The Effectiveness and Issues of Using Feedback in Second Language Writing

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ABSTRACT

Based on the description of feedback in the literature and the classification of feedback by different scholars, this paper discusses the efficiency and possible issues of the teachers' use of different feedback in the teaching of second language writing. Through interviews with experienced English majors, this paper further demonstrates the importance of teachers' use of feedback in second language writing teaching. At the end of the paper, the author also shows that the combination of different feedback according to specific situations in teaching can better promote the writing proficiency of second language learners.

1. Definitions and Explanations of Key Terms

1.1 The Theory of Feedback

Feedback is widely acknowledged that plays a crucial role in the instructional process [7]. It is defined differently by different researchers. Truscott, J. [11], for instance, states that any method used to reflect the right and wrong of teaching to learners can be regarded as the feedback. When it is used in the study of second language writing, feedback is still considered as the essential part for improvement of second language writing skills [7]. Biber et al. [1] also argue that both first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing skills can be enhanced through feedback. This means that feedback can be used to make learners more focused on effective self-expression than just practicing the multi-draft composition [7]. The presentation of feedback has changed over the past two decades. It is no longer just teacher's written feedback but also combined with other forms. For example, feedback can be given by teachers, other peers, or computer system even though the writing workshop and oral feedback. Learners can get progress from feedback because there are many focuses of feedback. It can include the content like ideas, organization and also focus on the aspects of language such as grammatical form and usage [1].

1.2 The Classification of Feedback

In the field of second language acquisition, Shao [9] points out that scholars use the clarity of feedback as a criterion for classification. Direct feedback, also known as explicit feedback, is that the teacher directly pointed out the learners' error and corrected the error. On the contrary, indirect feedback which is as well as implicit feedback means that the teacher underlined the error without giving correct format but left it to the students to correct it [2]. Ferris and Roberts [6] claim that indirect feedback is more

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helpful for learners' second language acquisition since learners are involved in error corrections which could make them more impressive so that enable to achieve long-term improvement in writing. Besides, Hyland, K & Hyland, F [7] also mentions that feedback can be divided into summative feedback and formative feedback due to the purpose. The former is regarded as comment given after writing used to estimate the outcomes of writing while the latter focuses on the learners' improvement of writing ability rather than ability in assessment. He asserts that formative feedback normally assists the summative feedback during the writing pedagogy.

1.3 The Theory of Error Correction

Written error correction is also called grammar correction and corrective feedback which is one of the most important components in the feedback. Based on Truscott, J. [11], error correction composes of the following parts: explicit, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, recast, repetition, clarification, and translation. Teachers can consider these aspects when giving feedback to learners, which can make feedback more effective and thorough. Furthermore, it is also useful for the teacher to notice that error correction cannot treat various linguistic error types in an identical way. Because they do not represent the same period of time, these linguistic knowledge are in the same main position respectively [12].

2. The Key Issues in Written Feedback

2.1 The First Issue about Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback

One of the most controversial topics in the error correction is whether it is effective for improvement in the accuracy of second language learner's writing [2]. Different scholars hold different opinions and attitudes on this issue.

2.1.1 The oppositions of using corrective feedback

Truscott [10] suggests that the error correction would not only help the second language writing but also have a negative impact. He advocates that this method should not continue to be used in teaching. The study did by Bitchener, J. [12] also find that students who are given four very different categories of feedback still make no obvious differences in their writing ability. Another strong evidence comes from Truscott, J. [11], whose experimental study concludes that students measured by grammar and vocabulary errors are less advanced than content-based students. Ineffectiveness of error correction also can be verified by Bitchener, J. [12]. Based on the results of Bitchener, J.

[12] study, the content groups are more advantageous than error group. Even in the aspects of the use of words, both groups improve considerably and do not make the great differences. Bitchener, J. [12] also argues that students who often experience modified mistakes are more likely to be restricted in writing. Additionally, Truscott, J. [11] claims that it is meaningless to give students error correction since it has no effect on the improvement of students' longitudinal writing. Teachers are also asked to shift the focus of feedback to the content and writing process of student writing [11]. Hence, the grammar correction is useless for second language writing [10], but also leads to a possible decline in the quality of students' writing because of the lack of attention to content.

