THE EFFECTS OF CONTENT FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' WRITING

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Öz

İçerik Geribildiriminin Öğrencilerin Yazılı Anlatımına Etkileri

Bu çalışma, içerikle ilgili geribildirim uygulamasının, öğrencilerin yazılı anlatımdaki başarımlarına etkilerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. İçerikle ilgili kodlanmış geribildirim kullanımının, öğrencilerin yazılı anlatımını iyileştirmede müspet bir etkisi olduğu hipotezine dayandırılmıştır. Hipotezin sınanması amacıyla bir deney uygulanmıştır. Katılımcılar, University Centre of Khenchela (Cezayir)'da öğrenim gören ikinci sınıf öğrencilerinden oluşmaktadır. İkinci sınıfa kayıtlı yüz elli altı (156) öğrenciden altmışı (60) araştırmaya katılmıştır. Katılımcılar, (1) kontrol grubu ve (2) deney grubu olmak üzere rasgele iki gruba ayrılmıştır. Her iki gruba da aynı koşullarda olmak üzere bir ön sınav uygulaması yapılmıştır. Ön sınavı takip eden üç aylık süre boyunca, deney grubu bir dizi yazılı anlatım etkinliği gerçekleştirmiş ve içerikle ilgili kodlanmış geribildirimin faydalarını görmüştür. Kontrol grubundaki katılımcılara ise geribildirim verilmemiştir. Araştırmanın sonunda bir art sınav uygulanmış ve her iki grubun sınav sonuçları karşılaştırılmıştır. Kontrol grubu ile denek grubu arasında önemli bir fark ortaya çıkmıştır. Sonuçlar, içerikle ilgili geribildirimin öğrencilerin yazılı anlatımlarındaki başarılarına önemli bir etkisi olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *İçerik Geribildirimi, Kodlanmış Geribildirim, Öğrencilerin Yazılı Anlatımı, Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, T-Testi, J.D. Brown.*

Abstract

This study intends to investigate the effects of the implementation of content feedback on learners' performance in writing. We hypothesized that using coded feedback on content had a positive effect on learner's improvement in writing. To test our hypothesis, an experiment was

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conducted. Our respondents were second year students in the Department of English at the University Centre of Khenchela (Algeria). Sixty (60) students out of one hundred fifty six (156) registered in the second year participated in this research. The participants were randomly assigned to two groups: (1) a control group, and (2) an experimental group. A pre-test was conducted for both groups under the same conditions. Following this, the experimental group did a set of writing activities for a period of three months, and had benefited from coded feedback on content, whereas the control group received no feedback. At the end, a post-test was conducted and the results of both groups were compared. There was a significant difference between the control group and the experimental one. The results indicated that the use of content feedback had a positive effect in improving students' performance in writing.

***Keywords:** Content Feedback, Coded Feedback, Students' Writing, EFL/ESL, T-Test, J.D. Brown.*

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of teaching writing to second language (L2) learners, there has been a constant dispute among scholars and teachers regarding the role of error feedback in helping students learn how to write (See Fathman and Whally, 1990; Ferris, 1999; Lalande, 1982; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996). Although providing feedback is commonly practised in education, there is no general agreement regarding what type of feedback is most helpful and why it is helpful. As a result of this, many instructors teaching writing in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) are often confused about how to help their students in writing classes. Some teachers still have a tendency to provide explicit and elaborate grammatical corrections on students' compositions.

However, there is a serious question as to the usefulness of this kind of direct feedback treatment. Error feedback may not help students improve their accuracy when composing regardless of the teacher's time and effort (Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985). For example, many students make the same errors over and over even though they receive feedback from their teachers. For this reason, some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of error feedback offered in classroom instruction (Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996). Furthermore, this traditional way of correcting students' compositions indicates going through the papers with a red pen, circling, drawing arrows and scribbling comments.

