

The Effectiveness of Feedback with Different Focuses on EFL Writing

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Abstract. The role of feedback is often mentioned in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). It would affect the learning process and final proficiency level of the second language (L2) learners. This study investigated the influence of different types of feedback on L2 learners' writing and learners' acceptance of feedback. Results show that different types of feedback have different effects on diverse aspects of writing, and comprehensive feedback is the most effective method for the overall improvement of writing. In terms of learners' acceptance of feedback, social, environmental, and personal factors are all influencing factors. These provide guidance for subsequent second language teaching, especially in L2 writing.

Keywords: L2 writing, corrective feedback, comprehensive feedback, learner agency.

1. Introduction

When discussing the relationship between SLA and L2 writing, recent research shows that L2 writing plays a facilitative role in overall L2 development, as it can encourage cognitive development and interactive moves. Moreover, the improvement of L2 writing could lead to greater precision in language use [1]. Therefore, the improvement of L2 writing could also indicate the improvement of overall L2 proficiency.

One influential aspect in writing that cannot be neglected is the role of feedback. In L2 writing, especially in the classroom settings, one of the teacher's main roles is to provide feedback on students' writing to help them make progress. Teacher feedback is valued by students, especially in some cultures that give teachers great authority, since it is regarded as one of the most significant factors to help students write better [2].

There are abundant studies focusing on the impact of corrective feedback (CF) on grammatical accuracy in learners' performances, especially in comparing which form of CF is more beneficial to learners [3,4]. However, under the claim that the assessment of L2 writing should not be limited to the pursuit of grammatical accuracy [5], other studies were carried out on the effectiveness of feedback with different focuses [6]. Moreover, when exploring students' reactions to teacher feedback, it is claimed that under certain influential factors such as beliefs [7], identity, and degree of recognition to feedback [8], students' acceptability to feedback is also diverse.

In this study, I analyzed four written texts from two intermediate-to-upper level EFL learners, trying to explore which form of feedback can provide the best guidance to learners. Learners' acceptance of teacher feedback with different focuses and the reasons for their acceptability were also explored. The research questions of this study are as follows: 1) Does CF have a positive impact on improving learners' writing accuracy? 2) Is content-related feedback useful in improving overall writing proficiency? Compared with only providing content-related feedback, is it more effective to provide learners comprehensive feedback (including CF, content, and structure)? 3) If does, how does learner agency affect learners' acceptance of feedback?

This research aims at revealing the effectiveness of different kinds of feedback, taking students' needs and values into consideration, and providing suggestions for subsequent L2 writing teaching to a certain extent.

2. Literature review

2.1 The Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback

Teacher feedback includes correction and evaluation for the aspects that need to be improved in L2 learners' writing. What kind of feedback to provide is a question that teachers continuously think about. Out of the importance of grammatical accuracy in writing, studies focused on the effectiveness of corrective feedback (CF). Fathman and Whalley's earliest study [9] found that learners who received error feedback had much higher linguistic accuracy in the revised drafts. Significant fewer grammatical errors were found compared with that of the control group who did not receive error feedback. Other early research also demonstrated the importance of CF in enhancing students' language accuracy [10,11]. However, the results of these studies were somewhat unconvincing because they only focused on the revised texts rather than newly written texts [12].

Later studies focusing on the role of CF have reached conflicting conclusions. Bitchener and Knoch [13] demonstrated the effectiveness of CF in improving long-term accuracy, while other studies did not find a significant effect of CF in improving accuracy [14], or it is difficult to determine students' improvements in accuracy are due to feedback or practice [15]. The impact of CF on the improvement of accuracy is still a controversial topic until now.

In addition, there has long been controversy over the best methods (e.g., direct and indirect feedback) to use for providing feedback [16]. It is claimed that direct feedback is an immediate correction method that can reduce learners' confusion, especially on more complex errors, while indirect feedback can promote learners' reflection on existing knowledge and has long-term effects in improved accuracy [13]. The effectiveness of different methods is also affected by students' proficiency levels [17], students' personal preferences [18], etc.

There are abundant studies on CF, and researchers seek to find a corrective method that can 'perfectly' minimize or even eliminate errors in learners' writing. However, the pursuit of grammatical accuracy seems overcorrected or oversaturated. In L2 writing, the impact of feedback should not be limited to correcting errors and improving accuracy [5]. A large number of studies have shown that correcting all errors in writing will take a long time without actual uses because correction only has an impact on language advancement from a narrow perspective, but accuracy is not the only essence of writing. Ideas should be injected, and context should also be taken into consideration [19].

