PROVIDING FORMATIVE FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING

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Abstract. The article discusses several types of formative feedback provided to students and focuses on some research findings. The paper also presents ideas on how teacher's comments provided either electronically or in written/oral form might be helpful in improving students' writing.

Key words: second language, writing, corrective feedback, online comments

Being a researcher is crucial for any English teacher because any study conducted by a language teacher helps to develop necessary aspects in their teaching practice. Language learning and assessment are vast areas in the research, which can hardly be covered as every time new approaches may either contribute to the existing knowledge or bring unexpected results. This development is not dependent on the time as its main purpose is to help both teachers to grow professionally and learners to become more knowledgeable. Practitioners should understand the importance of their study for the subject they are teaching as well as their students' and educational institution benefits. The focus of this article is made on the different types of formative feedback on improving first-year students writing.

Some teachers used to believe that correcting grammar mistakes directly or indirectly in paper is one of the main principles in assessing students' writing. There are several reasons why language teachers do it. First, it is obviously the evidence of the written piece having been checked by the marker. Students might ask for feedback and seeing a number of words/phrases or abbreviations will probably help learners to understand why such kind of a mark was given. Second, correction can be teacher's own belief in the importance of focusing on grammar, vocabulary and

mechanics. However, there are still discussions on the necessity of making corrections in the students' work.

Several studies have been conducted in analyzing the role of corrective feedback in improving students' accuracy in writing. For example, Evans, Hartshorn and Strong-Krause (2011) focused on dynamic WCF with the focus on linguistic accuracy of writing. The research was carried out two times: the first investigation was performed with pre-university students in the intensive English language programme. The second one was done with university-level students whose IELTS score was mostly 6.5. Both cohorts were divided into two groups: the control group "received traditional process writing instructions", and the treatment group was provided with dynamic WCF on each assignment (10-minute paragraphs on a certain topic). The students should have corrected each paragraph after receiving teacher's feedback. The process was complete as soon as the paper was free of mistakes. Evans, Hartshorn and Strong-Krause found that dynamic WCF brought significant improvement in the accuracy of students' writing. At the same time, they admitted that the study was conducted with a small group of students and no specific linguistic features were investigated. Therefore, researchers suggest studying the effects of WCF in other contexts and different cohort of students.

However, some researchers do not consider WCF to be beneficial in second language learning. For example, Truscott (2007) analysed how error correction could affect students' accuracy in writing. The researcher focused on the studies of other researchers starting from Semke (1980, 1984) finishing up with Ferris (2003) who investigated the value of WCF. Truscott concluded that most controlled experiments were focused on certain linguistic aspects and therefore the effect on the accuracy is quite limited and not largely positive. The researcher claimed that "correction can help students prepare for grammar tests or revise the piece of writing on which they received the correction" only [271].

It therefore seems logical to consider other views. For instance, Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) investigated whether feedback focused on prepositions, the past simple tense, and definite article improved the accuracy of their use in students' new pieces of writing. The study was conducted among 53 adult migrant students who entered a post-intermediate ESL programme. The students were divided into three groups: those who received written corrective feedback (WCF) and a five-minute researcher conference (a formal one-on-one talk between the teacher and the student); those who received only WCF; and those who received feedback on the quality and organization of their content. The comments provided to the first two groups were focused on the three grammar aspects (prepositions, the

past simple tense and definite article). All the participants completed four 250-word writing tasks during 12-week period (teaching week 2, 4, 8, and 12). After analyzing the data, Bitchener, Young and Cameron found that combination of full, explicit written feedback and one-on-one conference feedback helped students to use the past simple tense and the definite article with a greater accuracy in their new pieces of writing. Moreover, the researchers came to conclusion that indirect feedback is more effective than the direct one. That is why, they suggest using both written and oral feedback on "treatable" aspects on a regular basis.

