ELECTRONIC FEEDBACK: IS IT BENEFICIAL FOR SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS?

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Abstract

Feedback is one of the essential elements in the writing classroom. With its two forms, teacher and peer, feedback can help students modify their essays to produce better later drafts. However, the practice of feedback in class does not go without some drawbacks on both the teacher and students' side. This paper tries to demonstrate by reference to recent studies how the use of electronic feedback can aid in providing a better environment for feedback that can, consequently, result in better essays by the students. The paper presents some classroom practices regarding the use of electronic feedback.

Introduction

In the field of writing, or composition, feedback stands out as an essential element in the writing process, particularly in a class that adopts a multiple-draft essay writing philosophy. The two types of feedback that most researchers tend to agree upon, teacher and peer, take place in a variety of media: teacher written comments, face-to-face feedback conferences, and peer review sessions (Hyland, 2003). Despite the apparent agreement on the significance of feedback, many problems have been observed that may distort and weaken this significance. During my work at the Writing Center of the American University in Cairo (AUC) I have encountered some of these problems that researchers in the field of second language writing have investigated. Superficial feedback, for instance, which focuses on surface-level issues, is a serious problem at both the teacher level (Hyland, 2003) and/or peer level (Berger, as cited in Kroll, 2003). Other problems at the teacher level include unclear comments (Ferris, 2003; Leki, 1990) and the tendency to correct students' errors (Hyland, 2003). At the peer level, still, a number of concerns arise. The main problem is peers refraining from giving valuable feedback due to their cultural background (Kroll, 2003). Another problem that takes place in face-to-face conferences is students' shyness in the presence of teachers (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005; Heift & Caws, 2000). This attitude results in insufficient interaction, which is specifically true in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, like the AUC where the majority of students in the freshman writing classes are non-

native English speakers, mainly Egyptians. The current situation calls for action to search for some methods of effective feedback.

With the emergence of computers in language teaching and learning, some second language writing (SLW) teachers started to consider integrating the use of computers in generating electronic teacher and peer feedback in an attempt to overcome these problems. As a SLW teacher and researcher, I became interested in investigating the potentials computers could have for the SLW classroom. This paper will review some of the studies done in this field, presents and discusses the results yielded from them, and attempts to suggest some practical ideas for use in the SLW classroom.

Review of Research

Electronic feedback (e-feedback) has drawn researchers' interest for more than two decades. Research has focused on a wide range of topics: electronic feedback software programs (Sjoer & Brakels, ND), automatic computer-generated feedback (Chen, 1997; Snyder, 1996), collaborative writing projects (Dickinson, 1992; Marttumen & Laurinen, 1998), and electronic assessment of writing (Prins, Slujismans, Kirschner & Strijbos, 2005). The focus of this paper, however, is the ways in which electronic feedback could help not only overcome traditional feedback problems, but also, more importantly, improve students' essays as well, as the ultimate goal of the writing classroom.

The studies reviewed in this paper investigate mixed peer/teacher feedback and peer feedback solely. They also investigate the different modes of feedback: traditional face-to-face and electronic, either synchronous or asynchronous. The rationale behind the sequence of presentation is the movement from comparing the two modes of feedback to exploring a specific feature of e-feedback within the same type.

Teacher/Peer Feedback

In a recent two-fold study, Matsumura and Hann (2004) investigated the impact of computer anxiety on the method students preferred for feedback, and how this preference was reflected in the degree of improvement in their essay writing. They had two research questions, the second of which matches the focus of this review: is there a relationship between feedback method (independent variable) and improvement in students' essays (dependent variable)? Participants in this study were in beginning and intermediate classrooms (based on their TOEFL scores).

Students had to write two-draft essays that were evaluated on both surface level (grammatical accuracy and word choice) as well as deep level (consistency, originality, and organization). Differences between the two drafts were the measure of improvement. Students had to choose their preferred way of feedback: posting drafts to an online forum for teacher and/or peer direct feedback, getting online indirect feedback by following and reading teacher's comments on their colleagues' papers, face-to-face feedback, a combination of two or more ways, or no feedback at all. Students varied in the method(s) through which they received feedback. This variation correlated with the improvement noticed in later drafts as direct e-feedback, either alone or blended with face-to-face, was found to have the more positive impact on students' revisions. Giving students the freedom to select their method of feedback delivery though, is not a common practice in writing classrooms.

Participants in another study (Tuzi, 2001) did not have that choice, as the purpose was to explore the impact e-feedback may have on the revision process. Yet, participants (at intermediate and advanced levels) were privileged to receive training on the rules of effective feedback. These included not only how to respond to peers' writing but also what to focus on in each stage: meaning first and form later. Their task was to write three essays throughout a semester, with a minimum of two drafts each. In order to see the influence of the feedback students received in the online forum, their drafts were compared on level (deep vs. surface), type (reorganization, addition ... etc), and purpose of revision (preserving meaning, adding support … etc). Based on his analysis of drafts, Tuzi concluded that e-feedback helped students in their revisions as they produced better essays. He, however, did not elaborate on the specific factor that had a greater role in this improvement: the collaborative nature of e-feedback or the training students received in advance.

