

Adjusting Written Feedback on Postgraduate Student Writing to Optimize Student Uptake

Filiz Etiz, Middle East Technical University, Turkey

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Abstract

The importance of written feedback on L2 student writing is widely accepted. What seems to be unclear is which form of feedback proves to be most effective. In tertiary education settings where the medium of instruction is English, instructors of academic writing are also challenged with making decisions in prioritizing between genre-specific and L2-specific feedback. Despite the fact that genre-specific and language-specific feedback is constantly given to student writing, much of the end-product still includes mistakes ranging from minor grammatical errors to major genre-specific problems. This study was carried out to determine to what extent postgraduate students taking the course *ENG 402 – English for Graduate Studies I* revise their drafts according to the feedback given on their writing. Essay files consisting of a first draft with instructor feedback and a second final draft produced according to this feedback were collected at the end of the semester,. The types of written feedback provided by the instructor were then related to the quality of response given by students in their final draft. Taking the findings of this examination into consideration, ways by which written feedback on postgraduate student writing can be adjusted in order to optimize student uptake in this course were identified.

Keywords: graduate writing, feedback

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Background to the Study

The importance, or even necessity, of giving feedback in foreign language learning has long been debated by scholars. Despite the fact that there are some scholars who have previously posited that giving feedback is not necessary in language learning, an overwhelming majority has strongly argued for providing feedback. In this vein, Gagné (1985) and Gagné et al. (1992) define feedback as “an external learning condition to improve the effectiveness of learning” and have pointed out the importance of feedback for one’s learning, respectively. In addition to providing feedback to students, Brookhart (2008) puts emphasis on the “just-in-time matching” of feedback, i.e. providing feedback to each student tailor-made for that particular instance and individual.

Students in the foreign language classroom value teacher feedback and attach great importance to writing accuracy (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997). Research reveals that indirect feedback rather than direct feedback where mistakes are corrected prove to be more beneficial for students (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Feedback comes in three basic types: (i) direct feedback where the feedback is tailor-made for the student and correct versions are provided, (ii) indirect feedback where especially language errors are highlighted usually by the use of symbols, and (iii) dialogic feedback where the teacher engages the student by posing questions (O’Sullivan & Paynter, 2013).

The present study was inspired by a 2013 doctoral study carried out by one of our colleagues at the Department of Modern Languages, Gökçe Vanlı. The focus of her study was on student and teacher perceptions on feedback to student writing. At the end of her study, she points to the need to “analyze what goes on during the revision process” in order to “have a better understanding of how the students revise” as well as to the need to “shed more light on the issue of how much of a teacher’s feedback the students consider”. These suggestions for further study served as the starting point for the current study.

The context:

The study was conducted at the Department of Modern Languages at Middle East Technical University. The aim was to evaluate to what extent teacher feedback to students’ essay rough drafts were taken into consideration in the final draft. The essays were written in a graduate English course, ENG 401, during the Autumn term of the 2014-2015 academic year. ENG 401 is an integrated skills courses where the writing component aims to develop students’ essay writing skills through the process approach. In ENG 401, students write several non-graded documented essays and a graded documented expository essay, where instructor feedback is given to the outline and rough draft, and the process is also graded. The instructors gives feedback for outlines (first without and the second with sources incorporated), and rough draft during the process.

The Participants:

The instructor, who also works as a tutor at the academic writing center has 12 years of experience teaching writing courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The students come from a variety of departments. Student proficiency levels range roughly from CEFR B1 to C1. For the study, in each category - poor, average, good, respectively - 12 student essays (rough and final drafts) were collected.

Research Questions:

The research questions formulated in this study were:

- What type of feedback (FB) for content, organization and language is preferred by the teacher?
- To what extent do students take into account FB on content, organization and language?
- What is the relationship between student language proficiency and FB uptake?

Data Collection:

Samples were collected from the teacher who shared the rough and final drafts of 12 students (poor, average, good), including her written feedback. Instructor feedback types for content, organization and language were recorded separately for each student. Then, the extent of uptake in the final draft for each category was noted for each. Finally, the patterns emerging from the data in each category (content, organization, language) and each proficiency level were interpreted on a table. The analysis of feedback given by the instructor revealed that she gives written feedback and mostly prefers to use a combination of types of written feedback (e.g. direct, indirect, dialogic). However, the analysis of student papers revealed minimal use of constructive and even less use of positive feedback in general.

Students at all proficiency levels responded to written feedback but to varying degrees. Even students with poor proficiency attempted to revise their essays in some way. Student uptake of written feedback varies significantly according to proficiency levels. For the most part, the higher the level of proficiency of the student is, the better the uptake is. This is expected since proficiency in L2 also entails familiarity with writing conventions and experience reading, writing and revising as well as facility in understanding instructor comments and language skills.

Teacher feedback to Content varied in type: comments indicating errors, suggestions, positive comments and questions. Among the “good” students, 2 students did not need revision. Students at all levels attempted revision. Uptake improved with increase in proficiency level.

Teacher feedback to Organization varied in type to a lesser extent: mostly error indication, suggestions all of which were considered to a large extent by students with higher proficiency levels but most students with “good” proficiency did not need to make major changes in organization. Language feedback was given to all levels of students and the uptake tends to be higher as the level of proficiency increases.

Conclusions

Taking into consideration the results of the study, several conclusions can be made regarding this study: For one, it is evident that students at all proficiency levels tend to respond to feedback to a large extent. However, the uptake of feedback varies and seems to be in direct correlation with proficiency levels. In other words, the higher the proficiency level of students, the higher their uptake of feedback. This may be either due to more proficient students' higher frequency of writing skills practice earlier or to their better understanding of and insight into the L2 language mentality and thinking patterns as opposed to less proficient students' less engagement with L2 (writing) beforehand, or perhaps due to both factors. Another conclusion that may be drawn from this study is the fact that merely written feedback in different types rather than combining it with face-to-face and whole-class oral feedback is preferred. One reason why this may be so can be attributed to lack of time and high number of students to deal with in one semester. One other conclusion that can be reached in this study is about the employment of positive and constructive feedback. Apart from few positive remarks on especially more proficient students' writing, the use of such feedback appears to be minimal for the essays. Again, this may be due to lack of time and having to cope with large numbers of students every semester.

Suggestions

In the light of the conclusions made in this study, the following suggestions can be made:

- (i) Instructors should provide regular feedback for all writing tasks throughout the semester, and the feedback provided for students should be varied and should come in as whole class and face-to-face (oral) in combination with written feedback to optimize student uptake.
- (ii) It is evident that there is a strong relationship between student proficiency level and student uptake of feedback. Therefore, rigorous effort should be made both on the part of the instructor and the student to raise overall proficiency levels of students.
- (iii) More constructive feedback in the form of suggestions should be provided for student writing in order to guide and encourage the student. In addition to constructive feedback, positive feedback pointing to the strong points in student writing should not be disregarded since such feedback is likely to increase student confidence in writing and give the student a sense of achievement even at early stages of academic writing.

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