

STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN THEIR COMPOSITIONS AT AN GIANG UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract

This research looks at students' reactions to teacher written feedback in their writing at writing classes of the second year, in the School of Education, An Giang University, Vietnam. Interview and questionnaires were used to collect data. The findings indicate that the teachers' written feedback is legible, understandable and useful. In addition, most of the students desire their teachers to resort to correction codes because they are able to understand them. The students also have some preferences for feedback regarding the types of feedback including grades, error feedback and written comments. Finally, this study also gives some suggestions to help students play an active role in error correction in their writing.

Keywords: Compositions, reactions, students, teachers, written feedback

Background of the Study

Many researchers such as Leki (1991), Radecki & Swales (1988) have said that students gain a lot of benefits when getting feedback from their teachers (cited in Lee 2004). So, teachers should find out ways for giving feedback to students' writing so that they can produce writing of acceptable quality. There are three forms of feedback: teacher written commentary, teacher-student conferences, and peer feedback (Ferris 2003). Among them, teacher written feedback (teacher written commentary) is used in many writing class and it plays an important role in deciding students' grades. One significant factor influencing the effectiveness of teacher feedback is students' reactions to this kind of feedback.

This study examines students' responses to teacher written feedback in their compositions given by 4 writing teachers at An Giang University, Long Xuyen City, Vietnam.

Students study writing at least twice a week and a period lasts 50 minutes. In the writing class and students are required to write at least three drafts for a topic. After the teacher explains the structure or organization of a writing task, there are further instructions on how to plan to explore ideas. Normally, students are asked to do the writing task with a time limit in class. Afterwards, the teacher returns the papers with grades and written feedback to the students. This process is repeated two or more times so that the students can improve their writing.

Significance of the Study

The current research looks at students' reactions to teachers' ways of giving written feedback in their compositions in an EFL university writing classroom. Students at An Giang University are given an opportunity to express their ideas about the comments on their writing. Thus, students can report to the teachers so that the latter can adjust their ways of giving feedback. The teachers specializing in writing (including 4 teachers in this study) review their own ways of giving written feedback and see the students' reactions to the ways of giving written feedback.

It is hoped from this study that guidelines will be established for how the teachers respond to student writing in terms of marking symbols, feedback areas, the amount of error correction, comments, etc. So, the teachers of English writing will have the same marking symbols, the same amount of errors, the same forms of comments. Additionally, based on these guidelines, the teachers will not correct errors on an ad hoc basis and hopefully result in greater consistency of in the teacher's written feedback. More importantly, this study might encourage the teaching to be more student-centered using indirect error feedback, coded error feedback, questions, comments.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 3.1. What are students' reactions to their teachers' written feedback?
- 3.2. What are students' preferences for future feedback?

Literature Review

Second-language (L2) students believe that teacher feedback is useful and can help them improve their writing (Ferris 1995; Hyland 1998 as cited in Lee 2008). In addition, students prefer teachers to focus more on local than global issues (Cohen, 1987; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994, as cited in Lee 2008). Furthermore, students pay attention to and treasure teacher feedback and attach greater importance to it than other forms of feedback, such as audio feedback, peer evaluation, and self-evaluation (Leki 1991; Saito 1994; Yang, Badger & Yu 2006; Zhang 1995 as cited in Lee 2008). Hedgcock & Lefkowitz et al. (1994 as cited in Lee 2008), state that students are particularly positive about receiving feedback on language issues, although they also want teachers to comment on content and ideas in their writing. Additionally, Lee et al. (2005 as cited in Lee 2008, p.145) say that “as L2 students place a high premium on accuracy in writing, they are eager to have all their errors pointed out by the teacher”. “While studies by Radecki and Swales (1998) and Lee (2005) show that students wanted overt correction of errors (i.e., direct error feedback) from teachers, most of the other studies (e.g., Arndt 1993; Hyland 2001; Saito 1994) suggest that students prefer indirect to direct error feedback, where they were given clues and also a more active role to play in the feedback process.” (as cited in Lee 2008, p.145). Besides, “more advanced students like the L2 graduate students in Leki’s (2006) and Riazi’s (1997) studies, valued teacher feedback as a useful means to help them develop disciplinary literacy.” (as cited in Lee 2008, p.146). However, in different classroom contexts students have varying ideas about teacher feedback. In multiple-draft classrooms, “students generally attend to teacher comments and think that they help them improve their writing” (Diab 2005; Ferris 2003; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994 as cited in Lee 2008, p.146). “In single-draft classrooms, vague and cryptic comments are likely to bother students less than similar comments given to intermediate drafts in process-oriented classrooms.” (Cohen 1987 as cited in Lee 2008, p.146). Moreover, Ferris (1995) and Hyland (1998) emphasize that students like to receive both praise and constructive criticism (as cited in Lee 2008).

