

Some controversies to ponder over in ESL writing feedback

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is one of the most important activities in any English as a Second Language (ESL) writing class, and many teachers and students believe that it is key for writing development. The aim of this paper is to analyze research and come to an understanding of the effectiveness of corrective feedback in enhancing the quality of ESL students' writing. To this end, the following paper presents a critical review of published empirical studies in the area. The review illustrates that feedback in ESL writing has both advantages and disadvantages, with mixed empirical findings suggesting controversy about its effectiveness. The review concludes by highlighting the need for continuing research in the area.

INTRODUCTION

In almost all English as a Second Language (ESL) writing situations, feedback is asked for or given in order to improve a piece of writing, and therefore feedback assumes a central role in teaching ESL writing (Ferris, 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, there is a great deal of variability about when, how (Chandler, 2003; Sheen, 2010) and by whom (Ferris, 2006; Hyland, 2003) feedback should be given in a second language (L2) classroom. ESL writers may receive feedback when they search for a topic to write on, when they start outlining a paper, when they are midway through their writing process, or even when they are in the final stages of their writing. The nature of the feedback they receive may also vary. Some may focus on grammar and word choice, while others may be related to content and organization.

Writing researchers and teachers have suggested numerous strategies for ESL writing teachers to use when they provide written feedback. The first two strategies are direct and indirect corrective feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Teachers who use direct feedback usually cross out incorrect words or structures and replace them with the correct ones, while teachers who use indirect feedback do not correct the errors but localize the errors by underlining, circling, or using another localization approach (Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortread, 1986). Some indirect feedback providers may not even localize the errors, but simply identify that an error, or errors exist in the margin (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). The third strategy is

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the provision of metalinguistic corrective feedback, which entails the use of some kind of codes, such as "WO" for word order, and "SP" for spelling, or a brief grammatical description (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982;). The fourth strategy concerns what the focus of the feedback should be. In other words, the feedback may focus on all the errors identified, or on one or two errors, which has been labelled as focused or unfocused corrective feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006).

The source of feedback for ESL writers can either be teachers or peers (Hyland, 2003). Using the different feedback strategies and focusing on structural, meaning, or organizational aspects of the writing, ESL teachers react to students' writing efforts with a hope of improving students' writing skill (Hyland, 2003). Peer feedback is mostly used in conjunction with teachers' feedback and it is used to provide editing and revision support to peers as advocated in process approach to writing (Zamel, 1985). According to collaborative learning theory, peer feedback can also be employed in motivating L2 writers to put their ideas and resources together to complete tasks that are too difficult to be completed individually.

The variability of the different aspects of giving and receiving feedback to ESL writers has attracted the attention of L2 writing researchers and teachers. Their studies have indicated that there are unsettled issues in the field concerning whether feedback should be given, and if so, when, how, and by whom it should be given. Some researchers in the area have suggested a positive impact of corrective feedback on the writing development of ESL writers (Ashwell 2000; Chandler 2003; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997), while others question the usefulness of feedback and its effectiveness for the population (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

Due to the dearth of agreement on the various issues surrounding corrective written feedback, understanding the controversies in the area will help guide the feedback process in ESL writing. To this end, this article attempts to present an objective synthesis of the conflicting research findings about corrective written feedback. It is hoped that this will help guide ESL writing teachers' feedback decisions, strategies, and involvement by reviewing and, if possible, renewing those controversial issues, or by pointing out the settled issues.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY AND SOURCES

This literature review is delimited by the population addressed, type of article consulted, and type of issues identified. Reports on non-peer reviewed journals as well as non-professional outlets are not included so as to base the outcomes of the review on scientific investigations. The writer understands that there are many other issues and factors that surround effective ESL writing instruction, but this report focuses on issues related to debates surrounding feedback to ESL writers.

Population

This review is specifically geared towards advanced ESL writers. This population of ESL students is assumed to have transitioned from paragraph to essay writing. Therefore, giving different types of feedback and using different feedback strategies make more sense than for lower level ESL writers.

Written Corrective Feedback

Written feedback for ESL students is aimed at improving their piece of writing by incorporating teachers' or peers' feedback on the various aspects of a writing. Written feedback in ESL students writing has been studied extensively from different perspectives. For instance, some researchers studied students' preferences concerning teachers' corrective feedback (Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988), while others investigated teachers' response practices (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Zamel, 1985). Other areas of research include measurement of the difference in effectiveness between content-focused or form-focused feedback (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984), between providing direct correction or coding errors (Lalande, 1982), and investigating whether praise, criticism, or indicating both helped students to improve their writing (Cardelle & Corno, 1981).

