

The Impact of Explicit Teacher Feedback on Micro and Macro Level Features of the Performance of the EFL Students in Descriptive Writing

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Abstract: Teacher feedback is an essential aspect of any English language writing course. This is especially true now with the predominance of the process approach to writing that requires some kind of second party feedback, usually the instructor, on student drafts. Kroll describes feedback as one of the two components most central to any writing course with the other being assignments the students is given. Although teacher feedback seems an ideal one and most preferred by many students in second language instruction, its fruitfulness in developing students' writing is not so crystal clear. Moreover, many unanswered questions remain regarding micro and macro level features which have not been adequately attended by researchers. It seems the answers to these questions are not convincing, and there is a gap in this area. So, to fill the gap an investigation should be conducted to inform of whether this leads to improving the students' overall writing quality.

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1. Introduction

Writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning and teaching a second or a foreign language. Producing a successful written text is a task which requires simultaneous control over a number of language systems. Many scholars believe that teaching writing should be in a way that stimulates student output and only then should generate teacher response and conferencing (Raimes 1991, 1998; Reid, 1993).

Writing is the art of creating ideas and thoughts. So, writers are creators of words that convey meaning and through these words they communicate with the readers. Composing involves a series of decisions and choices that writers organize during the act of writing. Teaching ESL/EFL students to become successful writers is an especially complex task. But it can be a tremendously rewarding one as well.

During the last few decades researchers have delved deeper into the process of writing. This process includes several stages of composition development. While in the planning or prewriting stage, writers generate ideas and organization, they put these ideas into some rough order in writing stage. Then, during the revision stage, they hone organization and expression. Finally, during the editing stage, they correct surface errors like spelling, punctuation, and usage.

2. Developments in ESL composition instruction

Prior to considering the research compiled on the effects of feedback on students' compositions, it is essential to explore the development of approaches to teaching writing in ESL composition theories. The evolution of ESL composition theories and approaches has been discussed by Silva (1990). He mentions four major approaches as, Controlled Composition Approach, Current-traditional Rhetorical Approach, Process Approach, and Task-based Approach.

While the Controlled Composition Model primarily focused on formal accuracy and correctness and emphasized rigidly controlled programs of systematic habit formation to avoid errors, Current-traditional Rhetoric emphasized on the compared product rather than the composing process. The dissatisfaction with the "linearity and prescriptivism" of the first two approaches has brought the conception of the process approach. This approach, as the name suggests, focuses on the processes involved in composition writing, such as pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing, to provide students with an efficient and effective composing process. The process-centred approach to writing assumes that students learn to write best using multiple drafts rather than just one final product (Bellah, 1995). Many composition faculties advocate multiple draft

assignments that build upon one another in order to promote student learning. Process approach was also criticized by advocates of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Horwitz (in Dyer, 1996) suggests a task-based approach that merges process and product in the concept of communicative task.

3. Nature of Writing

The process/product debate continues in the field of writing instruction: should teachers focus on the writing process in the classroom or emphasize the importance of a correct final product in student writing? The process approach looks at writing from a new angle; it is completely different from previous approaches in writing. To Kroll (1990), this approach provides a positive, encouraging, and collaborative environment within which students, with sufficient time and less interference, can work through their composing processes. In process-based approach, writing is considered as a “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate reason. Unlike the product-based approach, this approach focused on the writer’s need for guidance and intervention throughout the writing process, rather than on controlling lexical, syntactical, and organizational patterns. The process-based approach to writing instruction attempts to avoid the perhaps premature imposition of these patterns and instead adopts the notion that content, ideas, and the need to communicate would determine form (Silva,1990). According to expressivists, like Elbow, Murray, Macrorie, William Coles, and Emig, providing writer-students with linguistic feedback and correction is regarded as an interfering deleterious factor in the delicate process of their creative thinking and free-writing. They advocated classroom techniques that encourage students to take power in their own prose. (Kroll 1990). On the other hand, although cognitivists, like Zamel, Spack, Raimes, Kraples, and Fried Lander make any possible attempt to minimize interference of the writing teacher in the productive cognitive process of their students’ writing, they hold that besides teachers’ feedback on the macro level features of their students’ pieces, feedback on their micro level features also seems to be necessary.

4. The Importance of Feedback

Generally speaking, the philosophy of teaching is fostering students’ learning with helpful writing instruction and giving effective feedback is a central concern for any teacher of writing and an important area for both L1 and L2 writing research. However, one major issue that has obsessed the scholars’ minds is how to provide the students with

fruitful feedback that best contributes to students’ improvement in writing capabilities. So, teachers are required to provide the students with feedback that facilitates student mastery of writing. The purpose of giving feedback is to teach skills that assist students to improve their writing skills to the extent that the students are “cognizant of what is expected of them as writers and are able to produce it with minimal errors and maximum clarity.”(Williams, 2003, p.1) It remains no easy answer to the question of what kind of feedback the teacher should give the students. However, teachers should focus on implementing types of feedback that make students maximize utilizing the previous prior feedback on subsequent writing occasions.

