The Effects of Teacher Feedback on Multiple-Draft Compositions in ESL Classrooms

Shamshad Begham Othman
Dr. Faizah Mohamad

Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA Terengganu Branch
Dungun Campus, Sura Hujung
Dungun, Terengganu
Malaysia

fareema@tganu.uitm.edu.my

THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER FEEDBACK ON MULTIPLE-DRAFT COMPOSITIONS IN ESL CLASSROOMS

ABSTRACT

Teacher feedback plays a significant role in helping ESL learners acquire the writing skills. However, many research findings indicated that feedback on single draft essays does not help ESL learners much in improving the essays because these learners do not have the opportunity to revise, rewrite, and resubmit their work. Therefore, this study aims at examining the effects of teacher feedback on ESL learners' compositions in terms of content, language and organization by instituting the multiple draft procedure. The participants of this study wrote a first draft; revised it after getting the feedback on content and further revised it after receiving feedback on language. The findings showed that there were significant mean differences in the content, language, organization and the total marks when the second and the third drafts were compared to the first draft.

INTRODUCTION

Writing, unlike other language skills such as speaking, reading, and listening, has created a lot of problems among learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). These ESL learners face writing anxiety, mental block, and an inability to connect grammar rules with sentence formation, as well as the ineptness in using the rhetorical style of the target language. These problems make it difficult for ESL learners to produce a piece of writing which is interesting, clear, concise, and effective.

Second language (L2) writing among students has been the concern of many researchers who are aware of students' weaknesses in this area. They have used different variables to investigate the problems in L2 writing. One of the variables that has been studied by many researchers is the providing of feedback to students. They have studied several techniques of providing feedback in the writing pedagogy such as peer response groups, teacher-student conferences, audio taped commentary and computer-based commentary. However, providing handwritten commentary on students' assignments is the primary method of response among teachers. Hyland (1998: 255) stresses the fact that, "Giving effective feedback is a central concern for any teachers of writing and an important area for both L1 and L2 writing research". According to many process writing proponents (Devenney, 1989; Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1990; Johns, 1986; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983; [cited in Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996]) teacher feedback facilitates successful revision in multi-draft writing instruction. They further elaborate that teachers should not treat writing texts as products but rather as work in progress. The reason for this is that treating texts as products would not make students aware of their errors and weaknesses because they only have to produce single draft essays to be graded. However, if writing texts are treated as work in progress, students have the chance of revising and rewriting to improve

their essays. In the process of improving their composing skills, they would be able to identify the point where their errors lie or the part where their ideas need to be clarified or organized into a coherent paragraph.

How students revise their work may be due to several factors because each student is unique in the sense that he is born to be individually different from another. Individual differences such as students' language proficiency, learning styles, motivation and attitude, and their first language play a significant role in determining how students respond to teacher feedback. Ferris (1999: 7) says that, "As for the practical problems attributed to student writers, effective grammar feedback and instruction will take into account students' first language backgrounds, their English language proficiency, and their prior experience with English grammar instruction and editing strategies".

Throughout the decades, researchers have been trying to find ways to improve second language writing instruction so that learners can be proficient in their writing. Writing proficiency is reflected when learners writing in the target language are able to substantially present the content using linguistically well-formed structures. In addition, the basic assumption that writing can be learned, developed, and mastered has led language teachers to believe that writing skills can be taught, if appropriate second language writing pedagogy is made available. This awareness among researchers and teachers ushered in a fresh outlook in second language writing pedagogy – process-oriented approach to writing instruction.

Process writing gives ESL learners the opportunities to do a number of revisions on their essays that can result in improved writing quality and fairer grades. According to Brown (2001: 336), the process-oriented approach gives students the opportunity to think as they write because unlike conversation, writing can be planned and given an unlimited number of revisions before students produce a good piece of writing as the finished product. With the advent of process considerations in writing, teachers are able to intervene at all stages of students' writing by providing their comments and suggestions. The statement made by Hadley (2001: 281) reflects this process approach in which she views writing as "…a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of 'writing down' on the one end to the more complex act of composing on the other". Thus it can be seen that the process-oriented approach to writing instruction emphasizes the notion that writing is a continuous process in which students have to come up with a series of drafts before the finished product emerges.