Lee’s (2008) research shows that high and low proficient students want their teacher to give more written comments in the future. Furthermore, about half of the high proficient students wanted the teacher to give more feedback on content, but they appeared to show little concern for the organization of their writing. Nevertheless, the low proficient students wanted more feedback on content, organization and language. Additionally, Lee (2008) makes a strong point that “there seemed a tendency for students

to wish for “more” from the teacher.”(p.151). More importantly, nearly a half of low proficient students did not want the teacher to give feedback to their errors while most of the high proficient students wanted the teacher to give feedback to all errors. In addition, the majority of the high and low proficient students liked the teacher to underline, circle errors, categorize them and provide correction. Besides, most of the high proficient students could correct the errors based on the feedback, but this is true for few of the low proficient students. Moreover, Lee (2008) also says that “about half of the high proficient and low proficient students said that only some of the written feedback was legible.”(p.153). This corroborates Zamel's research (1985 as cited in Lee 2008) saying that teacher written feedback is not perceived all the time.

Leki (1991 as cited in Lee 2004) emphasizes that the majority of the ESL (English as a second language) students in the study of students' preferences regarding error correction in writing desire their teachers to correct errors for them. Moreover, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994 as cited in Lee 2004, p.288) from their research concluded that “foreign language college students tend to value teacher comments and corrections on grammatical, lexical, and mechanical features more than those on content and style, while the opposite is true for ESL college students. In their study, both ESL and EFL (English as a foreign language) students express moderate preferences for the use of correction symbols, and both dislike the teachers' use of the red pen.”

Methodology

Research Design

The present research used the descriptive design with the aim of describing how students reacted to teacher written feedback.

Research context

The researcher collected data at An Giang University one of the universities in the Mekong Delta that offers training to students in the region. It was established in 2000 and offers majors in: Agricultural Engineering, Business Administration, Information Technology, Pedagogy, Mathematics, Physics, and English. For English-major students, they use English as the medium of instruction. However, Vietnamese is the main means of instruction for the other subjects.

The Participants

The participants of this research were four writing teachers in the English Department, An Giang University who were chosen based on convenience sampling and 50 second-year students who wrote 50 compositions that the teachers gave feedback on. The students also answered questionnaires and discussed their reactions to teacher written feedback with the researcher. Regarding the discussion, 10 out of 50 second-year students were selected randomly for the group discussion.

All of the students were around 20 years old. Most of them came from the countryside where they had limited exposure to English. Before they became students, they had studied English at high schools where English was taught with the focus on grammar and reading. Hence, their communications skills were limited, especially writing, speaking and listening.

Method of Data Collection

Students were asked to write a composition on one of the following topics:

1. Advantages and Disadvantages of using the Internet.
2. Advantages and Disadvantages of traveling.
3. Advantages and Disadvantages of studying abroad.

The researcher wanted to give three topics so that the students could choose a topic in which they might have some interest. More importantly, this kind of composition – advantage-disadvantage compositions – had been studied already by these students.

The 50 students were given 75 minutes to write their compositions in class and were allowed to refer to books and documents, e.g. articles from the Internet, their own notebooks about how to write a composition. These measures helped ensure that the students did not write their essays in a highly stressful environment because these compositions were not for their official assignment in class but for the research only.

