

Teachers' Focused Corrective Feedback in High School Learners' Composition

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most important skills in English, through which students can express their inner thoughts by the correct use of grammar, the accurate use of vocabulary and the well organized structure, which can be seen as the epitome of learners' language ability. However, it is no denying that writing is a weak point for many students, wherein they make various grammar mistakes, leading to the low quality of their writing. Fortunately, with the development of process-oriented writing approach, the written corrective feedback has been proved to be an effective way to improve the writing accuracy for students. This paper aims to provide effective strategies for teachers when giving written corrective feedback, and thus improve students' writing ability.

Keywords

Written corrective feedback, students' engagement, error logs, revision, collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

Writing, a crucial productive skill of language learning, serves as an indispensable part of learners' comprehensive linguistic competence. The present National English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools(2020), which is a guideline for senior high schools' English teaching in China, sets standards for senior high school in writing. The requirements could be shown as follows: students can choose vocabulary and grammatical structure on the basis of their needs of expression. In general, Chinese senior high school students may have acquired basic grammatical knowledge and demonstrated reasonable use of high-frequency vocabulary. However, what seems obvious to assert is that writing is a weak point for most Chinese students, resulting in making substantial linguistic errors in the process of English writing. In the 1980s, the process approach was introduced into the teaching of writing, which emphasized the students' writing process and the guidance of teachers, which also made it clear that teachers' feedback is an indispensable part of the process writing approach. At the present, many researches have proved that teachers' corrective feedback can have a positive effect on students' writing accuracy. Therefore, it is widely acknowledged that teachers' should provide appropriate and effective corrective feedback in students' writing to improve their writing ability. However, when teachers are giving written corrective feedback, they should take many factors into consideration to ensure the feedback they give is effective to improve the accuracy and students' writing ability.

This paper aims to provide some effective ways for teachers when giving written corrective feedback. The first chapter is an introduction of the paper, which includes the background, the purpose and the structure of this paper. While the second chapter is the literature review, which contains the definition, classification and the previous research of written corrective feedback, followed by the third chapter, which provides the theoretical basis of this paper. Then, it comes to the fourth chapter, various ways for teachers when providing written corrective feedback are

introduced, and the last chapter is a conclusion of this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition of Written Corrective Feedback

According to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, feedback is defined as “comments or other information that learners receive to concern their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teacher or other persons”. Ellis(1994) defines feedback as the information provided by proficient ones, which can guide the learners to revise their interlanguage. Among feedback, corrective feedback is a special and specific type, which is adopted to deal with language learners’ errors. In Ellis et al.’s article(2008), corrective feedback means the feedback that learners receive on the linguistic errors they make in a second language. By and large, corrective feedback is information provided by teachers to learners upon their errors, indicating incorrect use of language and encouraging learners’ revise. Mainly, feedback refers to the returned message with the purpose to improve and promote learners’ language learning efficiency. In the writing process, feedback is the input provided from a reader to a writer in the hope of providing message for the writer to revise the writing.

2.2. The Classification of Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback on L2 students’ writing can take many different forms, such as “direct feedback, indirect feedback, meta-linguistic feedback, focused feedback, unfocused feedback, and different combinations of feedback” (Ellis,2009:100). In sum, they can mainly be divided into two dimensions: (1) direct and indirect feedback (2) focused and unfocused feedback.

2.2.1. Direct&Indirect Feedback

As for direct corrective feedback, most scholars hold that it means teachers directly point out writers’ errors and provides the corresponding correct forms (Ellis,2008). In this way, the teacher can cross out unneeded linguistic elements, add missing parts or correct linguistic forms and structures in an explicit manner to assist students in becoming aware of where is inaccurate.

When teachers provide indirect corrective feedback, they indicate errors but do not offer correct forms. As it encourages students to ponder on their errors and facilitates guided learning (Lalande, 1982), it is regarded as more desirable to contribute to long-term improvement in language learning. Meanwhile, Chandler (2003) highlighted that indirect corrective feedback may become invalid if learners are presented with complex problems that exceed their existing developmental level. However, some researchers distinguished the meta-linguistic written corrective feedback from direct and indirect written corrective feedback separately and divided it into two strategies: (1)error code (PT for past tense error) and (2) metalinguistic explanation (grammatical explanation for errors).

2.2.2. Focused&Unfocused Feedback

Unfocused feedback refers to one kind of feedback that all of the students’ errors are corrected by teachers. Focused feedback refers to the other kind of feedback that some certain error types are corrected, such as past tense or English article errors(Ellis,2009). In other words, unfocused feedback, also known as comprehensive feedback, was provided on a wide range of linguistic error categories while the focused feedback was provided on only one or a few targeted linguistic errors.

2.3. Relevant Studies on Written Corrective Feedback

For more than three decades, a growing number of researchers have proposed the potential of feedback to promote the development of second/foreign language writing, aiming to find effective feedback methods in the writing classroom. These studies can be generally divided

into two types: outcome-focused studies and process-focused studies.

