

Feedback in the EFL Writing Classroom: Effectiveness and Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

In EFL writing classes, teachers give feedback with the assumption that it will help students improve. In contrast, Truscott (1996) argues that feedback has little to no value to students. This presentation, using data gathered from a first-year university liberal arts reading course, seeks to document and measure the potential effectiveness of two forms of feedback (explicit commentary and coded feedback) and the pros and cons of both forms. This research project examines two classes of 25 students each who wrote seven 400-500 word papers on a variety of topics. One class was given explicit commentary feedback while the second class received coded feedback. Over the course of one term, grades were recorded and compared to examine any differences between the two classes while receiving different methods of feedback. The data does not exhibit any significant variation, perhaps indicating that the type of feedback used is not so important. In fact, over the course of the term, there was no significant improvement in the students' writing. Secondly, this presentation will present students' perceptions of teacher feedback, as recorded by a 6-point Likert scale questionnaire. Interestingly, the vast majority of the students indicated that they wanted feedback from the teacher, even though feedback did not appear to have much impact on their writing. One interpretation is that students simply want feedback from the teacher in the same way children seek attention from parents: simply for emotional rather than practical reasons.

Keywords: writing, teacher feedback, student perception, effectiveness of feedback

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Introduction

Feedback allows students to review their own work and prepare for the next task under the guidance of the teacher (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Writing teachers have options as to which feedback technique they will use in evaluating students' work. Determining which is the most effective technique is the source of much debate and research and may in some ways be dependent on the teacher's goals and students' needs.

Commentary, or explicit direct feedback, takes the form of the teacher correcting student mistakes and providing a correct form (Hyland, 1996). The advantage of explicit feedback is that students will know the correct or more natural form. Possible disadvantages include students not being able to apply the correct grammatical in future tasks and students not having to engage in self-correction (Makino, 1993).

Coded feedback relies on a pre-determined series of abbreviations for various errors (GR=grammatical error, O=omit this word, etc.). The advantage of this form of feedback is that it highlights the form or type of error a student has made (Hyland, 1996). This allows a student to self-correct and then apply that knowledge to future writing tasks. A disadvantage is students may struggle to self-correct and then the two-step process mentioned previously will not occur.

Methods

This study was conducted on a first-year Liberal Arts reading course consisting of two classes of 25 students. The students read articles and summaries on a variety of topics, including literature, history and art of various Western nations. The first period class received explicit, direct feedback while the second period class received coded feedback. The second, experimental group was given a handout at the beginning of the term that explained the various abbreviations and their meanings (the code). In previous research of a similar nature, Ferris and Roberts (2001) included a third feedback condition: no feedback at all. This option was not utilized as the author only taught the course to two classes and it was thought to be unfair to the students to not receive feedback at all.

The course consisted of seven graded articles which were accompanied by vocabulary lists and related exercises as well as a paragraph-by-paragraph list of questions that summarized the main points and details of each paragraph. Each article/topic was covered in two weekly class sessions. Homework was assigned at the end of the second week, completing the unit. Time was sometimes given in class for writing, but the bulk of the students' writing time was outside of the classroom.

At the beginning of the course, a "perfect" paper was presented to the two classes in order to explain to students what was expected of their writing. This paper was actually prepared by a former lecturer but presented a thorough and comprehensive introduction, body and conclusion. This gave the students a model of what to strive for in their writing and how the lecturer would assess their writing. The grading system consisted of 50% for content, 30% for structure and 20% for grammar and vocabulary.

At the end of the course term, students were given a questionnaire containing ten questions regarding their perceptions of feedback. Their answers were placed along a 6-point Likert scale and then compared to students' grades. A representative sample of the questionnaire will be shown in the following section.

Results

The class that received explicit feedback had slightly higher average scores for the first five writing assignments than the class that received correctives codes, with equal average grades for the sixth and seventh assignments (see Figure 1). This could indicate that explicit feedback is slightly better suited to students' needs in writing and helps them learn to write better on future writing assignments. The higher scores could also indicate students who are simply better at writing, regardless of feedback. Likewise, the second class with lower average scores could be less motivated students.



Figure 1: Class Average Scores Over Seven Assignments

However, it should be noted that both classes showed some improvement throughout the term, with the first class exhibiting a more erratic, unsteady pattern while the second class had a steadier arc. This could indicate that these first-year students were improving their writing independent of the feedback given. Also, as students progress through their first term, they will generally become more acclimated to the university environment in general and to the learning rather than teaching environment of their courses specifically.

Nor do these results invalidate the use of feedback. In the questionnaire (see Table 1) given to students at the end of the term, students expressed a desire for feedback (“I like receiving feedback on my writing.”) and communicated an understanding of the purpose of feedback (“Feedback helps me improve my writing.”). A mild preference for explicit over coded feedback was expressed in questions 2 and 3 (see Table 1). While the students' responses are self-reporting (a weaker form of data), the students'

slightly improved grades correspond to their stated desires for feedback and reasons for it.

Table 1: Questionnaire Regarding Students' Perception of Feedback

Sample Question	1=Agree, 6=Disagree
1. I like receiving feedback on my writing.	1.91
2. Feedback helps me improve my writing.	1.71
3. Direct feedback is more helpful.	1.67
4. I like coded feedback.	2.46
5. I prefer to correct my own mistakes.	2.38
6. I would prefer no feedback.	5.08

Conclusions

There are limitations to this study which need to be explained. This study examined first-year university students, who may not have had extensive L2 writing experience. The assignments examined were single draft papers, as opposed to the more conventional three-draft process writing. The class examined was a reading class and assignments were to be reflections of students' comprehension of material read rather than developments of persuasive arguments or independent research.

As the differences between the two classes were slight, but not very significant, a teacher may wonder if there is any real difference in effectiveness in feedback techniques. The corrective code is far easier and quicker for the teacher, who may be marking 50+ papers per assignment. On the other hand, explicit feedback may be preferable simply because the students prefer it and view it as more beneficial than the corrective code. Many students observed in this project stated that explicit feedback taught them correct forms to be used in future assignments. It also represents a greater investment on the teacher's part in students' progress.

Teacher investment in monitoring students' writing may be the key issue. Even if feedback does not always lead to improved performance, students still indicate a strong preference for teacher feedback. Speaking speculatively, this may be due to students wanting attention from teachers. Comparable to children wanting attention from their parents, students may simply want teachers to read and comment on their writing.

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