SCHOLARLY ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK FOR ESL WRITERS

Supporters of a process approach to teaching ESL writing, which attends to writing instruction as a series of stages involving drafting and rewriting, contend that feedback focusing both on form and content is essential and should be provided to students' work (Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997). Correcting grammar has been shown to improve ESL writers' accuracy in subsequent writing, and is important because errors in grammatical structure may obscure meaning (Ashwell, 2000). Thus, providing form focused feedback in ESL writing is essential because in some contexts grammar may totally change meanings and affect the message being transmitted. Ferris and Roberts (2001) reported on an experiment that focused on whether teacher-provided corrective feedback helped students to undertake improved self-editing and revision. The experimental group that received corrective feedback from teachers outperformed those who received no corrective feedback. However, there was no statistically different performance between students who received corrective feedback only through the underlining of errors, and students who received feedback indicating the errors in the margin. Ferris and Roberts concluded that ESL students appreciated error feedback even though they may differ in the type of strategies they prefer their teachers to use. Again, in support of giving corrective feedback, Fathman and Whalley's (1990) research, which followed a process approach with specific reference to revision, concluded that ESL students who received feedback from their teachers qualitatively improved their second drafts more than those who did not get feedback.

Research into ESL writing has reported mixed results concerning whether or not feedback focusing on one area or multiple areas of students' writing is the best practice. In a study focusing on intermediate East Asian college students, Chandler (2003) suggested that students who edited and revised their writing after they received corrective feedback from their teachers showed significant improvements in their writing accuracy, as opposed to those who received no corrective feedback. His results also implied that giving feedback in any order, whether giving content or form feedback separately in different drafts, or giving both together in one draft, produced significant improvements in the students' writing. Chandler also warned that giving corrective feedback is not enough to help students improve their writing unless they are required to edit and revise their writing based on the feedback they get. These findings were similar to those of Fathman and Whalley (1990), who compared and contrasted the work of students that were exposed to different types of teachers' feedback; specifically those who

received zero, content-focused, form-focused, or both content and form-focused feedback. They found that giving feedback on content and form separately, or giving feedback on content and form simultaneously did not significantly differ in bringing about changes in writing performance when students rewrote their essays.

Although Chandler's (2003) findings were corroborated by Ashwell (2000), Ashwell suggested that students should not receive both kinds of feedback in one draft as it may not be effective due to the cognitive burden it entails. Thus, he advised ESL teachers to provide content feedback in the first draft while their focus of the second draft could be on form. Similar to Chandler (2003), Zamel (1985) proposed that feedback to ESL writers should be done in multiple drafts, in which the minimum is two drafts, however her findings were in line with Ashwell (2000), suggesting that each draft should focus on either content or form. Zamel (1985) argued that doing both in one is confusing for developing students. This implies a need to plan the way teachers prioritize their feedback focus; that is between the large-scale changes to content (revision) and the small-scale changes to form (editing).

It is rare for research into written corrective feedback to provide students with a chance to voice their opinion. However, in a case study on ESL student's reaction to feedback, Hyland (1998) pointed out that even in a fluency-oriented exercise some ESL students wanted correction from their teachers in grammar because they do not see how their writing can be improved without such feedback. In agreement with Hyland's case study, Leki (1991) found out that ESL students wanted their writing to be perfect and error free, thus they preferred all their errors to be strictly corrected. It was also emphasized that even though some students were not happy with open-ended comments from their teachers, they were still satisfied with the corrective feedback they got from their teachers.

SCHOLARLY ARGUMENTS AGAINST WRITTEN FEEDBACK FOR ESL WRITERS

Although the body of the literature reviewed in the previous section generally supports the need to correct students' grammar errors as well as provide feedback on the contents of their writing, there is no consensus among the scholars in the area about what exactly should be corrected. Truscott's (1996) study, which strongly criticized those who advocate the use of corrective feedback, fueled the controversies in the area. According to Truscott, grammar correction in L2 writing is not only ineffective but it is also harmful. Truscott supported his argument on theoretical grounds and through reference to other empirical studies that questioned the effectiveness of grammar correction in L2 writing. Strongly criticizing those who advocate for grammar correction in ESL writing class, Truscott stated that there is reluctance on the part of teachers (and non-teachers) to accept his argument against the effectiveness of grammar correction, mainly because the argument clashes with their intuitions. Drawing implication from first language (L1) error correction research, Truscott suggested that L1 findings can be transferred to L2 writing contexts and contended that error correction had a non-significant effect on students writing performance. Furthermore, his review of empirical evidences based on L1 and L2 studies showed that traditional sentence-level correction does not bring about meaningful revision in students' essays. In justifying his argument, Truscott raised three persuasive but controversial issues. The first is related to theoretical issues, in which he argued that teachers who believe in the importance of grammar correction for the development of ESL writing hold a simplistic view of learning; that is, a belief that transfer of information from teacher to students