2.2 The Effectiveness of Content-related Feedback

Under this claim, studies involve other aspects of feedback, for example, content-related feedback. It specifically refers to responding to and clarifying the content written by learners and is considered to have a greater effect on improving the overall writing level. Early research investigated the impact of feedback on content on L2 writing. Kepner's study [20] included 60 undergraduate students. By insisting on using content-related feedback and making comparisons with CF, the author concluded that by including feedback on content, learners' L2 writing proficiency and critical thinking had improved, but most grammatical errors were not corrected. However, the author pointed out that the study only evaluated the results of the post-test, which made it difficult to ensure that the improvement of learners was due to feedback rather than participation in continuous writing or not [21].

Subsequent studies have made up for this defect and made comparisons of feedback on different aspects. Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, and Anderson [22] compared continuous dynamic CF with feedback on content and organization on learners, but the result only emphasized the impact of CF in improving writing accuracy, the influence of feedback on content and structure was not clearly stated. In Rastgou, Storch and Knoch's [6] longitudinal study, by using pre-test, post-test and a delayed test, the study extensively discussed the impact of teacher feedback on accuracy, complexity, fluency, content and organization. It turned out that feedback on content, and organization has a positive impact on improving fluency, and the multilateral feedback group that has received feedback in all aspects has improved in accuracy, fluency, content, and organization. This study provided a new direction for feedback research on L2 writing. However, studies focusing

on the effectiveness of feedback on all aspects of writing are still scarce, more studies are needed for further confirmation of the research results.

2.3 The Impact of Learner Agency

The above research mainly focused on the influence of different methods on learners' writing. However, one of the keys to successful language learning lies in the learner's initiative [23]. The improvement of learners' writing abilities depends not only on the adopted methods but also on learners' own acceptance of feedback. Learner agency, as a concept that has only been concerned in L2 writing in recent years, refers to learners' engagement of feedback under the influence of emotions, cognition, and behaviors due to their different aims. In L2 writing, learners' individual differences in interaction with feedback can also be attributed to their own beliefs and experiences [24]. Saeli and Cheng [8] further confirmed this. It was found that students' L2 identity is deeply affected by their L1 identity, which in turn leads to their own preferences for various feedback related to CF. The emotionally active recipients can use CF better in their writing.

It is worth mentioning that learner agency is not an isolated concept that exists independently of individuals but establishes a kind of relationship and continuous negotiation with the environment around learners [25]. For instance, the differences in learners' cultures and beliefs would also be reflected in different engagement with feedback [26]. Learner agency even includes students' identification with teachers [27]. It can be estimated that when evaluating the impact of different feedback on learners, it is necessary to consider not only the objective influential factors, but also take social, environmental, and individual factors into consideration.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

There are two participants in this study, both of them are non-English major first-year students in a Chinese public university. Their English proficiency has reached an intermediate-to-upper level before admission, which is indicated by their English test scores in the college entrance examination (around 130 with a total score of 150). The teacher who provided feedback to the two participants is an English lecturer in their college, who has three years of English teaching experience in China. His nationality is South Korea, but before moving to China, he was born and lived in the United States for more than 40 years. In that case, he does not have a deep understanding of Korean culture. However, he was called "Korean teacher" by some students purely because he has an obvious Korean face.

3.2 Procedures

In this study, participants need to complete two argumentative essays, each essay requires more than 300 words. Participants are required to provide their own opinions and arguments on a specific phenomenon, and the difficulty of the two essay questions is basically the same. The first topic comes from one of the students' English contests, and the second one comes from Task 2 of an IELTS test. Before the start of writing, given that the participants are not familiar with argumentative writing conventions, some guidance on the structure of writing and content to be included were provided. Moreover, in order to allow students more time to think, there is no time limit for completing each essay.

After both participants finished the first essay, I sent their essays to the foreign teacher and requested him to provide them with different kinds of feedback. Since this study mainly focuses on the effectiveness of different kinds of feedback, student A received feedback on content and structure only, while student B received both CF and feedback on content and structure. Indirect feedback was given because it is claimed to be useful for more advanced learners [13]. The form of CF included both location and code (e.g. I bought a book (VbT), and the explanation of each code was also provided to students.

