THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER AND PEER CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON THE GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY IN WRITING AMONG THE L2 LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Corrective feedback (CF) is a common practice in education field, where a learner obtains comments from a teacher or peer on any task that he or she has done. The purpose of CF is to provide learners with the message of their incorrect usage of the target language. This preliminary paper sought to investigate the effects of two types of CF on the grammatical accuracy in L2 learners’ writing namely; teacher feedback and peer feedback. Their effects on grammatical accuracy in learners’ writing were observed on 64 form six students of one secondary school in Skudai, Johor. The heavy focus on the grammatical accuracy was due to the importance of grammar in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) that the students are required to take before finishing the high school. Such test as well will be the ticket for them to further their studies at higher institutions. In this study, pre-test and post-test were carried out to the experimental and control group. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that both types of feedback had positive effects on the students’ performance in L2 writing. However, students who received teacher feedback only outperformed those who received both types of feedback with a slightly better margin of improvement of 22.59 as opposed to 19.19 respectively. Some pedagogical implications for the teachers are also included in this paper which can serve as basic guidelines in providing CF to the students.

Keywords: Corrective feedback; teacher feedback; peer feedback; grammatical accuracy; writing; L2 learners.
INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Writing has always been seen as the most challenging skill among second language (L2) learners. This is because it does not only involve a representation of words, but also the development and organisation of thoughts in a structured way (Maryam & Hamid, 2012). It is a complex cognitive task as it incorporates several complementary skills to be done. Thus, it is not surprising that some learners show a variety of errors in their piece of writing when they are required to produce one.

For pre-tertiary level students, they are obliged to take Malaysian University English Test (MUET) before they are allowed to further their studies at higher institutions. Beginning the end of 2008, the writing component which previously carried a 25 percent weightage (maximum score 75) had been increased to 30 percent weightage with the maximum score of 90 (Malaysian Examination Council, 2006). Hence, greater emphasis has been placed on the writing component in MUET. The allocation of marks in both tasks in the MUET writing component is equal for task fulfilment and language. The language aspect which includes grammar determines whether an essay is well-written or low-graded. A grammatically incorrect essay is usually found to be a distraction to a reader’s attention from the content written. Such effect on the examiner’s attention will severely affect the score given to the essay. Therefore grammatical accuracy is observed to be important in a student’s success of getting good scores in MUET particularly in writing component.

A common problem encountered by many language teachers teaching students who are studying at pre-tertiary level is that some students still show the inability to produce an acceptably intelligible writing despite the fact that they have studied English for at least eleven years in school. Their writing problems range from spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation to appropriateness of vocabulary as well as the organisation of ideas. Due to that, corrective feedback (CF) has always been regarded as a vital part in the teaching and learning process. According to Ferris (1999), learners can hardly become skilful writers if they just read and write, as they need some kind of criticism from others to improve their writing. It is important for teachers to give feedback on students’ written errors although it can be one of the most demanding and time-consuming tasks (Ferris, 1997). Since it plays a vital role in improving students’ morale in writing better, teachers have to think of the best way to provide feedback to students. On the other hand, if CF is not effectively implemented, the errors done will be fossilized and affect the quality of their writing in the future (Mohammadi, 2009).

The role of a teacher’s CF is to indicate to his or her learners that their use of the target language is incorrect (Lightbown and Spada, 1999), and from the CF given to them, the learners will be able to notice the gaps and problems in their inter-language system and make the right adjustments towards making progress in learning the target language. While oral CF is thought to be detrimental to a learner’s progress in learning the target language, Van
Beuning (2010) presents that written CF is believed to be favourable and useful to a learner’s progress in the target language acquisition. Besides, CF could also be more effective when used with one-on-one conferences between the teacher and the learners. The two-way interaction on one-on-one conferences allows closer teacher-monitoring that may lead to self-initiated corrections among the learners.

However, students can sometimes rely too much on their teachers for correction or feedback. Such dependency can cause lack of confidence or lack of skills in identifying errors among students which may explain why the same type of errors keeps recurring in the students’ writing. Even though explanations have been given by the teacher as feedback based on their performance in carrying out the writing tasks, some students continue to produce essays that are full of errors. This could lead to an assumption that the teacher’s feedback still lacked the effect of enhancing students’ noticing function of the gaps in their inter-language system and therefore resulted in little or no uptake of new knowledge or skill.