Lee (2003) also believes that "it is important for teachers to use error feedback in conjunction with other strategies to help students treat their own errors" [218]. After carrying out research in providing students with feedback on their writing, the researcher came up with the following conclusions:

− teacher should decide which feedback is more preferable, comprehensive (pointing out all language mistakes in the paper) or selective;

− teachers should not rely on correction/marking codes only as these codes might be frustrating for students and time-consuming for teachers;

− teachers should help students become editors, i.e. apart from error correction teachers should promote student-teacher conferences, self and peer evaluation;

− teachers should be encouraged to have a more reflective attitude to error feedback as some teachers doubt the effectiveness of error correction

Another researcher, Lee (2006) investigated to what extent and in what way the quality of the essays (written for CEEPT: English Placement Test at Illinois University) are different in case the students are drafting them. One hundred students produced the first draft after watching a video lecture and reading an article on a similar topic in the morning. They then discussed the ideas with the whole group. After lunchtime, the essays were peer-assessed and provided with feedback. Then these students produced the second draft. The researcher used a holistic approach (a single global rating is given) and analytic assessment (for content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, the use of sources and academic honesty). Lee found that in comparison with the first draft the students took an advantage of the structured process, increased the text length, improved grammar and lexical choice and got higher scores. However, the researcher admitted certain limitations to the study: the results could vary if there were different topics, and students papers were not assessed for placement and their experience in writing had not been taken into account.

Taking into account the findings of different studies and teachers' observation, it seems logical to conclude that varying different types of providing feedback might

be more beneficial for improving students' writing. Teachers might provide comments on the students' written work in the following ways:

− hand - written feedback, which can include error correction code, shows them what kind of mistakes they have made and how their writing should be improved. Such kind of comments might be time-consuming for the teacher and the not quite clear for the students due to the poor hand writing. However, the students can always approach the teacher and hand in their work; sometimes the work can be looked through immediately. The only thing the students should do is not to lose this paper.

− computer-mediated (or electronic) feedback with the use of track changes and side comments as well as error correction code related to grammar, word choice, mechanics, links between ideas, and structure. It is quite a convenient way of providing feedback to those who are not technologically challenged and can type quite fast. In case the teachers are not good at technology, it will take some time to learn. Moreover, colour coding (using colours to show mistakes in different language aspects) can be used as well. The students can access the comments any time they want and even if there are problems with the computer system, the students can find the attachment in the email box.

− online feedback; this type of providing comments is becoming quite popular and there are different electronic platforms available online. One of them is Feedback studio that has recently become quite popular among language teachers. The system provides ready-made markers, i.e. words/phrases, which indicate common mistakes in writing. For example, choosing a "comma" marker will indicate that the student has missed a comma after a word. The explanation to the comma use is also provided. The teachers can even add their own markers. Typed-in comments, highlighting, and deleting are also available. All the comments are kept in the system; therefore, both the teachers and the students can have an immediate access to the work submitted and comments provided, but both will need an access to the Internet to be able to do that. The teachers may also face problems similar to computer-mediated feedback (basic IT skills are needed).

− teacher-student conference (TSC), a second comparatively new way of providing comments. Writing has always been considered to be separate from speaking; but TSC gives an opportunity for the students to talk about their paper. TSC purpose is for students to show at what stage of their writing they are, whether they are on the right way in writing their paper, and what areas need improvement. The main reason is to involve the students and monitor the

development of students' writing skills and provide suggestions for improvement. It might be time-consuming if the group is large; but it can always be resolved by dividing the group into sub-groups and letting each come at the certain time of the class or during teacher's office hours. The students get immediate feedback and can ask questions right away. The focus will not be made on the grammar and vocabulary mistakes only as the teachers can focus on the content and structure in the student's written work.

Obviously, formative assessment is an important part of any learning process, which might have a different influence on both teachers and learners. As it is assessment for learning, this kind of testing helps teachers not only to see what their students have learnt but also to assist them in their further learning as well as identify areas for improvement; but it may sometimes hinder the learning process if the learning value of the assessment is not thoroughly explained to students. The approach to on-going writing can give this opportunity for the teachers to see students' involvement in the process, their actions upon feedback and better performance of those engaged in comparison with others who ignored the significance of feedback. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to explain to students that formative assessment is not punishment, but testing for improvement of the knowledge and skills.

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