Teachers' Corrective Feedback and Students' Written Productions

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Abstract:

The present paper gives an overall analysis and discussion of the data generated by a questionnaire survey. In effect, this questionnaire is used to investigate the situation of teaching written expression within the English course at the Section of English Studies in the Department of Foreign Languages of Biskra University, the teachers' views about the factors that cause students recurrent errors in writing, and the impact of teachers' corrective feedback to improve students' writings. The findings show that students have many difficulties and deficiencies in writing caused by different factors, and that teachers can bring a great contribution to reduce these difficulties and improve students' performance through their corrective feedback. On the basis of the results obtained, a number of pedagogical implications are highlighted for EFL teachers to improve the quality of their corrective feedback in order to help students.
Keywords: corrective feedback – students' errors - written productions.

الملخّـــــص:

ترمي الدراسة إلى إعطاء تحليل عام و طرح نقاش حول المعطيات التي تم جمعها عن طريق الاستقصاء. إن مجمل الأسئلة التي تم طرحها تتناول وضعية تعليم التعبير الكتابي في أقسام اللغة الانجليزية ضمن قسم اللغات الأجنبية في جامعة بسكرة. و من المعلوم أن غالبية الأساتذة يعتقدون بان سبب الأخطاء الشائعة و المتكررة لدى الطلبة في كتابتهم، يتعلق أساسا بالصعوبات و النقائص التي يواجهونها خلال مدة التكوين. و بالمقابل، يستطيع الأساتذة تقديم العون و التخفيف من عدد الأخطاء لتحسين أداء الطلبة من خلال اعتماد التصحيح الانعكاسي و الذاتي. و بالاعتماد على النتائج المتحصل عليها من خلال الدراسة المنجزة تمكنا من إعطاء سلسلة من التوصيات و الاقتراحات و هذا من اجل تسهيل مهمة أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية لتحسين نوعية التصحيح الذاتي و هذا لمساعدة طلبتهم لمواجهة كل المشاكل التي قد تعترضهم خلال ممارستهم للتعبير الكتابي.

Introduction

Feedback for educators is an important indicator of learners' level, and for students it is a crucial correction tool. Teachers provide learners with feedback in the form of comments in order to advise them and criticize or inform them about how well or bad their performance is. Hence, feedback in education has a great significance since it helps teachers to make their instruction more accurate and assists learners to know their difficulties in writing and help them to overcome them. Hattie and Timperly (2007) conceptualize feedback as "a consequence of performance" (p.81). For the authors feedback is information supplied by a given agent who could be a teacher, a peer, a parent, one's self or an experience regarding an aspect of one's performance. In effect, a teacher or a parent can give corrective information or encouragement, a peer can replace temporally the teacher and becomes an alternative strategy, and even a book can be employed to illustrate some clumsy ideas. Furthermore, a learner him/herself can look up the answer to check out its correctness. Thus, feedback is a consequence of performance.

This paper proceeds as follows: section one provides an account of the previous studies on corrective impact and its effect in education. Section two defines the study objectives and significance. Methodology is described in section three. Findings are presented and discussed in section four, while conclusions are provided in section five.

1.   Literature Review

Pintrich (1995) defines feedback is a source against which students can verify "their internal construction of goals, criteria and standards" (cited in Bryan & Clegg, 2006, p.68). For Anderson (1982), Brophy (1981), and Vigotsky (1978) feedback is essential in education because of its great significance in both "encouraging and consolidating learning" (cited in Hyland and Hyland 2006b, p.1). Basically the role of feedback is mainly recognized by genre-oriented teachers and in process-based classrooms, as "a key instrument of the growing control over composition skills" (ibid). Many student writers think of feedback as someone telling them what is wrong with their writing to help them to fix it. Cole (2009) agrees with this perception as he defines feedback as "any response to the writer or his work that helps him write more and write better" (p.9). Furthermore, Cole associates feedback with happiness and goes on to say "I would define

feedback as any response that helps the writer write more, write better and be a happier person" (ibid) because writers feel happier when they write successfully. Hence, feedback helps students to become more aware of their strengths and areas of difficulty to be able to improve their learning by addressing their deficiencies. In effect, feedback, especially from teachers is very helpful as it substantiates their self regulation. Wiggin (2001) states that feedback "provides information about the gap between current student performance (effect) and the goals, standards and criteria that define academic competence" (ibid, p.69). Wiggins adds that comments like praise, blame or exhortation which does not embody clear advice (e.g., '*try harder*') or vague statements (e.g. '*this essay is poorly structured*') are of no help to learners because they do not develop self-regulation.