In relation to that, peer CF may help students to learn from one another on how to notice errors and gain more confidence that they are able to do it without having to resort to teachers’ feedback every time. With this noticing skill, students will be able to restructure their knowledge which could be represented in the correction of inter-language in writing based on the target norms as much as they could prior to submitting their work to teachers and reduce the number of errors gradually with increasing skill (Ellis, 1991). Peer feedback could also be an alternative for a large class especially when the teacher has limited time to give one-on-one oral feedback to students. Peer CF may provide better interactions among learners in monitoring and helping to notice the gaps. Students would have greater chances of carrying out discussions and learning from one another and therefore would acquire knowledge and skills better. Perhaps by exposing students to greater interaction opportunity by putting them in groups during error correction session with peers would lead to improvement in their inter-language system.

Given the above situations, this study looks at the effect of peer CF as a follow-up to teacher CF on grammatical accuracy in L2 learners’ writings and compared and contrasted it with the effect of having teacher CF only. It is of interest to see whether the supposedly enhanced noticing function as a result of the additional feedback from peers would better improve students’ performance in writing grammatically correct essays.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper are:

(i) to study the effects of teacher with peer type of corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy in students’ writing.
(ii) to study the effects of teacher corrective feedback only on grammatical accuracy in students’ writing.
(iii) to determine which type of corrective feedback has a greater effect on grammatical accuracy in students’ writing.

**Research Questions**

Based on the objectives mentioned above, the following questions are raised:

(i) Does teacher with peer type of corrective feedback affect grammatical accuracy in students’ writing?
(ii) Does teacher corrective feedback only affect grammatical accuracy in students’ writing?
(iii) Which type of corrective feedback has a greater effect on grammatical accuracy in students’ writing?

**REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Corrective feedback (CF) is a common practice in education field especially in writing and speaking. It is usually a situation where a learner obtains comments from a teacher or peer on any task that he or she has done. According to Lightbown and Spada (1999), CF regardless of the type of response received, gives learners the message of their incorrect usage of the target language. Schachter (1991) mentions other terms that are used interchangeably to signify CF; negative evidence and negative feedback that are used in the fields of language teaching, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology. Unlike in the First Language Acquisition (FLA) where most researchers strongly disagree with CF, the effects of CF are observed by many researchers to be rather equal between pros and cons in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Mounira, n.d.)

**Major Types of Corrective Feedback**

There are many terms to describe various types of CF when referring to the literature. Freedman (1987) in her comprehensive definition of CF highlights different major types which include teacher feedback, conferencing and peer feedback. The feedback can be formal or informal, written or oral, explicit, less explicit or implicit. Other types of feedback listed by Ellis (2009) in correcting students’ writing are metalinguistic, focused and unfocused, electronic feedback and reformulation (p. 98). Since this research studies the effectiveness of teacher feedback and peer feedback, therefore the focus will only be on these two types of CF.

**Teacher Feedback**

Teacher feedback is the conventional and most commonly-used technique to respond to students’ writing. Teachers are always seen as the only source of information including in giving CF. Hyland and Hyland (2006) state that written feedback from teachers plays an important role in L2 writing classes. The teacher may give feedback in two general ways that are direct or indirect. Direct or explicit feedback allows the teacher to give specific comments on students’ mistakes, while for indirect or implicit feedback, teachers just
generally point out that they have made mistakes. Three ways listed by Ferris (2002) that teachers can use to indicate mistakes are coded (use abbreviation or symbols coding system), uncoded (just use underline or circle without telling the type of errors made) and marginal error feedback (use margin to indicate the number of errors in each line). Many students within ESL setting particularly think that CF is crucial for them to improve on their writing style and grammar (ibid.). Teachers also are available to conduct student-teacher conference to give CF on errors committed by the learner. However, oral CF usually requires a heavier immediate cognitive load for the learners to comprehend, compare and contrast.

From their study, Bitchenere et al. (2005) suggest teachers to incorporate student-teacher conference in giving feedback to L2 learners as they found a significant result on the students’ accuracy levels of the use of the simple past tense and the definite article in writing when combining written and oral feedback. However, there may also be some possible disadvantages of teacher oral feedback that is, time consuming. Especially in instances of a large number of students in a classroom, such student-teacher interaction is not a viable option for many teachers (Chuang, 2009).

**Peer Feedback**

The term ‘peer feedback’ which is also known as ‘peer review’ or ‘peer response’ refers to the learners’ feedback in a form of comments, suggestions or questions offered to their peers after reading their writing (Flower, 1979). Storch (2004) mentions that peer feedback has a strong theoretical and pedagogical basis, which follows the concept of communicative approach in language learning. It supports Interactionists’ theories that learners need to negotiate meaning to assist their SLA (Long and Porter, 1985). Other than that, peer feedback also involves the process of noticing among learners. Swain’s Output Hypothesis (1985) explains that output is not just a result of one’s proficiency in the target language, but it can also be a process through which further SLA is promoted. One may need to intentionally look for appropriate linguistic forms when trying to produce output, and his/her awareness of the linguistic rules are consequently deepened. Through such process, one may acquire new linguistic knowledge as well as strengthen the existing knowledge.