All in all, the business of correcting writing is usually a frustrating experience for both teachers and students; perhaps worst of all, it seems to be mostly unproductive. When the compositions are returned, students read the overall mark given, shelve (or throw) the papers away to be forgotten, then repeat the same errors in their next compositions. Besides failing to raise students' interest, it has also showed that splattering the piece of writing with red ink killed any motivation that the students might have had. Given this, does providing feedback really affect students' achievement in writing? The motivation for this study came from a personal belief that if teachers change the way they provide feedback on their students' writing, and change the way they perceive and teach writing, this would improve learners' writing.

Writing is a difficult skill for native and non-native speakers alike, since writers must balance multiple issues as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and mechanisms such as capitalization. Writing is especially difficult for non-native speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of all those elements in a foreign language. Acquiring a language is a difficult task and learning how to write in a completely foreign language as in the case of Algerian students learning to write in English, is more difficult, and it is a process that takes time.

Unfortunately, the main corrections made by the teacher on a student's written work most often involve the correction of grammatical and orthographic errors. Yet, the true reason for writing is to achieve the communicative end. That is to say, writing constitutes one of the four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) or one of the four pillars of language, enabling the learner to communicate with others. Moreover, a piece of writing is not just a series of sentences showcasing only the proper use of grammar rules, it is rather a flow of ideas and thoughts that demonstrate the learner's way of thinking, which is worth reading and appreciating. Therefore, teachers should not just look at the surface level of grammar and vocabulary but also respond to the content before they correct it.

In her study of the comments that ESL teachers make on their students' papers, Zamel (1985:79) points out that "they frequently 'misread' students' texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer strategies for revising the text." Teachers should know that writing is a process which involves different stages as planning, editing, drafting and

revising. Thus, this process allows for interplay between writing and thinking, and since the stages are not fixed and linear the piece of writing is not a final one, and therein it should be taken as a draft. Hence, would students' writing ameliorate when teachers adopt new techniques of correction?

We hypothesize that by changing the way of providing feedback on students' writing based on a reformed view of the writing skill and the writing process, the learners would be able to write successfully and communicate with others through their written productions. In other words, a student's performance in writing will be affected positively after implementing coded-feedback on content. This situation arises many questions: What kind of feedback is useful and effective, and how can we provide feedback on students' writing? What are the factors to take into consideration when dealing with students' written work, and when in the writing process should feedback be offered? What type of errors should be dealt with, and how much information should be provided?

Our main goal is to search for an alternative to the traditional way of correcting students' compositions to encourage them and to make writing an easy and pleasant task for both students and teachers. The aim of the new technique is to move in the direction of creating in our students' mind the notion of writing as a means of communication, not a grammar exercise. Students must recognize that the rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling are essential for writing, but they are not in themselves the subject matter when they write.

Our other intention is to free the new technique from the old connotations students are used to, for instance, undoing the old negative connotations of the use of 'red' pen, which has traditionally been used to reveal the student's 'shameful' errors in the writing class. We are also seeking to make recommendations and suggestions for the implementation of the new technique which will make teachers and learners, partners in the writing class. Our other aim is to attract teachers' attention to this technique and its usefulness. Finally, with this study, we aim to make some contribution to the existing field of language teaching, especially teaching writing in English as a second/foreign language.

2. Research Methodology and Design

There are methods and designs to conduct research; including research in education. The choice of the most suitable method is the job of the researcher, and it depends on many factors like the nature of the issue, the aim of the study, the targeted objectives, the kind of the data needed, and of

course the sample involved. This study investigates the effects of coded-feedback on learners' performance in writing. In order to test our hypothesis we opted for the experimental method. The reason why the experimental method was selected is because the experiment is a means of collecting evidence to show the effect of one variable upon another, and is carried out to reveal cause and effect relationship between these variables; this relationship means that any change in the dependent variable is due to the influence of the independent variable. The independent variable (I.V) has levels, conditions or treatments. The experimenter may manipulate conditions or measures, and assign subjects to conditions that are supposed to be the cause. Whereas the dependent variable (D.V) measured by the experimenter is the effect or the result.

In the present study, the independent variable is the use of content feedback in teaching writing. We will test the effectiveness of this technique of providing feedback; examine students' reaction to it and we will observe its sufficiency. The dependent variable is the development of students' performance. We will focus on content and not on grammatical accuracy since we will follow the principles of the process approach in teaching writing.