The researcher made four copies of the 50 compositions and gave one set to each of the four teachers. The teachers were given two days to provide feedback on the compositions. After two days, the researcher gathered the graded compositions and returned them to the students. As a result, students received their compositions which had been graded by 4 different teachers. The students were given one day to read all the feedback on their compositions and then they met the researcher again to answer a

questionnaire and participate in a group discussion. Before the discussion, each student received a questionnaire adapted from Lee (2008) to give information about their reactions to teacher written feedback. After the students had completed the questionnaires, the researcher facilitated a group discussion to discuss the students' reactions to the teacher's written feedback.

Method of Data Analysis

The information students provided in the questionnaires was described and the issues discussed in the group discussion were used to analyze findings.

Findings and Discussion

Writing students' comments on their teachers' written feedback

This part aims to answer the first research question.

What are students' reactions to their teachers' written feedback?

The legibility of the teachers' written feedback

Ninety percent of the students said that they found their teachers' feedback legible. In addition, 10 per cent stated that the teachers' feedback was legible. In Lee's (2008) study, only a few students found the feedback sufficiently legible.

The understandability of the teachers' written feedback

Thirty per cent of the students said that they understood the teachers' written feedback and 40 per cent stated that they understood it, and 30 per cent indicated that they understood most of the comments.

From the group discussion, all the students said that the teachers did not explain clearly why words were erroneous so that students could not understand those errors. Lee (2008) says that not all the students could act on the teacher feedback. Additionally, Zamel (1985 as cited in Lee 2008) confirmed that teacher feedback is not always understandable. Ferris (1995 as cited in Ferris and Hedgcock 1998) found out that students had a lot of difficulties in understanding their teachers' remarks.

The usefulness of the teachers' written feedback

40 percent of the students said that the teachers' written feedback was useful. 40 per cent confirmed that it was useful and 20 per cent stated that it was somewhat useful. From the group discussion, all of the students stated that the teacher written feedback was useful. The teachers gave feedback on good and bad points, especially constructive feedback. If there was no feedback and they had low grades, they would not know what the errors may be. Getting feedback, Students might remember errors when they get feedback. If there was feedback, this meant that teachers had read their ideas and listened to them. As Goldstein (2005 as cited in Lee 2008) said, written commentary should help students see how their teachers are reading their writing and what strengths and weaknesses they possess. According to Ferris and Hyland (1995, 1998 as cited in Lee 2008), L2 students think that teacher feedback is useful and helps them write better. In addition, Leki et. al (1991 as cited in Lee 2008) state that students appreciate teacher feedback and consider it more important than other forms of feedback such as peer evaluation, audio feedback, etc.

However, 90 per cent of the students from the discussion said that the teachers do not understand their ideas. Hence, these teachers gave their correction because their ideas were different from the students'. Some students said that the teachers did not have the same ideas about the correction of particular errors. Furthermore, most of the students agreed that the teachers wrote down comments which were very general in terms of the content of composition, so students did not know how to develop their compositions. Furthermore, the teachers did not correct spelling and grammar errors. So, the students thought that their spelling and grammar was correct.

Lee (2008) argues that one of the plausible factors which causes teacher's feedback to be not useful is the quality of the feedback covering some issues such as consistency, accuracy and comprehension. Moreover, teacher's feedback is not beneficial if it cannot lead students to some form of revision. Zamel (1985 as cited in Gwin 1991) explains that teachers' comments should be text-specific and should concentrate on helping students to revise their compositions. In addition, Lee (2005 as cited in Lee 2008) says that students wanted to receive overt correction of errors. When L2 students put a high premium on accuracy in writing, they would like to have the teacher point out all their errors.

In addition, 50 per cent of students admitted that they were able to correct the errors accurately according to the teachers' feedback and 50 per

cent stated that they were somewhat able to correct them. This is true in the group discussion mentioning all of the students could correct most of the errors, not all.

