other aspects of their paper. In addition to grammar correction, they also received many comments on the content and organization of their essay and they pay attention to the feedback seriously. The students in her study also felt that teacher comments help them avoid future mistakes, improve their grammar, and clarify their ideas.

The studies discussed above have shown that students have their own preference of what type of feedback they like to receive. However, it would be very difficult to give different types of feedback, which are appropriate to every individual student. The tasks of the teachers will be more complicated. So, what is the best way to overcome this problem? The answer depends on many different aspects, including the individual differences of students.

CONCLUSION

Given the above issues of feedback, the question that comes to mind is what types of feedback will be appropriate in increasing the quality of a student's writing? Is it error corrections, comments on content or both of them? It is difficult to answer these questions because it involves a number of aspects concerning the appropriate feedback for student writing. Leki (1990) discussed the question of giving students positive feedback or negative feedback. She pointed out that comments of praise do not appear to be helpful; critical comments have not helped student improve their writing. Other researchers, such as Kepner (1991) and Truscott (1996) argued that error correction is not helpful. Still others, such as Fathman & Whaley (1990) and Ferris (1996) appeared to advocate grammar correction.

If the problem of appropriate feedback is not conclusively resolved, the students will not be able to get the most from feedback. They may be confused and frustrated if teachers provide feedback that they don't like and understand. It may be better if teachers provide feedback on both content and grammar at the same time. Furthermore, it is worthwhile if teachers provide both negative and positive feedback. This would mean a lot of works for teachers but this would improve students writing in some way.

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