by paying no attention to the process of learning guarantees learning. Truscott suggested that this opposes the large body of language acquisition research describing L2 learning as complex and exhibiting different learning stages, and not simply a step by step process that occurs suddenly. Furthermore, he pointed out that the acquisition of syntax, morphemes, lexicon require different processes; thus, using one correction technique is not sufficient to help students learn these items. He also decried grammar correction as having a negative effect on students' attitudes due to the time and energy that it demands.

The second explanation Truscott (1996) gave for the ineffectiveness of grammar correction is centered on its long-term effect. He noted that there are many students who may agree with the correction provided by their teachers superficially, but these students may have other reasons not to consider the correction given by their teachers in their final drafts. He also underscored that some students trust their intuition more than their teacher's feedback, thus they disregard the feedback given. Because of these situations, students who are forcefully required to make changes based on the correction they get from their teachers either do not correct the identified errors at all, or they only accept that teacher's corrections while they are in that teacher's class. Truscott's point here is that if students do not transfer the learning they get from a previous writing correction to their future writing, then it has no effect for long term use, therefore error correction is not useful. The belief that students might sometimes intentionally ignore teacher feedback was supported in Radecki and Swales' (1988) study on perceptions of students who were taking college level non-language courses. Their results showed that some students did not have confidence in the ability of their ESL teachers to give content and text organization feedback because of lack of expertise in what is written.

Third, Truscott (1996) recommended that grammar correction should be avoided because there is little evidence demonstrating that students' writing improved because of such feedback. After reviewing the available evidence in the area, Leki (1990) came to a similar conclusion stating that grammar correction is not necessary in ESL writing. Leki suggested that correcting only those errors that affect the comprehension of the message should be given more emphasis than grammatical errors that cause no or little understanding problem. Implying that corrective feedback on form has no significant effect in helping students rewrite accurate essays, Frantzen and Rissel (1987) discovered that students were not able to figure out what their errors were when teachers simply indicated the location of errors. Kepner (1991) compared a group of Spanish as a foreign language writers' development in terms of producing quality content and grammatically accurate writing after teachers' feedback in both areas and found that students improved the content of their writing significantly while they did not show significant improvement in their grammatical accuracy. In accordance with this research, Sheppard (1992) compared two groups that received feedback in two different ways. One group was given general feedback on the errors they made using error codes followed by discussions on the errors, while the other group received feedback only on the content of its writing. The results showed that the group receiving no feedback on the grammatical aspect of its writing did not perform lower than the group that should have performed higher. This position was partly supported by Hyland (1998), who reported mixed results regarding positive feedback on students' writing. Hyland stated that some ESL students considered positive feedback as a source of encouragement and motivation to write, while others consider it as an insincere form of feedback since such feedbacks are followed by *but*. Hyland also highlighted that praise as a form of writing feedback may not be trusted if it is not common in the students' native language writing experience, and it may also disillusion if the students' scores for writing are low.

CONCLUSION

Written feedback assumes a central role in ESL classroom. The manner in which feedback is given can be direct or indirect; it can also be focused or unfocused. Its purpose is to help ESL writers improve their writing skills by engaging them in their own writing based on the feedback they receive. Many of the issues addressed by the ESL writing researchers, however, raise questions rather than give conclusive answers to the issues they investigate. This paper, thus, has attempted to objectively document the scholarly arguments in support of and against written feedback for ESL writers. In terms of support for written corrective feedback for ESL writers, the main arguments suggest that correcting grammar in writing improves ESL writers' accuracy in subsequent writing, and that feedback also ensures ESL writers' intended messages are not obscured by grammatical errors. The research above also suggests that any corrective feedback provided is better than receiving no feedback at all, and that there is also a student expectation to receive such feedback.

Research has also shown mixed and negative results regarding the effects of written corrective feedback. For example, there exists no consensus on the issue of whether it is better to focus attention on the correction of one area or multiple areas of students' writing. There does, however, exist a body of research suggesting that grammatical feedback to ESL writers might be harmful, might have a negative effect on L2 writers' attitudes due to the time and energy it demands, might have no long-term repercussions, and might not have any effect on student writing in terms of improvement.

In short, the controversies surrounding written feedback issues in ESL context were described and a need to conduct related studies has been justified.

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