The teachers' correction codes

80 percent of the students felt positive that their English teachers use a correction code in marking their compositions. However, 10 per cent said that correction codes were not used by their teachers. Half of the students admitted that they understood their teachers' correction codes and the other half indicated that they understood some of the coding. More importantly, 70 per cent of the students wanted their English teachers to use correction codes in marking their compositions and 10 per cent did not. The questionnaire data confirmed that 90per cent agreed that teachers could use correction codes.

These findings corroborate with Lee's (2004) research on error codes. In his study, 91per cent of the students indicated that their teachers utilized error codes in marking their compositions. Nevertheless, many students claimed that they did not fully understand the codes. In addition, almost half of Lee's (2004) students could correct half to three-fourths of the errors based on the codes. However, 76per cent of his students preferred teachers' use of error codes.

Students' preference for future feedback

The second research question *"What are students' preferences for future feedback?"*.

The type of written feedback in the future

In the future compositions, 70 per cent of the students preferred to get grade + error feedback + written comments from their teachers. 10 per cent preferred error feedback + written comments; 10 per cent did grade + error feedback; and 10per cent did grade + written comments. This corroborates with Lee's (2008) research which states that students (both high proficient students and low proficient students) wanted to have not only a mark/grade and error feedback but also comments from teachers.

Additionally, 50 per cent of the students would be more interested in teachers' comments on their writing in their future compositions, 40 per cent in the errors they have made, and 10 per cent in the grade. Lee (2008) found that students wanted their teachers to give more written comments in the

future. However, half of the students in this research were interested in their errors. According to Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, et. al. (1994 as cited in Lee 2008, p.145), "Most surveys of student preferences show that students are particularly positive about receiving feedback on language issues, although they also want teachers to comment on content and ideas of their writing".

A half of the students said that they would like their teachers to give more written comments in the future. 40 per cent of students prefer more error feedback. However, 10 per cent do not want their teachers to give written comments and error feedback. 50 per cent of the students confirmed that they wanted about same amount of written feedback in the future. 30 per cent of the subjects wanted their teachers to give less error feedback and 20 per cent would like less written comments.

From the discussion, all of the students wanted comments on both bad and good points. This finding agrees with Lee's (2008) research in which students had a tendency to want "more" from their teachers.

Feedback areas for future

Based on the questionnaires, half of the students admitted that they would like their teachers to emphasize language more in the future and the other half wanted organization to be emphasized more. However, 30 per cent of the students wanted their teachers to emphasize less on content less while 30 per cent wanted language to be emphasized less. 30 per cent still wanted the teachers not to emphasize areas such as content, organization and language and 10 per cent stated that organization is less important than some other areas.

As mentioned above, the students still wanted teachers to focus on language forms. There was one student in the discussion that he wanted teachers to correct all of his errors so that he could progress later. Research evidence shows that students evaluated feedback on grammar more than on content (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994; Leki 1991b as cited in Ferris and Hedgcock 1998). More importantly, the students wanted to receive both praise and constructive criticism.

Lee's (2008) research on the reactions of high and low proficient students, found that low proficient students wanted teachers to focus on content, organization and language while the high proficient students concentrated more on content. In the current research, the students paid attention to organization, content and language among which organization was the main focus. The students in this research were not so proficient in

English so, they wanted more feedback on structures to express their ideas successfully. One student in the discussion said that organization was important because when a person was discussing this topic and suddenly he or she skipped it and jumped to another topic, listeners or readers could not understand what was written. The students in this study wanted to receive "more" from teachers and confirm that students wished to receive feedback on language, content and organization (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994; Leki 1991 as cited in Lee 2008).

The amount of error correction

In the questionnaire, 70 per cent of the students indicated that their English teachers corrected some errors for them and 20 per cent reported that their English teachers corrected all the errors. However, 60 per cent of the students wanted their teachers to respond to all of their errors and 40 per cent wished their teachers to react to only some of their errors. Eight students wanted the teachers to correct all the errors because it would help their progress later. These two students suggested that the teachers should correct only typical errors. If the same errors occurred in different places, teachers should correct that kind of error only once then, they could write down their comments at the end of the composition.