Peer Feedback

While Matsumura and Hann (2004) and Tuzi (2001) were interested in exploring the dynamics of teacher/peer electronic feedback, other researchers paid more attention to peer feedback only. Bearing in mind the drawbacks of traditional peer review sessions, many researchers have examined how electronic peer feedback can help overcome these drawbacks. Liu and Sadler (2003) carried out their study with the purpose of examining the difference in quality of comments between traditional and electronic peer feedback, and they also examined how this difference would affect later revisions. The research methodology was in harmony with the

aforementioned purpose: an experimental group that utilized electronic feedback and a control group that utilized traditional feedback. Participants in both groups would give their first draft to their peers for comments. Then, peers would meet (virtually or face-to-face) to discuss these comments. The last step involved students revising their papers and turning in a second draft to the teacher for evaluation. Like participants in Tuzi's (2001) study, students in this study were coached on the procedures of good peer review sessions. Students in the experimental group were able to give a larger number of feedback comments on both global and local levels. Their feedback was also more focused on what their peers should revise in their drafts. In other words, it was more revision-based.

As Liu and Sadler wanted to inspect the potential differences between the two methods of feedback, other researchers explored what takes place during the e-feedback sessions. Heift and Caws (2000) were as consciously aware of the limitations of traditional face-to-face peer responses as were Liu and Sadler. While Liu and Sadler's main focus was the focus on surface structure problems in peer review sessions (2003), Heift and Caws' was the inhibition some students show in expressing their ideas. They relied heavily on Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development and how learners "benefit most from social interactions concerning tasks" (as cited in Heift & Caws, 2000, p. 2). The purpose of their study, therefore, was to investigate the interaction patterns in synchronous electronic peer feedback sessions. Students, who were assigned to heterogeneous groups in terms of their language ability, participated in online sessions where they commented and gave feedback, using written messages, on the content of four essays that they had read. Their contributions had to take the form of argumentative statements (i.e. claims with stance from the topic). On counting the number of messages exchanged within each group, the researchers found out that students posted a large number of feedback messages. Not only was the quantity large but also the quality was good as students interacted more on the cognitive, rather than social, level. Assigning students to mixed-ability groups was found beneficial as it gave more opportunity for collaboration among students and less for teacher's intervention.

Discussion

The findings of the four studies demonstrate some commonalities in spite of the diverse setting of each. Two threads of findings seem to intersect in all over the studies: type and focus of e-feedback comments and changes and improvements in later drafts.

Type and Focus of E-Feedback Comments

The type of electronic comments provided by participants on their peers' papers was of high quality (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Heift & Caws, 2000; Tuzi, 2001). Participants in Heift and Caws' study, for instance, were able to provide more cognitive feedback comments for their peers. Their comments were found to be more of a cognitive acknowledgement than a social one. In other words, the comments were more related to the topic of the assignment. This cognitive acknowledgement can be explained in the light of the assignment students were working on: giving argumentative statements on course readings. Therefore, the tasks the teacher assigns to his/her students can determine the comments they are likely to post. Detailed comments were also a feature of both teacher and peer electronic feedback in Tuzi's (2001) study. Although he does not inform us about who gave these detailed comments, teacher or peers, he concludes that e-feedback resulted in clear comments that would affect (as discussed below) the later drafts students write.

Not only did the quality of comments but also the quantity of comments improve. According to Sullivan and Pratt (1996) more practice in writing, which comes with e-feedback, is more likely to affect the length of comments students provide in this medium. Liu and Sadler (2003) found out that students in the computer-enhanced group gave a larger number of comments on both the local and global levels compared to those in the traditional group. The same students were found to present more revision-oriented comments contrary to the comments given by students in the traditional group. This finding, again, confirms what Sullivan and Pratt said that using computers in feedback sessions helps students produce focused responses. These focused responses influenced the changes students made later in their drafts. These findings, also, emphasize the crucial role training the students can play in peer feedback quality. Students who were trained on how to give effective feedback (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Tuzi, 2001) outperformed those who were not provided with any type of coaching.

Changes and Improvements in Later Drafts

Different modes of feedback contributed to the changes students made in their revision process. While Tuzi (2001) found out that a considerable percentage of changes in revisions was due to e-

feedback only, Matsumara and Hann (2004) concluded differently. They found that the greatest improvement in later drafts was identified in the papers of students who received both direct electronic and face-to-face feedback. Those who received e-feedback only came second. When face-to-face feedback was interwoven with indirect e-feedback (feedback obtained through following comments to other students), students showed limited improvement, with the least improvement displayed by those who received indirect e-feedback only. This sort of improvement illustrates the worth of pairing the two modes of feedback in order to enhance students' writing.

Nevertheless, when examining the focus of changes, Liu and Sadler (2003) found that revisions by students in the computer-enhanced group were focused on local issues whereas revisions by students in the traditional group covered both local and global issues. Although this conclusion does not conform much to the course of results in the other studies, it can be attributed to the fact that "surface-level editing" is a typical feature of working on word processors (Pennington, 2003).