On the one hand, outcome-focused research examines how feedback contributes to writing development in terms of its focus, scope, and explicitness (Cheng & Zhang,2021). First, in terms of focus, Lee (2017) recommends that teachers “focus primarily on content and organization in the first draft, leaving language issues for later.” Second, in terms of scope, such studies aim to explore the effectiveness of corrective feedback in improving the accuracy of one or more error types or in providing comprehensive feedback for a series of error types (Cheng & Zhang,2022). Research suggests that teachers provide comprehensive feedback for higher-level learners and focused feedback for lower-level learners (Lee,2017). Thirdly, the explicitness of feedback, focuses on the effects of direct feedback, indirect feedback and metalinguistic feedback on correcting students’ writing errors. For example, Shintani and Ellis (2013) found that metalinguistic feedback has greater advantages than direct feedback in a second language context, while direct feedback has greater advantages than metalinguistic feedback in a foreign language context. Metalinguistic feedback can enhance students’ cognitive engagement (zhang,2021).

On the other hand, feedback is conceptualised as an ongoing socially based process in which learners use information from a variety of sources to support learning (Jiang, 2022). Process-focused feedback explores how to maximize the role of feedback in developing students’ writing strategies and subsequent writing process.

For example, Yang (2023) explored the impact of teacher feedback on students' use of self-management strategies in writing. At the same time, it examines how feedback attracts students' attention in certain aspects of the writing process. (Zhang & Hyland, 2022). Process-focused research has also explored the impact of corrective feedback on the writing process, such as planning, formulating and evaluation. In recent years, more and more researches take students' engagement in corrective feedback into consideration, that is, how learners respond to received feedback, and students' engagement can be generally divided into three dimensions: cognition, behavior and attitude. For example, Cheng (2023) explores students' engagement in teacher feedback and peer feedback in writing.

3. Theoretical Basis

3.1. Interaction Hypothesis

Long proposed an extension of the Input Hypothesis, the Interaction Hypothesis, “in which native speakers of a language can, via collaboration, ensure that L2 students’ input is maintained as $i+1$, rather than being overly advances or overly simple” (1 996:414). It claims that the negotiation of meaning occurs when there is a communication problem. Thus, it leads to the modifications of interaction between two speakers. Then, speakers can be provided with the input needed for L2 learning. WCF can also be regarded as a kind of “negotiation of meaning” which occurs between teacher and students in L2 writing. Students receive the WCF and notice the errors they have committed. WCF affords an opportunity for them to “notice-the-gap”. In other words, it works by making students compare their own production with teacher’s WCF. The L2 acquisition occurs through the written form of meaningful negotiation. Long explicitly suggested that feedback facilitates language development, “at least for vocabulary, morphology, and language-specific syntax” (1996:414), issues commonly seen in L2 writing.

3.2. Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt(1990)pointed out that noticing is the necessary but insufficient condition of transforming input into the output. Learners first notice the gaps between the target language and their current expressions and then comprehend the meaning, which means students consciously participate in the process of language input. Only in this way can the input be

converted into the intake and be used to construct linguistic systems. Swain (1995) added that feedback can function like noticing. Feedback enables learners to notice the gaps between their current language system and the target language system, which arouses students' attention to think over their language expressions and make some revisions. Corrective feedback means that teachers underline the errors or give some hints and comments to learners. In this way, students can be conscious of their errors. After attending to the gap between the target language and current language, students modify the error to fill the gap. They can further encode the correct expression into short-term memory and further into longer-term memory, which contributes to language acquisition. Moreover, Ellis (2009) held that noticing has a positive impact on the writing process when learners revise the draft. With noticing the drawbacks of expression, learners are likely to modify them, examine and update the language system, and adopt the correct expression to communicating with others.

4. Ways to Provide Written Corrective Feedback

There are many effective ways for teachers to give effective written corrective feedback, and the author provides mainly five strategies based on the previous researches.

4.1. Using varied corrective strategies

There are many different strategies for written corrective feedback, for example, correct feedback, indirect feedback and metalinguistic feedback which includes error code and metalinguistic analysis. As for direct CF, teachers directly point out writers' errors and provides the corresponding correct forms. In this way, the teacher can cross out unneeded linguistic elements, add missing parts or correct linguistic forms structures in an explicit manner to assist students in becoming aware of where is inaccurate. When teachers provide indirect CF, they indicate errors but do not offer correct forms. As it encourages students to ponder on their errors and facilitates guided learning (Lalande, 1982), it is regarded as more desirable to contribute to long-term improvement in language learning. Metalinguistic CF is usually construed as providing some kinds of metalinguistic hints about the nature of the error. In contrast to indirect feedback or direct feedback, metalinguistic CF is about furnishing learners with some form of clues on the nature of errors in their writings. Many researches have explored and compared the efficacy of these strategies and strive to find the most effective ways to written corrective feedback. However, the outcomes of these researches do not reach an agreement. Therefore, when giving feedback, instead of just using one particular corrective strategy, the teacher can employ other ways, and then, the teacher can compare whether there is difference among them, so that they can find a way which is most suitable for their students. For instance, the teacher can provide error code or some grammatical analysis for students' error, which encourage the students themselves to correct mistakes, and compare the effectiveness with the direct feedback where the errors are corrected directly by the teacher.