2.1.2 The supports of using corrective feedback

In order to against the viewpoint of Truscott [10], a great number of researches did by opponents. Ferris [4] argues that written corrective feedback should not be abolished because it does help the learners promote their accuracies in writing. He points out that the Truscott's argument is pretty immature and overly strong. The study of Truscott, J. [11] also verify that through the revised manuscript, it was found that the group that was given the error correction obviously had only a small number of grammatical errors compared to students who did not receive feedback at all. Besides, Ferris and Roberts [6] conclude that based on past literature, 80% of errors can be successfully corrected by students through feedback from teachers.

Scholars also try to focus on students' attitudes toward teacher corrective feedback. Most results of studies indicate that students' view on teacher corrective feedback is positive. Ferris and Roberts [6] as well as points out that compared with peer feedback and oral feedback, ESL students have a consensus that teacher written feedback is more helpful for their writing. Furthermore, students wish their writing mistakes to be commented by the teacher. Otherwise, they will be disappointed [10].

2.2 The Second Issue about Effectiveness of Direct or Indirect Feedback

Direct feedback and indirect feedback which promotes the accuracy of students' writing has attracted the attention of many scholars Ferris [4]. Different scholars have expressed different opinions on this issue.

The discussion of both two feedbacks

In terms of effectiveness of indirect feedback, Ferris and Roberts [6] suggest that indirect feedback allows students to personally participate in the correction of errors

and the resolution of problems which can achieve long-term second language acquisition by improving students' attention and noticing. Another instance for this is that Ferris [4] discovers that through indirect feedback, the accuracy of students in writing is increasing. Moreover, indirect feedback is more effective in reducing students' errors of writing in the long run [6]. From the students' perspective, the several studies show that students tend to indirect feedback with coded error is more helpful to them [3]. Indirect feedback also promotes students to review themselves and self-correction [3].

However, when it comes to direct feedback, other scholars' research proves its effectiveness. Ferris [4] experimented that in a survey of 5,000 teacher feedbacks, students prefer to apply direct feedback in the writing process because they are allowed to directly use advice from teachers into their new pieces of writing. The view that direct feedback is helpful also support by Ferris [4], whose study shows that direct feedback can make the correct rate as high as 80% or more while indirect feedback is only 77%. In addition, Chandler [3] emphasizes that direct feedback helps students understand the correct format of the target language by reducing student confusion. It is also useful for lower proficiency students to correct complicated errors [3].

To sum up, since various factors have to be considered, it is difficult to give a very clear conclusion to the above two issues.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Author's Voice on the Topic

In my view of point, students can benefit from appropriate feedback, which means that various factors should be considered not just focusing on the grammar errors when teachers give feedback to individual students, so the effectiveness of feedback can be increased. For example, Chandler [3] mentions that teachers should take into account the social function of feedback and meaning-related issues in learner's writing. Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti [5] did the research reveals that experienced teachers adjust their feedback based on the student's background such as the capability, the personality of each student. Considering contextual features, it can also be proved that giving appropriate feedback is effective by combining different types of feedback in teaching writing. For instance, students with a high degree of language are more suitable for indirect feedback, leaving students with space for self-modification (Lalande, 1982), whereas low-level language learners due to lack of the language proficiency are not able to correct errors by themselves [5]. Hence, using

different feedback to different language level students are allowed the teacher to improve the effectiveness of feedback.

However, although feedback actually has advantages for English language learner's writing, it still exists some limitations in feedback. For example, Ferris [4] states that according to his own teaching experience, she finds that her suggestions about feedback only more available for students' treatable errors. Another limitation is that students show their interests in teachers' direct feedback while the previous studies demonstrate that indirect feedback chronically facilitates students' writing ability. As a result of this, the teacher should make adequate preparation if they choose indirect feedback on their students' errors [6]. But these shortcomings are not unsolvable. In order to address the issue, Ferris [4] argues that do not use the changeless method to correct those untreatable errors in students writing and these errors can be handled by training and explicit feedback. As for the second limitation, developing students' independent self-editing and self-reflection skills could be the solution. Besides, giving students expatiation also could be helpful to overcome the limitation [6].