However, writing teachers must balance the process and product-oriented approach because writing must certainly come to an end at some point. As Brown (2001: 336) puts it, "Process is not the end; it is the means to the end". Therefore, we can see that it does not serve the purpose of writing, just to have students going through the process of rewriting and revising their work many times without giving any significance to the final product. It is only then fair to grade students' writing not on final products of single-drafts but on finished products of multiple-drafts that have been reviewed by teachers at all stages of writing (Cohen, 1994). Multiple drafting means that learners have to go through a series of revisions before the final product of their writing is graded. These

revisions are essential in the writing process to give learners the chance to improve their writing. The revising strategies will be ineffective without the help of teachers throughout the writing process.

In second language writing pedagogy, it cannot be denied that ESL teachers play an important role in providing feedback to their students. Even though many things have changed in the field of composition research and pedagogy over the last several decades, one thing has remained constant and that is the significance of teacher feedback on writing (Ferris, 1995). Neman (1995) contends that, "The greatest growth in writing takes place when students under supervision, revise and rewrite their work". However, providing feedback on multiple-draft compositions takes teachers' time and energy especially if the writing class is a big one. So, teachers may refrain from providing feedback to the student writers.

According to Fathman & Whalley (1990) as cited in Ferris (1995: 35), teachers cannot do away with their commentary on students' essays because in their study they demonstrate that, "Students' revisions improved in overall quality and in linguistic accuracy when they received comments and/or corrections on both the content and form of their essays". If teachers understand this viewpoint, they certainly will provide expert feedback to their students.

When learners are given the chance to revise their work, expert feedback would be one of the sources used as a guideline to discover their mistakes and clarify their ideas in order to improve their essays. Expert feedback can be conceptually defined as the response made by teachers on L2 writing using form-focused approach (i.e., feedback on rules, lexical choices, etc.) and content-focused approach (i.e., feedback on ideas, organization, etc.) with the intention of improving the composing skills of ESL writers. Students expect teachers to give their feedback on their L2 composing because they are of the opinion that teachers have expertise in the content as well as the form of the essays. Research done on ESL writing instruction has shown that students expect and value their teachers' feedback on their writing (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Mc Curdy, 1992) as cited in Ferris (1995: 34).

Teachers, on their part, after spending much time and effort in providing written or oral feedback to their students feel that such response is a critical part of their job as writing instructors (Ferris, 1995: 34). They try their best to give effective feedback to help students in their writing. Teachers may assume that their feedback is effective in helping students because they have made comments on all aspects of students' essays including those on content and form. Students, on the other hand, may not find the comments helpful because of various factors. For example, in their perspective, there is little clarity in the feedback given by teachers. Some students feel that words and phrases used by teachers are not appropriate to their level of proficiency. And, sometimes there is little oral feedback given by the teachers. In addition, the illegibility of teachers' handwriting can be another factor why students are not able to respond positively to teacher commentary. In such situations, a multiple-draft procedure may help in bringing about

changes in the ESL writing classes. There is thus a need to examine the shortcomings of the feedback giving and receiving situation in ESL classrooms.

This study hopes to see how multiple drafting in ESL classrooms affect students' revisions in response to teacher feedback. Ferris (1995: 36) says that, "It makes sense that student attention to and preferences regarding teacher feedback would differ in a pedagogical setting in which multiple drafting is required". Ferris' argument is that when students have to rethink and revise their drafts, they will pay more attention to teacher feedback rather than when they are not required to submit a final draft with changes. A multiple drafting pedagogical setting is thus chosen so that student response to teacher feedback can be analysed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The researchers intend to find out the potential effects of feedback on multiple-draft compositions.   This study was guided by the following research questions with regard to the effect of teacher feedback on students' written work that they intend to investigate.

1. Is there a significant mean difference in content, language and organization between students' preliminary and second drafts after receiving content-focused feedback?
2. Is there a significant mean difference in content, language and organization between students' second and final drafts after receiving form-focused feedback?
3. Are there significant mean differences in the total scores of the second and final drafts as compared to the preliminary draft?