4.2. Advocating collaborative processing

Sociocultural theory (SCT) connected with the work of Vygotsky views human cognitive development occurring in mediated social interactions. Vygotsky argued that human cognitive development is mediated by culturally constructed means or tools. Thus, from a SCT perspective, language development is viewed as a "socially situated process". In practical teaching, after the teacher give feedback, it is almost processed individually. However, Syed Muhammad Mujtaba et al (2021) have explored whether there is significant difference between individual processing and collaborative processing, and he collaborative processing group was found to have significantly outperformed the individual processing group in terms of the number of resolved and abandoned errors for three essays written over ten weeks, echoing proponents of SCT that suggest dialogic collaboration between learners promotes meaningful language use and

learning opportunities. Therefore, teachers are suggested to use written corrective feedback in connection with collaborative processing, especially in large language classes.

4.3. Stressing the importance of revision

Revising is the stage when teachers guide students to make necessary improvements in both organization and contents based on either self-editing and peer-editing, e.g. adding new points or deleting irrelevant facts, and correcting errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar or choice of words, which is an crucial stage in the process-oriented writing. Researchers have found the revision stage can make teachers' corrective feedback more effective. Ekanayaka and Ellis(2020)have examined whether asking learners to revise add to the effect of written corrective feedback on L2 acquisition. In this research, they divide the participant into three groups. One group revised their writing, with half keeping their corrections when writing a new task and the other half not having access to them. A second group completed the new tasks after discussing the feedback in pairs but without revising. A third group completed the tasks without feedback or the opportunity to revise. Results showed that the two groups that received feedback made greater gains in accuracy in finite verb constructions from the first to the second task than the control group. The group that had the opportunity to revise before completing a new writing task made the greatest gains. A stronger add-on effect for revising was evident in those learners who kept the corrected first draft when writing a new task. This research has proved that if students are given the chance to revise their composition after they've received written corrective feedback, they would make less errors and perform better in the following writing.

4.4. Valuing students' engagement

Although a lot of researches have explored the effectiveness of teachers' written corrective feedback, however, if the students are not engaged in such process, teachers' feedback will be not so effective. For example, some learners may only superficially attend to feedback or choose to ignore feedback altogether. This is discouraging given that the learning potential of WCF is closely related with learners' engagement with the feedback. Ellis's(2010)framework describes learner engagement with oral/written corrective feedback as encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Behavioral engagement is characterized by learners' uptake of feedback. Cognitive engagement, on the other hand, is interpreted as the learners' ability to notice and comprehend feedback and the application of meta-cognitive strategies to promote feedback processing. Finally, affective engagement refers to learners' attitude towards feedback, their opinions on the value of feedback, and their emotional response to feedback. As for how to promote students' engagement in writing process, Zhang(2021)has examined that collaborative approach to writing and revision, together with teacher feedback, facilitated student engagement with feedback. This approach encouraged discussion and joint efforts among empathetic peers, creating a supportive and reassuring learning environment that is conducive to effective revision, and what the teacher should do is to encouraged students to work together from the beginning to the end, asked each group to appoint a group leader, assigned writing roles and required peer collaboration in revising.

4.5. Paying attention to using error logs

Error logs is a strategy that could facilitate deep cognitive processing of written corrective feedback by promoting self-awareness of errors in learners' writing(Ferris,1995)By actively recording and reviewing their errors, learners can become more mindful of their mistakes, potentially leading to better self-correction in future writing tasks. When design the error logs, teachers should at least require students to record each error and type and their corrections, and if possible, the explanations for each correction. Wing Man Erica Lau et ra (2024) found that error logs enhanced writing accuracy and also revealed a strong relationship between

students' engagement with WCF through completion of error logs and improved accuracy in new writing. Specially, it was observed that students who were able to accurately explain their corrections in their error logs generally showed accuracy improvements in new pieces of writing. According to the research, most students showed positive attitudes about the error log intervention, with most reporting that it raised their awareness of their errors and aided them in retaining linguistic knowledge. Therefore, it is obvious that keeping error logs is an effective strategy to strengthen teachers' corrective feedback and improve students' writing.

5. Conclusion

This paper mainly introduced the ways to give written corrective feedback based on previous researches, which includes: 1) using varied corrective strategies; 2) advocating collaborative processing; 3) stressing the importance of revision; 4) valuing students' engagement and 5) paying attention to using error logs. As is mentioned above, writing is an important productive skill, and written corrective feedback is proved to be an effective pedagogy to reduce grammatical errors and improve students writing ability. The strategies provided above can be seen as a reference to practical written corrective feedback. Given that the different context of learning and individual differences, whether these strategies have the potential in promoting students' writing ability still remains some space to explore. Therefore, in practical teaching, teachers should perform their role as a researcher to examine the efficacy of these methods, and exert their effort to give effective written corrective feedback

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