IMPACT OF TEACHER FEEDBACK ON ADULT STUDENT WRITING

CHENG WINNIE ANNIE

Centre for Learning and Teaching, Vocational Training Council, Hong Kong
E-mail: awcheng@vtc.edu.hk

Abstract - Teacher's feedback to student writing played an extremely important role in second language writing (L2) [3]. When providing feedback, most teachers adopted an indirect error correction approach i.e. indication of errors by means of an underline, mark or code. This classroom-based research aims to explore whether direct written corrective feedback is an effective approach to improve the writing ability of a class of L2 adult learners of Business English. The findings also helped the teacher to review the function of correcting errors in terms of scaffolding learning in English language. Data collection was limited to three sources: sample of student writing scripts, students' responses to a questionnaire, and transcripts of informal interview with secondary school teachers. The findings revealed that when the teacher's and students' perspective on feedback approach corresponded with each other, it could, to some extent, give a positive value for teacher's feedback. The adult students in this study welcomed direct written corrective feedback because such approach could help them identify their writing issues promptly and effectively. Furthermore, the positive findings in this study confirmed that teacher's feedback did play an important role in improving the writing accuracy in this class of adult learners.

Index Terms - Error correction, second language learning, written corrective feedback

I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher's feedback to student writing played an extremely important role in second language writing (L2) [3]. Written corrective feedback could be defined as grammar or error correction [12]. Having discussed with a number of language teachers about the best ways to give written feedback so that students could take full advantage of it, I found that, interestingly, most of them focused on language errors only, and adopted an indirect error correction, i.e. indication of errors by means of an underline, mark or code.

In contrast I adopted a direct feedback practice, i.e. to correct every grammatical error and rewrite sentences for students. This is because I believed that teacher's feedback could serve the function of correcting errors as well as the pedagogical function for scaffolding learning in English language. In recent years, there have been continuous debates on the value of providing teacher's feedback on L2 writing. This classroom-based research aims to explore whether direct written corrective feedback is an effective approach to improve the writing ability of a class of L2 adult learners of Business English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Correction was defined by Truscott [12] as "correction of grammatical errors for the purpose of improving a student's ability to write accurately". Depending on the instructional context, this definition can be broadened to include lexical errors, including word choice, word form, collocations and mechanical errors such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and typing conventions [12]. Truscott [12][13] criticized that previous research on error correction failed to provide evidence that it could help student writers. From his point of view, teachers (and non-teachers) had wrong perception of error correction: when students were given the right form of grammatical structure, they should be able to use it in the future. But, Truscott believed that "the acquisition of a grammatical structure is a gradual process, not a sudden discovery as the intuitive view of correction would imply". He further argued that error correction could be ineffective in practice and have damaging effects. In this connection, he strongly recommended that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned. In response to Truscott's challenge to the value of error correction, Chandler [1] provided evidence, with a comparison between experimental and control group data, that students' accuracy in writing could be increased if teachers gave error feedback and required students to make corrections. Harmer [4]

described the role of written feedback as not only an assessment tool of students' work, but also a teaching aid. Lee [5][6] further found that the efficiency of error correction very much depends on feedback strategies. Lee [5][6] suggested teachers to understand student perspectives on teacher feedback in order to develop reflective and effective feedback practices. In this regard, a number of studies were conducted and discovered that students are generally positive about receiving teacher feedback [5][6][10][11].
But, students have different preferences and perceptions of teacher-written feedback. Until then, it is difficult to draw a conclusion on the value of teacher's feedback. However, an action research project on scaffolding literacy in adult and tertiary environments [8] confirmed that a consistent and structured feedback approach did help students identify their problem areas in writing; and the contextualized feedback also helped students understand and learn from their mistakes.

III. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

According to [9], classroom research is a study centred on the classroom, aiming to investigate what happens inside the classroom when learners and teachers come together. This study was a classroom-based research conducted to collect data from a class of 22 working adults who were attending a business English course at foundation certificate level offered by a university in Hong Kong. These language learners had Level 2 in HKCEE English Language. Data collection was limited to three sources: samples of student writing scripts, students' responses to a questionnaire, and transcripts of informal interviews with secondary school teachers. As this study was conducted with reference to specific learner characteristics and classroom contexts (i.e. working adults of a business English class), its findings and conclusions could not be generalized to other groups with different characteristics. Nonetheless, the results should be valuable for my own reflection and development of a constructive feedback practice in the future.