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on two ESL classrooms in which the process-oriented approach to writing instruction was employed by the teacher. In this approach, students were involved in the revise-rewrite-resubmit procedure whereby they had to produce multiple-draft compositions in response to teacher commentary. The researchers   hoped to find out whether these students improved their essays significantly based on three components namely content, language and organization.

The Sample

The participants in this study were students who took Diploma in Business Studies in UiTM Dungun Campus. They took English as a proficiency course, a requirement that they had to fulfil in order to obtain their diplomas. The English course is called Mainstream English 1 and writing expository essays is one of the many skills taught in this course. The study focused on two ESL classrooms, which consisted of 26 students each. Together they constituted 52 respondents.

Research Design

The sources of data were from written texts. The written texts were in the form of multiple-draft essays that were produced by all the participants involved in the study. The research design could be considered as a pre-experimental research with one pretest (first draft) and two post tests (second and final drafts). The treatments would be the teacher's comments on content and then on form.

Data Collection

Students were asked to write an expository essay and they had to write it in three drafts including a final version. The first draft was submitted to the teacher and she focused her comments on the content of the essay. The researchers requested the teacher to grade the first draft without disclosing the score to the students. The scripts with the content-focused feedback were then returned to them. The students rewrote and resubmitted their second draft together with the corrections they had made in response to the feedback given on their first drafts. The teacher then commented on the language used and graded the papers. The teacher returned the second draft together with form-focused feedback to the students. Finally, the students handed in the final version of their essays with the corrections made in response to form-focused feedback. The teacher still made some more comments that she thought fit on the third draft. She graded the papers and disclosed the scores to the students so that they knew how their writing performance was like. There was also a second scorer of the scripts to ensure the reliability of the marks. The average marks of the two scorers were used in the analyses.

Data Analysis

Standard statistical procedures were employed to analyse the data obtained from the written work. Independent T-tests and one-way ANOVA tests were conducted on the average marks in the preliminary, second and final draft scores.

FINDINGS

Since this research involved two raters, the inter-rater reliability was examined to ensure the reliability of the data obtained. The scores given by each rater for all drafts were analysed using the Pearson's correlation coefficient and the result of the analysis is presented in Table 1 below. The results show that there was a significant correlation in the scores for all three drafts with the significant level at $p= 0.000$ for preliminary and second drafts and $p= 0.001$ for the final draft.

Table 1: Scores on the Inter-Reliability for Preliminary, Second and Final Drafts of the
Two Raters (Total Scores)

Draft	Corr (sig)
Preliminary	.728 (.000)
Second	.567 (.000)
Final	.466 (.001)

The findings of this research were presented based on the research questions previously
mentioned.

RQ1: Is there a significant mean difference between students' preliminary and second
drafts after receiving content-focused feedback?

The students' preliminary draft scores were compared with their second draft scores. The
mean scores for content, language and organization for both drafts were presented in
Table 2 below.

Table 2: The mean scores for preliminary and second drafts for content, language and
organization after receiving content-focused feedback

Components	draft	N	Mean	Mean Difference (S-P)
Content	preliminary	52	4.6058	1.0913
	second	52	5.6971	
Language	preliminary	52	4.5144	0.8414
	second	52	5.3558	
Organization	preliminary	52	2.1827	0.8077
	second	52	2.9904	

Independent T-Tests were run to see if there were significant mean differences in the
scores. Table 3 shows that there were significant mean differences in content, language
and organization after the students received content-focused feedback.

Table 3: T-Tests for preliminary and second drafts for content, language and organization after receiving content-focused feedback

Components	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Content	-7.806	102	.000
Language	-6.769	102	.000
Organization	-11.644	102	.000

RQ2: Is there a significant mean difference in content, language and organization between students' second and final drafts after receiving form-focused feedback?

The students' second draft scores were compared with their final draft scores. The mean scores for content, language and organization for both drafts were presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The mean scores for second and final drafts for content, language and organization after receiving form-focused feedback

Components	draft	N	Mean	Mean Difference (F-S)
Content	second	52	5.6971	0.3366
	final	52	6.0337	
Language	second	52	5.3558	0.6490
	final	52	6.0048	
Organization	second	52	2.9904	0.4134
	final	52	3.4038	

Independent T-Tests were run to see if there were significant mean differences in the scores. Table 5 shows that there were significant mean differences in content, language and organization after the students received form-focused feedback.