In summary, it can be drawn a conclusion that feedback plays an extremely central role in English language writing. In addition, it is necessary to give students feedback on their writing since it is advantageous for them to enhance their writing ability.

3.2 Author's choice of most effective feedback

Personally, the author prefers that indirect feedback is most effective for English learners, especially in terms of long-term benefits. In the process of using indirect feedback by students, they must learn to solve and correct their mistakes according to the clues left by the teacher. This means that in this process the student's learning motivation is stimulated which leads to the development of the long-term second language knowledge acquisition [5]. The impact of indirect feedback on students' accuracies of writing is continuous and can keep it for a long time. Ferris & Roberts, [6] also reports that students who received indirect feedback had a higher rate of error decline than students who received direct feedback. She also mentions that the short-term correction ability of students who receive direct feedback will not develop into long-term ability. Language acquisition is a long-term accumulation of learning [8], therefore, indirect feedback that has a lasting impact on students becomes more important and more effective for improvement in the accuracy of second language learner's writing.

4. Interview

Because of the respect for the interviewer's personal privacy, the teacher who was interviewed would use a pseudonym, which means that the letter "Z" refers to the teacher in the interview report.

4.1 Teacher Profile

Z is a Chinese teacher who has been teaching English in the university of China for 21 years, and she also is a teacher with rich teaching experience. Her teaching subjects are comprehensive English, English listening and English Lexicology which are all the compulsory courses for Chinese students who study in English major.

4.2 Report of Interview

Z holds the view that it is necessary that the English language teacher should give the students feedback. Z [13] argues that feedback is very crucial for motivating students learning, in the field of second language (L2) writing, most scholars admit the importance of feedback. Her argument also is verified by Hyland, K & Hyland, F [7] who asserts that feedback is regarded as the essential part and its importance is acknowledged in the academic world. When Z was asked which kinds of writing feedback are valuable for learners, Z [13] thinks that different feedback should be used since teacher should give different writing comments on individual students' writing. She also mentions that the standard of effective feedback is variable, depending on the actual situation of the student's writing. For example, when there are too many grammatical errors in the student's writing article, then you should pay attention to grammar correction. However, sometimes if the content of the student article makes you feel confused, you should give the student a content evaluation. Sometimes when the cohesion and coherence in students' paper are poor, organizational issues should be pointed out in the feedback. Z [13] insists that the effective feedback should be able to students realize their errors and weakness in their writing and also can help students write better in a long term. Besides, Z [13] suggests that in the effective feedback, text-specific should be considered since it plays a key role in writing feedback. When discussing the pros and cons of feedback, Z said "As for advantages, I think, it is obvious that it can help students easily locate their problems and revise their text correctly, and it is also very useful for developing students writing ability. While in terms of disadvantages, maybe it is time-consuming, and inappropriate comments maybe undermine students' confidence in writing." When asked if she prefers indirect feedback or direct feedback, Z [13] states that it depends on the actual teaching situation, but direct feedback is more targeted for students to locate their errors accurately so that they can correct them better. Chanlder [3] concludes that direct feedback allows students to better understand feedback and make full use of feedback to modify their own errors. Furthermore, when asked about the attitude of students about feedback, Z [13] notes that according to her teaching experience, the attitude of Chinese English learners is very positive. She points out that students are inclined to receive feedback from teachers. In the study of Hyland, F. [13] also finds that most students are willing to receive the feedback from teachers.

In brief, the questions and answers of the interviews are closely related to the issues I discussed in part A. For example, the first to fourth questions in the interview were all raised for the first issue. Another instance is that the seventh question in the interview is for the second issue. Hence, interviewed teacher's ideas provide me different perspective and understanding of feedback.

From the above teacher's beliefs and experiences, there are some implications for my future teaching. First, the factors affecting the effectiveness of feedback is various, so teachers cannot just use a single type of feedback in the teaching process. Giving feedback to students in different forms can enhance the positive impact of feedback on teaching. Second, in the face of different students, the teacher should give different comments on the individual writing situation of the students. Third, it is extremely important to choose the appropriate method to give feedback. Giving students simple and less information feedback is maybe not proper in teaching.

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