A. Students' Writing Scripts

Student writing scripts were collected from two written assignments. The first assignment was a report-writing on "Employees' Working Conditions". Direct written corrective feedback (i.e. every grammatical error corrected and the problematic sentences rewritten) and written comments were given when marking the first assignment. In addition to individual feedback, a list of common errors was compiled for peer corrections and discussions during the lesson. Students then revised their assignments and rewrote the paper individually. The correction scripts were then collected and tracked to see whether students had attended to the teacher's recommendations and improved their accuracy in writing.

To prepare for the second writing assignment on 'Replies to Complaints', more guidance was offered before students writing so as to enable them to understand the important language features of this genre of writing, and to reduce grammatical errors. For example, notes on content and organization of standard 'complaint' and 'replies to complaint' letters were given to students. Students' writing scripts were then checked to see whether students' accuracy in writing was improved when they worked on the second assignment.

B. Survey on Students' Perspective on teacher's feedback

It has been found in a research that all learners, particularly the older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instructions should be delivered, and this learner belief would affect their way of learning the second language [7]. Therefore, a 6-item structured questionnaire was designed and distributed toward the end of the course to solicit written responses from the students concerning their preference in the kind of error feedback and their views on the usefulness of the current feedback practice. By doing so, it is hoped to find out if there was any mismatch between the students' and the teacher's views on the role of written corrective feedback. The questionnaire was developed based on the one adopted by Lee [5][6] in her study on student reactions to teacher feedback.

C. Interviews with Secondary School Teachers

Informal discussions with three full-time English teachers were conducted to find out their feedback approach, and to solicit their views on the value of teacher's feedback to students. The key questions asked during the informal discussions were: "how do you correct your students' writing?", and "why do you use this feedback approach?"

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the above data collections were summarized as follows:

A. Analysis of Students' Writing Scripts

From the analysis of students' corrections for the first assignment, I have found evidence that some students did attend to my recommendations and showed apparent improvements in their second writing of the first assignment. One of the student's writing improvement in response to my feedbackwas illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary of a Student's Correction

Teacher's feedback	Student's correction
1. Contents and organisations	
Give more background information in the 'Introduction'	Inserted a few sentences to specify the company's goal in the first paragraph
Insert a suitable heading for each paragraph of the 'Findings'	Inserted appropriate sub-heading for each finding
Quote percentage to support your findings	Inserted relevant figures in percentage form as evidence
2. Grammar and language issues	
Wrong expression	Rewrote the sentences by coping sentences written by the teacher as well as using his own words.
Incomplete opening sentence	Rewrote it as a complete sentence
Use past tense to report findings	Changed marked mistakes to the correct tense
Incorrect subject-verb agreement	Mistakes corrected by rephrasing the sentence structure

The above summary showed that the student corrected most of the grammatical mistakes according to my comments. On the other hand, some new errors were

identified from his second writing, e.g. usage of relative pronoun, active voice and passive voice, and such grammatical usage were not found in his first writing. This additional information revealed that the student might lack comprehensive knowledge on English grammar. Information collected from the analysis could enable me to understand his weaknesses so as to plan my teaching pedagogy to enhance these areas in the future.

B. Questionnaire Survey on Students' Preference for Teacher's Feedback

The questionnaire findings showed that majority of the students responded favourably to the current feedback practice. Around 73% of them indicated that they wanted to have not only a mark/grade, but also error feedback and written comments. It was further noted that nearly 60% of highly proficient students preferred to have more written comments, whilst 80% of medium and low proficiency students preferred to have more error feedback. Although this finding confirmed what was said in research literature [5][6] that both high and low proficiency students preferred to have explicit error feedback from the teacher, it was different from Lee's finding that students wanted to have more written comments regardless of their proficiency level. As some surveys of student preferences showed that students were particularly positive about receiving feedback on language issues [2][11], it was not surprising to see these adult students had a preference to teacher's feedback on language (i.e. grammar, vocabulary and sentence pattern) as well as content and organization issues. This finding was also tallied with Lee's study results [5][6] that students expected to have feedback on not only language but also other issues like content and organization. Likewise, similar research findings summarized by Ferris [3] that students expressed strong preferences for teacher feedback on language issues as well as appreciation for feedback on their ideas and composing strategies. The findings of this study revealed that adult learners appreciated teacher's feedback provided that it was helpful to them. For example, responding to the question about whether they found their teacher's written feedback useful, one student answered "Yes, it is useful because my English is slightly improved", while the others found my feedback useful because it helped them understand their mistakes and problem.