2.1. The Investigated Population and Sampling

Conducting an empirical research on the entire population of 699 students in the Department of English at the University Centre of Khenchela, (Algeria) is practically very difficult, and renders our attempt no more than an ambition since we cannot meet our aims because of the obstacles hindering our research. Thus, most researchers prefer sampling that is, working with more limited data from a sample or subgroup of the students in a given population. Only then can data be sufficiently and practically collected and organized. Different types of research require different types of sampling. Difficulties arise during the process of selecting the appropriate sample representative from the population on which the study will be carried out, and on which research findings will be generalized. Samples are commonly drawn from populations for language studies by random sampling.

In the present study, two groups or samples are needed, an experimental group and a control group. The subjects are randomly assigned to each group to guarantee every individual in the population an equal chance of being chosen. The samples are drawn according to a table of random numbers from the population of the second year students in the English Department at the University Centre of Khenchela. Thirty (30) students are assigned to the

control group and thirty (30) students to the experimental group for the experiment, making up a total number of sixty (60) students out of 156 i.e. 51.28% of the students registered in the second year. We have taken into consideration variables such as age, place of origin, and sex.

It is worth mentioning that the Department of English, like the other departments in the Faculty of Human Sciences, is characterized by female over-representation (543 out of 699 students in the Department of English are girls i.e. 77.68% against 22.31%). Assigning students randomly to two groups may make us fall onto a female over-represented samples, but this does not constitute a problem. Since our sample contains more female students than male students (106 out of 156.i.e. 67.94% against 50 i.e. 32.05%), our sample is a representative one. Hence, the findings of the research could be generalized for all the population.

We have not used stratified random sampling because this kind of sampling not only identifies the population but also subgroups, strata within the population, must also be precisely defined. This form of identification is usually done with clear-cut specifications of the characteristics of that subgroup, for instance, sex (male/female), type of school attended (public/private), location (urban/rural), economic status (family income), and their proportions in the population. The researcher can randomly select from each of the different groups, or strata, in proportion to their occurrence in the population. The resulting sample should, thus, have almost the same proportional characteristics as the whole population. This procedure also requires random selection but adds a certain amount of precision to the representativeness of the sample and allows for the use of the identified characteristics as variables. Stratified sampling is inappropriate to our study because those factors like social class, age, sex, ethnic group etc. are unlikely to be prominent factors in our study.

Sampling with probability proportionate to size is another technique which is inappropriate to the present study because it is used with larger populations whereas our study deals only with the students of the Department of English. This technique could have been used if our study had included all the students learning English at Algerian universities. We opted to work with second year students because they are neither beginners nor advanced learners. Moreover, they have acquired enough background that enables them to write in English.

2.1.1. Teachers

The total number of teachers teaching in the Department of English at the University Centre of Khenchela is 38 including:

1-Permanent: officially recruited teachers. There are totally 14 permanent teachers in the Department of English.

2-Associated: permanent teachers in institutions other than the University Centre of Khenchela, and part-time teachers working in the Department of English. There are 14 associated teachers in the Department of English.

3-Vacataire: part-time teachers in the Department of English without being necessarily permanent teachers in other institutions. There are 10 part-time teachers in the Department of English

Among the total number of teachers, only four of them teach writing, therefore no sampling has been made and the whole population was taken as respondents.

2.2. Data Gathering Tools

To get the necessary data about the progress of students' writing after providing them with feedback on content, we relied on learners' written productions and the scores they got before and after the experimental treatment. We made use of a pre-test for the two groups before the experimental treatment which lasted for three months, and which was followed by a post-test, then a T-test was conducted to provide evidence for treatment's effects, and hence to prove our hypothesis.

In addition to the tests, we made use of questionnaires directed both to teachers and to students so as to have more information about their opinions, attitudes and personal perceptions. Our permanent presence in the Department, as permanent teachers, facilitated the task. This made the data-gathering process easier, and provided an easy access to the teachers as well as students while enabling continuous contact with them.