Practical Ideas for SLW Classroom

Analyzing the findings of the studies reviewed in this paper could enlighten SLW practitioners on some of the best practices, with regard to integrating electronic feedback that they can adopt in their classes. Some of these practices can be applied before electronic teacher and/or peer feedback sessions while the others can be incorporated in the feedback sessions themselves. These practices can be used with different tasks and activities (see Appendix A) in the second language writing classroom.

Before Electronic Feedback Sessions

An initial step before considering integrating electronic feedback in a class is to investigate students' knowledge of computers and their attitudes toward them. Teachers should make sure that no affective factors play against the medium they select for their classes. Computer anxiety can be one of these factors (Liu and Sadler, 2003; Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Tuzi, 2001). Upon deciding on the use of e-feedback, adequate coaching on the procedures and focus of good peer review/feedback should follow. Coaching can be seen as the "appropriate support" Hyland (2003) emphasizes as necessary (p. 147). In assigning students to peer review pairs or groups, the teacher should be careful about their abilities. Pairing students with different, but not entirely,

abilities was found to result in better feedback (Heift & Caws, 2000; Liu & Sadler, 2003). Feedback paves the way for "collaboration and peer support" which Hyland sees as one of the principles of composition instruction (2003). Having planned for the electronic feedback sessions in advance, the teacher could now proceed safely to incorporating e-feedback in his/her class.

During Feedback Sessions

Incorporating e-feedback along with face-to-face modes has been shown to yield the best results in terms of quality of feedback and impact on revisions (Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Tuzi, 2001). This hybrid of methods accommodates most, if not all, students' learning preferences, which, in the long run, will have more positive influence on their gains. In the convenience of e-feedback, the teacher should encourage students to comment on many of their colleagues' papers. As Matsumura and Hann highlighted, when receiving multiple feedback, students become more focused on areas that need improvement in their work. This conclusion comes in support of Sullivan and Pratt's idea that feedback from more than one student tends to reinforce the same points and the same suggestions for revision (1996).

Problems with E-Feedback

The aforementioned benefits of electronic feedback for second language writers do not mean that the practice is not immune from drawbacks. Both technical and practical problems may arise in a class that adopts electronic feedback. Since the technical issues are beyond the scope of this paper, there will be brief discussion of some practical and pedagogical problems that may tarnish the practice.

Students who are not familiar with peer feedback are more likely to find the practice difficult and time consuming. They may also feel frustrated as they are not sure what to give feedback on and the best way to give it (Macdonald, 2001). This is a double facets problem that could have a number of ways to help students have a smoother practice. One possible way is to train students in how to give feedback on their peers' papers. Using a detailed rubric or a checklist may be beneficial to inexperienced students, as it would focus their attention on the points that need more work in later drafts (Farag Allah, 2008). In order to save students' time, they can be asked to review only one essay or piece of writing, particularly at the beginning. In addition to saving students' time, limiting the number of papers to be reviewed by each student

will allow more careful reading and reflection which will help them develop better critical reading skills.

Another problem that could minimize the benefits of electronic feedback practice in the writing classroom is when some students do not take the process seriously enough to participate, review papers, or give any feedback to their peers (Macdonald, 2001). Researchers have suggested several ways to overcome this problem. While Macdonald suggests assigning grades for feedback comments students give their peers, Rollinson (2005) suggests raising students' awareness that giving peer feedback may help students reflect on their own weaknesses and strengths. This reflection is more likely to guide students while redrafting their own papers.

Conclusion

Even though computers are becoming more and more an integral part in the writing classrooms, SLW teachers should deal with integrating electronic feedback with a balance of enthusiasm and cautiousness. Rushing to adopt new trends without careful planning before and during e-feedback sessions can negatively influence students performance in the writing classroom.

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Appendix A

Tasks and Activities for Electronic Feedback

Depending on the level of students in the writing class, a writing instructor can adapt one of the following activities for students to practice the electronic feedback process. Students can post their work in different ways such as WebCT, a forum, a blog or a wiki, or e-mail to receive feedback from their instructor and peers.

a) Topic sentences and thesis statements: Students may be asked to create a thesis statement and corresponding topic sentences on a given topic. Students should read their peers' sentences and give feedback on conciseness and unity. The teacher can give feedback right from the beginning or give students time to read and reflect on their colleagues' work and then provide his/her feedback. The teacher may determine a minimum number of comments each student should give.

b) Journals: Students are asked to write journal entries of certain length on a given topic. In groups of three or four, students exchange their journal entries. After students finish reading and commenting on their peers' journals, the teacher can collect both the entries and comments electronically for feedback and/or grading.

c) Essays: Since essays are more time and effort consuming than the previous activities, it is advisable that pairs, or groups of three, exchange their papers to give feedback comments on specific features previously

set by the teacher (e.g. argument, analysis, transitions, or concession). The exchange can take place in any of the methods mentioned earlier. The instructor can monitor the comments or ask for a soft copy of the essays to make sure the students have given feedback according to the set criteria and features previously set.