The questionnaires and discussion data show that in terms of student preference, there was a distance between what students wanted and what their teachers did. Sixty percent of the students in the questionnaires wanted their teachers to respond to all of their errors and 8 students in the discussion liked their teachers to correct all of the deviant forms. However, teachers' feedback was selective as 70 per cent of the students in the questionnaire stated that their English teachers corrected only a few errors for them. Like the students in this study, most of Lee's (2004) subjects (83 per cent) said they wanted their teachers to mark all their errors. It seemed that the teachers should "work harder" to meet the students' needs for error correction. In Lee's (2008) study, a little below a half of low proficient students did not want the teacher to respond to their errors, whereas over three quarters of the high proficient students desired the teacher to respond to all of their errors.

Method of error correction in the future

60 percent of the students in this research stated that they would like their English teachers to underline / circle their errors, categorize them, and provide corrections for them in the future when they (the teachers) responded to their errors (students' errors). Twenty percent wanted their

teachers to underline / circle their errors and provide corrections for them. Ten percent desired their teachers to underline / circle their errors and categorize them (their errors), and 10 per cent wished their teachers to give hints about their errors and categorize the errors for them. The discussion indicated that the students wanted their teachers to underline and to correct their spelling and grammar errors and to have time for students to ask questions about the feedback on their papers. The data from the questionnaires and the discussion show that students wanted their teachers to play an active part in error correction. This supports Lee's (2008) findings mentioning both high and low proficient students wanted teachers to give feedback with effort.

In Lee's (2008) study, over a half of the high proficient students chose "underline/circle errors, categorize them, and provide correction", whereas over one third of low proficient students wanted teachers to underline and correct errors, and less than one third selected "underline/circle errors, categorize them, and provide correction". Lee (2004) has similar evidence saying that 76 per cent of the students wanted their teachers to provide corrections for all errors, whereas only 22 per cent of them wished teachers to supply corrections for some errors.

Implications and Recommendations

The study indicates that most of the students wanted the teachers to correct all the errors and they would like their teachers to underline / circle their errors, categorize them and provide corrections. In the discussion the students wanted the teacher to underline / circle the errors and correct them. In brief, the results demonstrate that students played a passive role in error correction. Teachers in general and those at An Giang University in particular should give written feedback which provides students with long-term benefits. They cannot "feed" corrected words all the time, but teach the students to correct errors by themselves. There are many ways to activate students' roles in error correction. First, the teachers can use indirect error feedback by giving hints to the students so that they correct words by themselves. If weak students cannot do this activity, the teachers can ask students to revise in pairs or in groups, and then the teachers give help by letting them ask which feedback they do not understand. In addition, the teachers can encourage students to tell how the teachers should give written feedback so that the students can correct by themselves. Likewise, the teachers should explain their ways of giving written feedback and show how to correct errors with the teachers' guidance. Students should be motivated to

have conferences with the teachers, if they have problems with feedback and revision. Future research can address how to stimulate students to correct by themselves. Future researchers can research on what difficulties students will encounter while self-correcting and how these problems can be addressed so that students can have an active role.

Limitations of the Study

Firstly, due to time constraints the study used convenience sampling to collect data from subjects. The study consisted of only 50 compositions of second-year students in two writing classes at the University. The results cannot be generalized to all Vietnamese teachers and students at tertiary level. Secondly, this research y focuses on students' reactions, not on teacher written feedback, peer reviews and teacher-student conferences as a result, it cannot generate effective strategies for providing feedback, but it can indicate possible suggestions for giving feedback.

Conclusion

The study is about students' reactions to teacher written feedback at An Giang University, Vietnam. Most of the students thought that teacher written feedback was legible, understandable and useful. Almost all the students wanted to receive "grade + written comments + error feedback" in future feedback. They were more interested in teachers' comments than errors or language forms. The students wanted the teachers to give specific comments on good and bad points. The students also wanted their teachers to focus more on language and organization first; then, content. They thought that the teachers should continue to use correction codes. Finally, most of the students expect their teachers to respond to all the errors and said they needed direct error feedback.

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