There are a few advantages that peer feedback can bring to learners’ writing. Hyland (2000) says that peer feedback promotes student participation in the classroom and makes student less teacher-dependant. Besides, peer feedback helps learners to notice the gap between them and their peers in perceiving their writing, develop self-reflection, and improve students’ editing skills. In adopting peer feedback in the classroom, Berg (1999) lists out a few suggestions on how to ensure a successful practice of peer feedback. Some of the points that teachers have to concentrate on are: a comfortable classroom atmosphere, clear explanation of the role of the peer in giving CF, students’ understandings on the role of peer CF in their writing, types of CF to be used and a support tool to guide students giving CF on specific areas of writing. However, the use of peer feedback in the classroom is quite limited. It also
may not always be successful due to insufficient L2 proficiency, lack of task training and learner reluctance.

**Literature on Corrective Feedback**

There were a great deal of CF-related studies that had been conducted before, but this study only highlights several relevant ones. A big name in CF, Truscott (1996) reviews CF as unsuccessful and even destructive in developing L2 acquisition among learners. However, the CF literature has offered an array of theoretical counter arguments and studies indicating that CF can direct to acquisition including Ferris (1999). She argues that Truscott's views were premature as the proofs of the effectiveness of CF from researches are still in a rapid growth. However, she agreed that the issues highlighted by Truscott still need to be taken into consideration when doing research on CF.

Among the studies that claimed to have found positive evidence in support of the CF effectiveness were conducted by Chandler (2003) and Ashewell (2000), while the studies that reported to not find any positive evidence of CF were carried out by Polio, Fleck & Leder, (1998) and Robb, Ross & Shortreed (1986). The study on the issue of CF is still controversial as some researchers manage to point out obvious flaws in other studies such as no/lack of control group to best compare the result, use revised topic in post-test instead of a new topic and provide unfocused feedback as opposed to focused feedback.

**Role of Corrective Feedback in Improving Writing**

CF has been acknowledged by many researchers to be significant in assisting learners’ writing development. Many studies including Ferris (2002) indicate that CF is useful to all learners, because it makes them notice their own flaws and reconsider a better writing style. CF makes students aware of their writing performance and indirectly encourages them to improve their writing from time to time. Without CF from readers like teacher and peers, learners would be confused and unaware of their aspects of writing that need to be reconsidered. This gives them a longer time to revise their own piece of writing. They might also believe that their writing has conveyed the intended message and never thought of doing correction (Freedman, 1987). Teachers may also benefit from CF as it shows them the challenging areas in learners’ writing, and this allows them to create better teaching and learning practices related to writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

**METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN**

**Participants**

The participants of the study were 64 form six students of a secondary school in Skudai, Johor who were taking the same subjects namely; General Studies, Business Studies, Bahasa Melayu and MUET (Malaysian University English Test). They only differed by one subject which 32 students took Economics while the other 32 took History as an additional subject for their Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM). Since Ferris (2001) states that teachers need to
consider the students' backgrounds, especially their previous English language education when giving feedback to students' errors, it is noted that majority of them were in the low to intermediate level of English proficiency as accordance to their SPM English results. All of them were taught by the same teacher for MUET subject. In terms of CF, the teacher feedback was the most common CF that the students received during their study but peer feedback was informed to be a rare occurrence in their classrooms.

**Procedure / Treatment**

All participants were informed at the very beginning that their writing products would be analysed and used for research and teaching improvement purposes. They took a pre-test, followed by the treatment and the post-test. Before that, they were divided into two groups. In dividing the students, their English proficiency level which was based on their SPM English Language results was taken into account. Care was taken to get similar number of students from each proficiency level into each group. Each group was made of 16 students from the Economy class and 16 students from the History class. Students in Group 2 were further divided into eight 4-member groups. Group 1 consisted of students receiving coded CF from the teacher only, while Group 2 consisted of students receiving the same coded CF from the teacher followed by peer CF.

Before treatment, the students were given a pre-test of a topic to be written in approximately 200-250 words about ‘A fund raising activity by the Scouts during the weekend’. After the pre-test, the groups were given two different treatments. Initially both groups were given the teacher feedback for 45 minutes. For this study, the verb tense had been chosen to be the focus based on the result of a previous test conducted on grammatical accuracy in writing. From that test, it was found that majority of them scored less than 50 percent on the correct use of verb tense. Xu (2009) states that learners will be more conscious on their use of the target language in the post-test when the focus is given on specific grammatical structure(s) only (as cited in Van Beuningen, 2010).