2.3. Procedure

To test our hypothesis, we compared the development of the writing skill within two groups of the university students studying English for three months. The experimental group benefited from feedback whereas the control group received no feedback.

The topics on which the students have written their paragraphs were carefully selected with regard to the motivating interest they could trigger within our students since we have respected our students' preferences. On the other hand, we have taken into consideration students' level and background knowledge. Students were asked to complete short narratives, to write essays about illegal immigration, and essays about protecting the environment.

During this period, the students have written five essays on different subjects in order to develop the different writing skills (narrative, descriptive, expository). Each time the teacher corrected students' productions using coded feedback and returned the papers back to the students so that they could read the comments and correct their mistakes. In the classroom, while the students are generating ideas and writing the first drafts, the teacher has supervised and helped them to express themselves and correct some mistakes; special emphasis has been placed on feedback.

Both groups received a pre-test under the same conditions. Then, for a period of three months the experimental group received instruction and practised writing based on content feedback. At the end of the period, a post-test was assigned to both groups, again under the same conditions. After testing, comparisons between pre-tests and post-tests, and between post-tests were made; a t-test was also conducted to see whether the experimental treatment was effective.

2.4. Results and Discussion

The number of errors in the four categories (organization, development, style, interactive communication) occurring in students' drafts were counted and compared. The progress of the experimental group in all the tests has proved the effectiveness of content feedback as an instructional tool in decreasing the number of errors related to organization, style, development and communication i.e. improving students' level of writing proficiency. The statistical validity of tests' results has put us in a better position to confirm the hypothesis set for the research study in which we argue that providing students with the necessary feedback can significantly be a real language experience that helps EFL learners at the university level to develop and reinforce their writing skill.

To validate our assumption, we applied the appropriate testing and statistical procedure – the **t-test** which is considered to be the most suitable test to compare two means. To calculate the **t** value, the following formula needs to be applied:

$$\mathbf{t}\, N_1 + N_2 = \frac{(\overline{X_1} - \overline{X_2})\sqrt{(N_1 + N_2 - 2)N_1 N_2}}{\sqrt{(N_1 S_1{}^2 + N_2 S_2{}^2)(N_1 + N_2)}}$$

$$= \frac{(10.71 - 9.92)\sqrt{(30 + 30 - 2)30 \times 30}}{\sqrt{(30 \times 1.90^2 + 30 \times 2.29^2)(30 + 30)}} = \frac{0.79\sqrt{58 \times 900}}{\sqrt{(108.3 + 157.2)(60)}}$$

$$\boxed{\mathbf{t=1.73}}$$

Degree of Freedom: J. D. Brown's method of testing in which he has stated that "the degree of freedom (df) for the t-test of independent means is the first sample size minus one plus the second sample size minus one." (Brown, 1988:167) helped to find the critical value for "t".

$$df = (N_1 - 1) + (N_2 - 2)$$
$$= (30 - 1) + (30 - 1) = 58$$
$$df = 58$$

Alpha Decision Level: "The language researcher should once again set the alpha decision level in advance. The level may be at $\alpha \langle .05$ or at the more conservative $\alpha \langle .01$, if the decisions must be more sure." (Brown, 1988: 159). In this statistical test, we decided to set alpha at $\alpha \langle .05$ which means only 05% chance of error can be tolerated. The test is directional (tailed) because there is a theoretical reason and a sound logic to expect one mean to be higher than the other (feedback treatment).

Critical Value: Since alpha is set at $\alpha \langle .05$ for a one-tailed decision, $df = 58$ and the corresponding critical value for "t", in Fisher and Yates' table of critical values, is **1.69**, then we get $t_{obs} \rangle t_{crit} (1.73 \rangle 1.69)$.

2.5. Hypothesis Testing

Now, we have collected the necessary information for testing our hypothesis.

Statistical hypothese: $H_0 : \overline{X_E} = \overline{X_C}$

$$H_1 : \overline{X_E} \rangle \overline{X_C}$$

Alpha level: $\alpha \langle .05$, one-tailed (directional) decision.