   Writing needs to be evaluated, graded and treated as any other EFL learning process. As a result, teachers use written assessment to determine their learners' level of linguistic and communicative competence. Many teachers consider the written assessment as a crucial tool to measure their learners' advancement and progression in writing. Wendling and Roberts (2009) argue that the information teachers obtain from the assessment process helps them to know their learners' strengths and weaknesses in writing. They recognize that when effective teachers of writing analyze students' strengths and weaknesses, they design specific teaching plans to select the most appropriate instructional interventions to treat these writing deficiencies.

   Rosa (1999) divided feedback into two types: explicit and implicit. Explicit feedback provides precise grammatical illustrations about the target structure, whereas implicit feedback informs the subject whether his response is correct or incorrect. Some studies classify feedback according to teachers feedback focuses. Some teachers focus on form feedback in traditional way when they correct grammatical and mechanical mistakes. Other teachers, however, focus on content feedback by giving learners encouragement or criticisms to improve their writings in the areas of: organization, creativity, paragraphing, cohesion and coherence (cited in Shafaei and Nadjati, 2008).

   Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) explain that feedback can be divided into two types in terms of mechanism. The first division is selective feedback, in which teachers allow prioritization of the most serious, frequent patterns of errors made by students. The second division is comprehensive feedback, where teachers mark all of the errors

committed by students in their written productions. Arguments rose for and against both types of feedback. Arguments in favor of selective feedback state that this option facilitates and develops self editing strategies. Arguments against this position state that students prefer to have all errors identified so that they do not miss anything. Hartshorn et al.,(2010) have noted that for real-world writing tasks, students should learn how to edit their own texts comprehensively rather than selectively, and hence leaving few errors uncorrected by teachers would not help them to do so adequately (Cited in Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014).

   In terms of strategies, feedback is divided into two types: direct and indirect feedback. It is very difficult to decide which approach to use in error correction (direct or indirect). Direct feedback involves providing the student writer with a target- like form (a suggested correction), while indirect feedback provides students with an indication that an error has been made (underlying, circling, an error code, etc.) but it requires the student to self correct Most experts agree that indirect feedback has more potential for helping learners to develop their L2 linguistic proficiency. Indirect feedback is believed to enable students to learn more effectively. However, experts also confirm that direct correction can help lower level students who do not have the capacity to self-edit even when the error is clearly pointed out. Furthermore, direct correction might be suitable for selected idiomatic lexical errors such as collocations with wrongly selected prepositions (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014). To sum up in indirect feedback, teachers only point out where the errors are made, and the teacher sometimes can give the positions of the errors and reveal its type, but no direct correction is done because at this level the learners' role starts. Indirect feedback is sometimes referred to as 'coded error feedback' and is considered as one of the most helpful types of feedback because it is believed to enhance learners' performance in the learning process (Lee, 2005).

   Teachers use feedback to correct learners' incorrect behavior, enhance learners' performance, and promote the learning process. Meckeachie and Sivinicki (2013, p.115) Teaching Tips explain that feedback is not a monologue in the sense that the meaning of feedback comes into being through interaction between a teacher and his/her students. Therefore a teacher must enrich his feedback and make it meaningful to students by:

- Tailoring their comments to answer students' needs
- Supplementing teachers' feedback from other sources such as peer feedback
- Strengthening the students ability to judge the quality of their own work

According to a research carried out by Ellis (2009) and Van Beuningen (2010), there are two general approaches used by teachers to provide written error correction to their students' compositions. The comprehensive (unfocused) approach involves the teachers' correction of the students' written errors, irrespective of their error category. In contrast, the selective (unfocused) approach involves the teachers in correcting specific linguistic features, leaving all other sorts of errors uncorrected (outside of their focus) (cited in Corpuz, 2011).

The research literature about feedback has not been positive about its role in instruction because teachers are not believed to make use of their feedback' potential. However, surveys of students' feedback preferences show that students value much teachers' written corrective feedback and consider it much more important than other forms of feedback such as peer feedback and oral feedback. Hence, students are very positive about their teachers' written feedback and seem to value greatly teachers' comments and corrections in all aspects of their compositions. Ferris (1997) stated that "three quarters of substantive teachers' comments on drafts were used by students, only half of their revisions in response to these could be considered improvements" (cited in Hyland and Hyland, 2006, p.3).