The teacher provided feedback based on the errors students made in using the verb tense in their writing. Teacher feedback included the coded written feedback on verb tense (coded as ‘vt’) and oral explanation of the coded feedback. During oral feedback, students were allowed to pose questions about verb tense specifically and about grammar in general. After the first 45-minute session, the students were separated into their respective groups for the task of rewriting the essay as correction. For the next 45 minutes, students in Group 1 were asked to rewrite individually while students in Group 2 were asked to do corrections based on the peer feedback. Students in Group 2 discussed the correction in their respective groups and rewrite their essays after confirming the correct forms of the errors they made in verb tense by peer editing. After the treatment, no additional input on grammar rules was given by the teacher until the post-test was conducted.
For the post-test, the students were required to describe several activities based on a given situation. The question for the post-test was divided into two parts: ‘How my classmates and I keep our class clean everyday’ and ‘The school ‘gotong-royong’ during the weekend’. For each part they had to write in about 100 words. The first part of the question was intended to elicit the Present Tense use in the students’ writing while the second part was to elicit the Past Tense use. In order to control the degree of difficulty of the writing tasks, the genre for both tests were narrative essays.

**Instruments**

Two testing instruments were used in this study to answer the research questions – pre-test and post-test. To guide the students as well as to ease the teacher’s marking part, the students were given pre-prepared writing sheets for writing their essays on both tests. The writing sheet was designed to enable coded written feedback to be delivered to the students instantly after the teacher returned their work. Two teachers were assigned to mark the essays. The marking was only focussed on identifying grammatical errors in verb tenses. The focus on verb tense form made marking clear and unambiguous, and this eliminated the need for inter-rater reliability.

**Data Collection**

The scores that students obtained for the pre-test and post-test were tabled and analysed. Each student’s score was calculated by finding the percentage of the number of correct verb tense used over the number of obligatory occurrences of the verb tense in the student’s writing.

**Data Analysis**

In order to attend to research questions, descriptive and inferential statistics were used in this study. The data collected was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Ver.16.0. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used in the study. Independent samples t-test was used to ensure that there was no significant difference between the groups. Paired sample T-test was applied to find significance differences between the pre-test and post-test for each independent variable.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The result of the analyses was tabled as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Pre-test Mean Score</th>
<th>Pre-test Mean Score</th>
<th>Margin of Improvement</th>
<th>Pre-test SD</th>
<th>Post-test SD</th>
<th>Sig. (Paired 2-tailed t-test)</th>
<th>Significance (Independent 2-tailed t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>43.44</td>
<td>66.03</td>
<td>22.59</td>
<td>29.55</td>
<td>18.70</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>45.72</td>
<td>64.91</td>
<td>19.19</td>
<td>24.17</td>
<td>16.97</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The results disclosed that both types of feedback had positive effects on the students’ performance in writing. It was found that both teacher and peer feedback led to students’ overall writing improvement. However, based on the overall findings, it can be said that peer feedback was not significantly more effective than the teacher feedback as it seemed that the former did not give any significant difference in the students’ performance in writing grammatically correct essays as compared to the effect of having teacher feedback only. This study was in contrast with the result of study conducted by Keh (1990) and Urzua (1987). Since there was not much difference in both groups’ margin of improvement, this study also partially rejects Villamil & Guerrero’s (1998) statement that peer feedback should be regarded as a necessity to complement teacher’s feedback in the ESL classroom.

Moreover, as predicted teacher feedback was found statistically significant on the students’ grammatical accuracy improvement. These findings confirm the findings of previous studies that show positive and significant effects of written CF (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003) and direct (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) CF by teachers. In this study, peer feedback can be said to show very little positive effect in providing greater improvement in students’ performance in writing grammatically correct essays due to their deviation of focus when they were with peers and insufficient competence in the language.

Between the groups, Group 1 had outperformed Group 2 with a slightly better margin of improvement of 22.59 compared to Group 2 with a margin of improvement of 19.19. The result of this study showed an unexpected result where the teacher feedback only was more effective than the teacher feedback with peer feedback as a follow-up.