C. Interview with Secondary School Teachers

In most cases, feedback strategies are influenced by teachers' beliefs, values, training and examination culture [5][6]. According to my learning experience, I believe that students could not benefit from indirect teacher feedback unless the teacher could supplement it with verbal clarifications. This belief resulted in my adoption of a direct feedback practice, i.e. to correct every grammatical error and rewrite sentences for my students. Unfortunately, teachers' responsibilities are very diverse nowadays. It was found from the interviews with secondary school teachers that apart from teaching, teachers were often engaged in non-teaching duties, such as being called upon to reply to parents' complaints, providing student counseling service, or drafting fund-raising letters for their institutions. Therefore, teachers could not afford time to have feedback conferences with individual students. Among other things, time constraint is the major reason for teachers not adopting direct and constructive feedback practice.

CONCLUSION

The above findings and discussions revealed that when the teacher's and students' perspective on feedback approach corresponded with each other, it could, to some extent, give a positive value for teacher's feedback. The adult students in this class of business English course welcomed teacher's direct written corrective feedback because this approach could help them identify their writing issues promptly and effectively. Furthermore, the positive findings in this study confirmed that teacher's feedback did play an important role in improving the writing accuracy in this class of adult learners.

On the other hand, this study also inspired me to conclude that in order to manipulate teacher's feedback as a pedagogical tool for scaffolding learning in English language, it was necessary for the teacher to adopt an appropriate kind of feedback and embed it in the overall approach in language teaching. I believed that other language teachers in Hong Kong would consider using directive written corrective feedback and genre-based pedagogy if time constraint was no longer their main concern.

REFERENCES

[1] J. Chandler, "The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing," Journal of Second Language Writing, vol. 12, 267-296, 2003.

[2] A. Cohen, and M. Cavalcanti, "Feedback on written compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports," In D.R. Ferris (Ed.), Response to Student Writing – Implications for Second Language Students. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, London. 92-114, 2003.

[3] D.R. Ferris, "Response to Student Writing – Implications for Second Language Students" Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, London, 2003.

[4] J. Harmer, "The Practice of English Language," Pearson Longman, 147-152, 2007.

[5] I. Lee, "Understanding teachers' written feedback practices in Hong Kong secondary classrooms," Journal of Second Language Writing, vol. 17, 69-85, 2008.

[6] I. Lee, "Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms," Journal of Second Language Writing, vol. 17, 144-164, 2008.

[7] P.M. Lightbown, and N. Spada, "How Languages are Learned," Oxford University Press, 66-67, 2006.

[8] A. Mahboob, S. Dreyfus, S. Humphrey, and J.R. Martin, "Appliable linguistics and English language teaching: the Scaffolding Literacy in Adult and Tertiary Environments (SLATE) project," in A. Mahboob & N. K. Knight (Eds.),

Appliable Linguistics, 25-43, 2010, London, United Kingdom: Continuum International Publishing Group.
[9] Nunan & Baily, "Exploring Second Language Classroom Research," Cenage Learning. Chapters 1 & 2, 2009.
[10] C. Rennie, (2000), "Error feedback in ESL writing classes: What do students really want?" in D.R. Ferris (Ed.), Response to Student Writing – Implications for Second Language Students. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, London.pp, 92-114, 2003.
[11] H. Saito, (1994), "Teachers' practices and students' preferences for feedback on second language writing: A case study of adult ESL learners." In D.R. Ferris (Ed.), Response to Student Writing – Implications for Second Language Students. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, London, 92-114, 2003.
[12] J. Truscott, "Review article – the case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes," Language Learning, vol. 46(2), 327-369, 1996.
[13] J. Truscott, "The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately," Journal of Second Language Writing, vol. 16, 255-272, 2007.

★★★