2. Objectives

The primary concern of this study is to explore the views of group of 20 teachers of English at the Department foreign Languages at Biskra University about the main sources of errors in the writings of EFL students at university level and the impact of teachers' corrective feedback to reduce these errors and improve their written work. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following question: What is the impact of teachers' corrective feedback on students' written productions?

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section presents the research methodology used in this study and gives information about the participants. It also provides a

description of the different sections of the questionnaire and it finally gives information about the analysis of the results.

3.1 Participants

All the participants are teachers of written expression module at the Branch of English Studies in the Department of Foreign Languages in Biskra University. They are university awards; they all hold a BA and MA or "Magistère/Master" degree and only 2 hold a PhD (Doctorate) degree. Concerning their employment status, 13 are full time teachers while 5 are part time. As far as their teaching English experience is concerned, 5 teachers have an experience of one year to five. Equally is the number of teachers whose experience is five to ten years; however, 8 teachers have an experience of over 10 years. Concerning the length of their experience in teaching the written expression module, 15 teachers have an experience of less than one year to five, and only 3 teachers have taught the written expression module from five years to ten.

3.2 Description of the Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a tool to collect survey information about a particular subject in order to carry out a research. It provides structured and often numerical data and can be administered without the presence of the researcher. Wilson and McLean (1994) describe the questionnaire as "being comparatively straightforward to analyze" (cited Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2005, p.317). this questionnaire certainly does not guarantee absolute credibility nor validity, but rather it helps firstly to give much insight about students' difficulties in writing, secondly to explore teachers' conception and understanding of the causes that lead students to make errors when writing and thirdly to prove the effectiveness of corrective feedback of teachers in reducing these errors.

In order to make sure that the questionnaire is clear on its purpose, clear on what needs to be included or covered in terms of elements and that it asks the most appropriate questions to elicit the most appropriate types of data to answer the inquirer purposes, the researcher piloted the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 10 teachers during the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015 and the return rate was 80%. After piloting the questionnaire, the researcher distributed the final questionnaire to 20 teachers and this time the return rate   was 90% a rate which can be considered as relatively high with 18 out of 20 that completed the

questionnaire. From the sample of 18 participants 8 are males and 10 are females.

The questionnaire is addressed to teachers and makes use mainly of the technique of close ended question but not exclusively. In many cases, teachers are allowed space to provide their own answers. In brief, many types of questions are used where the participants are invited to choose by ticking one or more than one response option.

3.3 The Questionnaire Sections

The questionnaire starts with a short section meant to gather some information about the teacher' degree, professional status and years of work experience in teaching English in general at the university level and in teaching the written expression module in particular. **The second section** of the questionnaire is about the writing process. It includes questions which seek to clarify teachers point of view about the efficiency of the written expression program to improve students 'level in writing, to get some insight into the teachers' view about what good writing is, to address the teachers' position vis-a-vis their learners' level in writing and whether they deem it satisfactory or not and why. Other questions inquire into the teachers' willingness to encourage their students to write and what techniques they use in teaching along with the module content of which they are in charge and examine the teachers' awareness or unawareness of the approach they use in teaching writing. Furthermore the questionnaire tries to inquire the relationship between the time devoted to written expression module and the progress in students' writing ability. **The third section** aims to explore the causes behind students' errors in writing and inquires into the process of L2 acquisition to gain insights about whether it involves inevitably the making of errors and how. Other question items addresses the teachers' experience and analytical skills to find out whether their students make errors only due to negative transfer of their native language. **The fourth section** tackles the teachers' feedback in the learning process. It inquires into the teachers' awareness of learners' language lacks and difficulties in completing their written assignments and examines the frequency viewed by teachers of students' errors in writing. Furthermore this section inquires into the approaches or methods of written correction employed by teachers to provide feedback to their students and into the ways teachers use to respond to their learners' errors when correcting their compositions. In addition,

the questionnaire items of this section try to explore the types of errors mostly pointed out to students by teachers and the type of feedback which is the most effective. Besides, it tries to explore how teachers interpret the concept of effective feedback in relation with course goal and examine the difficulties that teachers encounter when they provide feedback and their students' reactions to their feedback.