CONCLUSIONS

Pedagogical Implications

There are several pedagogical implications from the findings of this study. In general, the two types of corrective feedback had positive effects on improving students’ grammatical accuracy in writing. Teachers can be rest assured that CF used within a process approach does have a role in L2 acquisition. However, some of them are often doubtful of the best approach to give CF to their students (Paulus, 1999). This study proves that the coded written CF used by the teacher had a significant effect on grammatical accuracy in students’ writing. The findings from this study were therefore found to support the use of CF for developing grammatical accuracy in written compositions. By narrowly focusing feedback on salient grammar points, teachers can help arouse learners’ attention to the linguistic feature to be acquired and hence lead to learners’ uptake of the new knowledge or skill. Thus teachers are highly encouraged to always plan their feedback with a rationale behind it by scrutinizing the wide range of ways of giving feedback in order to identify the most effective way that suits their students. The lack of
efficacy of any teacher feedback could perhaps be due to the ambiguous and unsystematic approaches adopted by the teacher.

Peer feedback was not found to be superior in comparison to teacher feedback in improving students’ grammatical accuracy in this study. Hence for the participants, peer feedback is not an alternative to teacher feedback for efforts in enhancing students’ performance in grammatically accurate writing. However, since there are researches that provided proof that peer feedback can be superior to teacher feedback (Keh, 1990; Urzua, 1987), the use of peer feedback therefore should not be totally ignored. Again, by studying various approaches in implementing peer feedback effectively based on SLA theories, properly planned tasks with peer feedback should be adopted by teachers to bring in variety to the types of feedback practiced in the classroom. One of the ways is by adopting Berg’s (1999) suggestions on how to ensure a successful peer feedback practice listed in the Literature Review.

Limitations

As a preliminary research, this study is not without limitations. The short duration for the study was insufficient for the application of the treatment to be repeated several times because after the pre-test, treatment could only be done once before the students were given the post-test. The period was not conducive for research as students and teachers were all preoccupied with preparation for the trial Second Semester STPM examination hence less attention was given by the participants to the study. Both writing and giving feedback are skills that actually require time and practice to develop. Other studies on CF as reviewed in the Literature Review were done in longer time duration. For example a research conducted by Maryam & Hamid (2012) on the effects of two different CFs on English learners in a language school spent seven weeks of study and the learners were given six narrative tasks. Besides that, the research also investigated students’ attitudes toward those two feedback types. Had there been several systematic treatments on the two groups in this study and one other investigative purpose on what transpired during the treatment process, there would be more data that would help to give greater insight into the study. There would probably be more conclusive results that can show and explain the difference or similarity between the two groups in this study.

For this study, the students were also not taught how to provide CF. Instead it was assumed that as young adult learners, they would have their own system of noticing errors and CF skills. However, this method of error correction among peers was something new to the students as participants in this study. Longer time and more practice are therefore needed by these participants to be able to carry out the task better and may be more effectively. The lack of experience in giving feedback could result in poor quality feedback with vague explanations that could create confusion in understanding among students in the working group. Hence, the participants in this study should have been afforded more opportunity to engage in repeated practice.
Suggestions for Further Studies

Although the number of research done on CF has been greatly mounting recently, there are still many areas that need further exploration. To begin with, we would like to suggest future researchers to have one control group and more experimental groups to get more reliable findings in studying different issues. For example, the issue of focused/unfocused CF can be further studied to observe the best way to motivate students to improve their writing. It is because although unfocused CF is perceived to be more likely and genuine when getting feedback from teachers, many students barely improve their writing due to the large scope they have to examine at once (Van Beuningen, 2010).

Future studies are also recommended to conduct more researches that study the effectiveness of CF when applying task-based approach (dictogloss technique) with the presence of consciousness-raising activity for treatment. Other than integrating all basic skills in the language learning session, students will be more geared to focus on form and encouraged to participate in their groups to complete the task assigned.

Other than that, future researchers also need to pay more attention to the participants of the study in terms of the explanation and guidelines prior to task accomplishment. Failure to address this matter will later affect the procedure and result of the study.

Conclusion

Three main conclusions can be withdrawn from this study. The basic findings of the study may be summed up as follows: Firstly, CF plays an important role for learners in SLA context especially in developing writing skills. The study found that teacher feedback had an apparent significant effect on improved grammatical accuracy and helps students to reduce their errors as opposed to peer feedback.

Secondly, there is not a significant difference between teacher feedback and peer feedback independently in promoting better written grammatical accuracy of the participants. From this finding we conclude that peer feedback and teacher feedback may complement each other in promoting overall writing quality, but the study showed no evidence that peer feedback is superior to teacher feedback.

Thirdly, this study presents some evidences that teacher feedback used within a process approach in assisting students to improve their written grammatical accuracy is effective, whereas peer feedback is not really effective in dealing with grammatical accuracy (in this study specifically verb tense). We can partly relate the ineffectiveness of peer feedback to the participants’ inadequate grammar knowledge.
REFERENCES