Observed statistics $t_{obs} = 1.73$

Critical statistic: $t_{crit} = 1.69$

Degree of freedom: $df = 58$

Table 1: information necessary for hypothesis testing

Since the observed statistic is greater than the critical value $(1.73 \rangle 1.69)$, the null hypothesis is rejected. Having rejected the null hypothesis, then the alternative hypothesis H_1 is automatically accepted. This means that there is

only 5% probability that the observed mean difference: $\overline{X_E}\rangle\overline{X_C}$ ($12.66\rangle10.33$) occurred by chance, or a 95% probability that it was due to other than chance factors.

The interpretation of the results should have two parts: significance and meaningfulness. The results revealed that the two means in the post-test are significantly different : $\overline{X_E}\rangle\overline{X_C}$ ($12.66\rangle10.33$). The null hypothesis H_0 is rejected at $P\langle.05$ which means that we are 95% sure that the relationship between the dependent variable "D" (writing tests' scores) and the independence variable "I.D" (feedback instructional treatment) did not occur by chance. It was due to the role of the feedback which contributed to developing and improving experimental group subjects' writing skill.

To have clear view about teachers' and students' attitudes, perceptions and opinions concerning different aspects of feedback and their writing, a questionnaire was administered for both. Almost all students (83%) responded that they wanted their teachers to correct the errors in their compositions either directly or indirectly. Only (17%) of the students said that they did not want to receive feedback from their teachers. The majority of the students (75%) claimed that they had a high concern about content. It is the first priority, whereas form or grammar accuracy comes as a final stage when they come to refine their piece of writing (the final draft). Some teachers consider grammar accuracy very important, whereas others place it in the last stage after content and organization.

The results had shown that content feedback had a positive effect on students' writing in terms of diminishing mistakes and improving their writing. Moreover, the core idea of our research was: if a teacher wants to improve his/her students' level in writing, then s/he should make use of feedback on content first and let grammar accuracy as a last step when students come to refine their writings. Teachers should help their students to express themselves and to communicate with others via their writings, and avoid turning writing into a grammar exercise.

3. Conclusion

This study has examined how content feedback affected EFL students' writing. Participants were sixty (60) second-year students at the University Centre of Khenchela. The experiment was carried out through multiple stages over three months. Additionally, multiple methods were used for data collection, including observations, essay writing and questionnaires. The collected data were compared and analyzed to examine the effects of content feedback on students' performance in writing.

In the training stage, which lasted for two weeks, questionnaire results revealed students' attitudes toward different modes of feedback on their writing, among which were content feedback and coded feedback. It also revealed some problems that students face while writing. Thus, this stage of the research did not only help in directing the research questions, but it also revealed the needs of these students. In this stage, after both groups have written a multiple-draft pre-test paragraph, the experimental group received extensive training and modeling on how to deal with coded feedback on content, while the students in the control group were instructed using a traditional model of instruction on the same activities. The same teacher-researcher taught both groups simultaneously.

During the implementing stage the students were asked to write multiple-draft essays on different topics, and then the teacher provided them with feedback on content using coded feedback. Following this, the papers were returned to the students, and students were asked to rewrite their pieces after correcting the mistakes on the light of teachers' feedback. The students found it enjoyable, and growth in their writing over time was clear as they continued to write and receive feedback and guidance over the experiment. Finally, a post-test was conducted and the results of both pre and post test were compared. The comparison showed that students' writing in the experimental group highly improved and the number of mistakes decreased due to content feedback. $t = 1.73$ i.e. the null hypothesis was rejected and our hypothesis that the use of content feedback would improve students' writing was clearly proved.

To conclude, feedback should constitute an essential component of any writing activity. However, teachers should know how to make it play a positive role in motivating the learners. Teachers should respect learners' preferences concerning writing (choices of the topics, feedback), and should not only concentrate on grammar accuracy but also on content. Feedback is a way of developing students' writing, so teachers should make their students understand the positive outcomes of feedback. It should be stressed, however, that this in no way excludes the importance of grammar accuracy. What one should aim at is a kind of compromise between form and content.

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