Table 5: T-Tests for second and final drafts for content, language and organization after receiving form-focused feedback

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Content	-3.372	102	.001
Language	-5.876	102	.000
Organization	-7.833	102	.000

RQ3: Are there significant mean differences in the total scores of the second and final drafts as compared to the preliminary draft?

The students' mean total scores for all three drafts were presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Mean total scores for all three drafts

Draft	N	Mean
Preliminary	52	11.3029
Second	52	14.0433
Final	52	15.2885

One-way ANOVA were run against the total scores of the three drafts and it was found that there was a significant mean difference among the drafts as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: One-way ANOVA for total scores for all three drafts

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total score	Between Groups	432.381	2	216.190	114.829	.000
	Within Groups	288.055	153	1.883		
	Total	720.436	155			

In order to find out which draft was better than the other, a post-hoc comparison test was run. It was found that the students fared significantly better in their second draft as compared to their preliminary draft with the mean difference of 2.7404 and also they significantly better in their final draft as compared to their preliminary and second draft with the mean difference of 3.9856 and 1.2452 respectively.

DISCUSSIONS

This research has shown that the role of multiple drafts has a great impact on the writing improvement of the students. It also indicates that when the content-focused feedback was given, the students not only improved on the content, but also in language and organization. This is consistent with the findings by Kepner (1991) who found that the use of content-related type of written feedback does not forego accuracy for content. Sheppard (1992) also supports this claim by stating that when students need to communicate, they tried their best to use accurate language to present their ideas that often resulted in L2 writing.

It is also found that when form-focused feedback was given, the scores for content, language and organization in the final draft have decreased. This finding is parallel to the total scores of the students. The mean difference of the total scores was higher between the preliminary draft and the second draft as compared to that of the total scores between the second and final draft. It seems that the students had improved more after the content-focused feedback than after the form-focused feedback. This is probably because the teacher commentary in preliminary drafts was seen important to the students and they had used the feedback extensively in their revision. As most of the corrections were already done in their second draft, the students only had to work on minor errors in their final draft. Another possibility to explain this phenomenon was the limited language competence of the students. When the students had difficulties in grasping the rules of the language, they would not be able to do proper correction on the language forms. This finding is supported by Shamshad (2003) who found the low percentage of revision success after the teacher gave form-focused feedback.

CONCLUSION

The objective of instituting the multiple-drafting procedure in a process-oriented writing pedagogy was to give students the opportunity to revise, rewrite and resubmit their work before their papers were finally graded. In order to get students to improve their drafts, teacher commentary must be given as guidance to them. To sum up, this research has shown that teacher feedback is very much needed and called for in a process-oriented writing pedagogy to help ESL students write well in the target language. Most students look forward to having teacher commentary on their essays so as to make their writing clear, concise and impressive to the readers who are the teachers themselves.

REFERENCES

Brown, H.D. 2001. *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. White Plains: Addison Wesley, Inc.

Cohen, A.D. 1994 Assessing language ability in the classroom. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Ferris, D. 1995. Teaching students to self-edit. *TESOL Journal*. 4(4): 18-22.

Ferris, D. 1999. The case of grammar correction in L2 writing classess: A response to Truscott (1996). *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 8(1): 1-11.

Hadley, A. O. 2001. *Teaching language in context*. USA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Hedgecock, J. & Lofkowitz, N. 1996. Some input on input. Two analyses of students response to expert feedback in L2 writing. *The Modern Language Journal*. 80: 287-308.

Hyland, F. 1998. The impact of teacher written feedback on the individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*. 7 (3):225-286.

Neman, B. S. 1995. *Teaching students to write*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Kepner, C.G. 1991. An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second language writing skills. *The Modern Language Journal*. 75: 305-313.

Shamshad Begham Othman. 2003. *Student response to expert feedback on multiple-draft compositions in ESL classrooms*, Unpublished Master's Thesis. International Islamic University Malaysia.

Sheppard, K. 1992. Two feedback types: Do they make a difference? *RELC Journal*. 23(1): 103-110.