4. Analysis and Discussion of the Results

From the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, teachers were grouped into two classes depending on their perception of the adequacy or the non-adequacy of the actual content taught in the written expression module. One group approved the efficiency of the current program, whereas another group demonstrated their disapproval and believed that it should be updated to respond to learners needs in writing. Furthermore, teachers gave different interpretations to the concept of 'good writing', but all of them agreed that it is a combination of basic elements, which are complementary and together with additional components such as style, legibility, organization and clarity can create good and effective writing. Additionally the survey findings revealed that almost all teachers considered their students' performances as low because their skills in writing are not adequate and such difficulties can be devastating to students' education and self-esteem because they risk staying motivated with their continuous struggle to overcome these writing deficiencies.

In spite of all the challenges, teachers asserted that they continue to encourage learners to progress in their writing and to improve their performances by trying to choose the most appropriate approaches to teaching writing and by assisting students during the writing process, especially with the phases of the process which they consider the most challenging. Teachers also emphasized the role of practice in writing and wished to be allowed longer hours of teaching writing because this would provide students with more opportunities to maximize their language learning.

As aforementioned, teachers admitted that students have great problems in writing but recognized that making errors in L2 production, especially in the initial stages of language acquisition is inevitable and asserted that it is an integral part of the learning process. Additionally teachers attributed these errors in students' writing to many reasons among them the psycholinguistic, social and educational background of the students. Furthermore, they recognized

the developmental factor as a very important contributing factor because they believe that learners can master the correct forms only after having ample linguistic input and practice. Poor study conditions also were recognized to contribute to the low achievement of learners. Teachers themselves admitted that they can have a negative impact and may sometimes hinder learners' progress in writing with regard to their competence, instructional methods and feedback. Other teachers attributed the students' errors to technical factors such as L1interference, translation and overgeneralization.

Further, the analysis of the teachers' questionnaire revealed that students of English in the Department of Foreign Languages of Biskra have serious problems in writing at the levels of spelling, language use, organization and other skills. Teachers highlighted the role of teachers to help and assist those learners to improve these aspects of writing by directing comments on the content and the general quality of the work to incite them to reduce errors and to raise their writing standards. Moreover, teachers explained the approaches they adopt in error correction; there are those who use the explicit error correction, where they provide the learners with information about what is erroneous in their forms and structure and there are those who tend to use the implicit approach, in which they provided learners with indirect correction to correct their errors. Hence, teachers differ in their reactions to students' errors. Some of them stated that they accepted the learners' works and replaced the errors with the correct form without emphasizing the error itself, while others preferred to localize the incorrectness by underlining or circling it, letting the student to discover the type of the error. A third category of teachers recognized training their students to respond to certain indication of their own errors such as correction codes.

Furthermore, all instructors agreed on the importance of corrective feedback in assisting learners to develop their written performance and they insisted that equal importance should be given to the form in students' writings as well as content and organization. Teachers gave different interpretations to the concept of 'effective feedback', but all of them agreed that it should be immediate, transparent, useful and accessible. Also they added that effective corrective feedback should be consistent with the goals set by teachers for the course because the purpose of an effective feedback is to develop learners' awareness, knowledge and strategic competence in order to develop their writing skill. Finally, teachers of English in the Department of Foreign

Languages at Biskra University recognized to encounter many difficulties in providing corrective feedback to their students such as the great numbers of papers to correct, the long time and effort it takes, the students' lack of motivation and interest in feedback, etc. However, teachers demonstrated that what matters most importantly is to check always whether or not their students understand their feedback; this would help them much to readjust their feedback strategies to meet learner' needs in writing.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that students have many difficulties and deficiencies in writing and these problems are caused by different factors such as the psycholinguistic, social, developmental and educational background of the students; poor study conditions, the teachers' competence, instructional methods and feedback; in addition to other technical factors as L1 interference, translation and overgeneralization. Besides, teachers can have a great contribution to reduce these errors and improve students' performance through their adequate corrective feedback. Hence teachers have recognized that being aware of the origin of errors in students writing would help much to minimize errors and they have also recognized the crucial role of corrective feedback in improving students' compositions.

Given the results of this study, a number of recommendations for further research are suggested. First, it is recommended that further research should be undertaken to investigate the sources of errors committed by undergraduate EFL students majoring in English. Second, further investigation into finding the best ways to provide clear and effective corrective feedback is recommended. Last but not least, it would be interesting to conduct a survey to find out what types of feedback the students would like. Teachers should have a feedback system which always begins by a survey of the students' intentions and needs in writing in order to be able to provide corrective feedback focused on those needs.

6.   References

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