5. Explicit teacher Feedback

Among the various types of teacher feedback, explicit teacher feedback is the main concern of this study. Direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form that seems more preferred by teachers and students (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, Cheyney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Hadley, 2001; Komura, 1999; Rennie, 2000; Roberts, 1999). In direct feedback errors can not be tolerated and should be removed directly (Hadley, 2001).

Celce Murcia (2001) points out to the Lyster (1997) that provided the Canadian students with numerous feedback in immersion classrooms frequently in the middle of content-based exchanges. Their findings revealed that explicit correction and negotiated feedback had a positive value that “uptake” of correct grammatical forms occurred following such feedbacks.

6. Micro Level and Macro Level Features

In the present study the researcher concerns two aspects of writing as micro and macro level features. While at the micro level the emphasis is on the specific written forms at the level of word or sentence such as, grammatical conventions, spelling and punctuation, macro level features emphasize content inclusion, coherence like sequencing of ideas and linking, and organization (Ur, 1996). Unlike the previous research, this study focuses on micro and macro level features simultaneously. But the researcher tries to investigate the degree of impact of explicit teacher feedback on these two features. In fact, it will be carried out by considering the empirical data that will reveal the degree of improvement in writing skill over a course semester.

To sum up, methods of explicit teacher feedback as overt correction of errors, or marking errors, at both micro and macro levels will all be identified in this study to recognize whether explicit

teacher feedback has positive effects more on micro or macro level features by considering the number of errors in a number of writing tasks, the scores the students gain on the final product, and both quality and quantity of their writing including correctness at the end of the semester. In other words, the results of this study will reveal to what extent the students apply explicit teacher feedback more to the micro or macro level features of their writing.

7. Modes of writing in terms of purpose

In the past it was common to categorize writing with regards to its product. For instance, it was possible to find writing classes entitled “Letter Writing” or “Essay Writing” since the final outcome and the product was the main focus; however, today there is more emphasis on the process of writing and as a result students are motivated to concentrate on the purpose for which they write. To recognize the purposes in writing, it is necessary to review the modes of writing. Richards & Schmidt (2002) point out to different forms of writing and classified them into four types as: descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative writing. But among these modes of writing, description is the basic form of writing. At first look, it seems simple for academic discourse. But it is the opinion of those who did not write. Description is not simple, but it is “fundamental and the best way to lay the foundation of the writer’s craft.” (Murray; 1999, p.245). All types of writing encompass some elements of descriptive writing that cause a reader see, think, feel, and react. (Murray, 1999). Therefore, each mode of writing activates different types of processes in the mind of the writer and follows different procedures.

8. Discussions

8.1. Feedback on Writing: Micro Level versus Macro Level Features

There is an argument over teacher feedback on micro and macro level features. In contrast to Truscott (1996), who claimed grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned, most researchers agree that attention must be paid to both micro and macro level features (Loewen, 2002; Skehan, 1988). What there is no agreement on is the degree of effect each has on improving students’ writing. Among numerous scholars, some recommend that teachers should emphasize macro level features and believe that micro level features should be focused on after ideas have been fully developed. (Elbow and Belanoff, 2000; Raimes, 1993; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1999). But recent studies claim that except content, grammatical accuracy should be considered, because the lack of grammatical accuracy may prevent

students’ progress in university. (Ferris, 1995; Santos, 1988; Vann, Lorenz, & Meyer, 1991; Vann, Meyer, & Lorenz, 1984). But Ferris (2004) contends that it is far from complete to draw such conclusions. There remain many unanswered questions regarding micro and macro level features. The majority of the previous studies have investigated the impact of teacher feedback on grammar and content of ESL students’ writing, but they have revealed very little evidence of improvement in overall quality of the performance of EFL student writing. In other words, it is the time to look at the final product of the research on the effect of explicit teacher feedback on micro and macro level features and its impact on the improving the students’ writing abilities.

8.2. Benefits

Among the different skills, writing is an inseparable part of any language learning process. (Chastain, 1988; Rivers, 1981) Writing ability is the art of producing thought and ideas and inability in writing causes many problems for learners to do many different writing tasks in a second or a foreign language. Academic, educational, business, research tasks are just a few major ones. Poor writing ability is a main concern among the students. Here, teachers are responsible for assisting students to cope with problems. This investigation can shed light on how to provide effective feedback on students’ composition. In this case we may get some steps closer to finding a remedy for poor writing ability to contribute our students and meet their needs and to improve in writing ability. The outcomes of this investigation will have pedagogical implications and course developers will use them for material preparation for writing classrooms. Test designers will use the results as well. They recognize which aspect of writing they should consider more to focus in testing writing skills. The findings of this investigation will also indicate that whether the explicit teacher feedback is effective in improving the students’ writing abilities, and to what extent the teachers should provide the students’ writing with explicit teacher feedback. Finally, it will cater a new experience for language teachers to contribute their students to learn the writing skills in a faster and easier way.

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