In order to make sure that participants read the foreign teachers' feedback carefully, they were asked to make revisions based on their understanding of the feedback. I sent the second essay question to them after receiving their revised version of the first essay. A 15-20-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with both participants individually after they had completed both tasks. The questions in the interview focused on their overall impression of the feedback and the influential factors which affect their acceptance of the feedback.

3.3 Data Analysis

Mixed method analysis was used in the analytical procedure. Quantitative measurement was used for the evaluation of participants' writing. In order to ensure the comprehensiveness and completeness of the analysis, both CAF measurement and an assessment scale were used to evaluate students' writing. According to the measurement of CAF proposed by Wolfe-Quintero and Inagakiand [28], accuracy is assessed based on the percentage of error-free T-units. The types of errors include errors in spelling, grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. However, concerning students' current writing level, the judgment of errors in word choice is not that strict as long as the meaning is comprehensible. The syntactic complexity is measured according to the ratio of clauses to T-units. Fluency is measured based on the amount (i.e., total words) a writer produces. The assessment scale was adopted from the writing rubric given by their college and is used for rating their writing assignments and exams in daily teaching.

4. Results

In the following part, I will use both CAF measurement and the assessment scale to discuss the performance of two participants in their two written texts, in order to explore the effectiveness of feedback with different focuses on learners' writing. In this study, student A only received feedback on content and structure, while student B received both CF and feedback on content and structure.

Table.1. Impact of feedback on accuracy

Student	Text 1	Text 2
Student A	0.4	0.28
Student B	0.44	0.59

Table 1 shows the performance of students on accuracy before and after receiving teacher feedback. It can be noticed that the feedback on content and structure received by student A is not helpful in improving accuracy, and even has a negative effect on the accuracy of his second writing. However, student B, who received CF, improved significantly in accuracy after a short period of time.

Table.2. Impact of feedback on syntactic complexity

Student	Text 1	Text 2
Student A	1.48	1.39
Student B	1.22	1.36

Table.3. Impact of feedback on fluency

Student	Text 1	Text 2
Student A	365	465
Student B	398	352

It can be noticed from Table 2 and Table 3 that the syntactic complexity and fluency of writing of the two participants show an opposite trend, which indicates that it is difficult for learners to balance both. There are only slight changes in syntactic complexity. However, significant improvement was found in student A's fluency of writing after receiving feedback on content and structure.

Table.4. Impact of feedback on overall performance

Student	Text	Content	Organization	Focus	Cohesion and Coherence	Vocabulary	Grammar	Total
Student A	Text 1	2	3	3	2	4	3	17
	Text 2	4	4	4	4	3	2	21
Student B	Text 1	3	4	4	3	3	3	20

	Text 2	4	5	5	4	3	4	25
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The overall writing proficiency of participants is measured by using the assessment scale which contains a range of aspects. Overall, from Table 4, both participants get improved in their second writing, especially in the overall structure and content of the essays.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in understanding students' overall impression and the factors which affect their acceptance of teacher feedback. Narrative analysis was used for evaluation. It is indicated that students' own beliefs and cultural differences are the main influential factors that have an impact on their acceptance of teachers' feedback.

5. Discussion

This study focuses on the effectiveness of different kinds of feedback on different aspects, and comprehensive feedback in improving students' overall writing ability. Meanwhile, it also tries to explore other influential factors that affect learners' acceptance of feedback. The above issues will be discussed separately in the following sections.

5.1 The Impact of CF on Accuracy

When mentioning the assessment of accuracy, since student A did not receive CF, errors in his first essay still exist in the revised version and the second essay (e.g., our life). Only student B, who received CF, improved in accuracy in the second writing, which proved the role of CF in enhancing students' writing accuracy. This conclusion is consistent with that of Bitchener and Knoch's study [13]. When reading the revised version of student B's first writing, it was noticed that although the lecturer tried to provide the student CF on everything, according to the student's output, only the more obvious and easy-to-correct errors were revised. This indicates that comprehensive CF may not be always needed. In terms of improving accuracy, although it was claimed that there is no significant difference in the use of focused CF and unfocused CF [29, 30], in L2 writing teaching, we need to take the proficiency level of students, time spent by teachers for providing feedback, the condition of different writing tasks into account, consider the needs of students [31], and to make the decision of whether to use CF which focuses on set targeted aspects.

5.2 The Impact of Content-related Feedback and a Comparison of Different Feedback on Overall Writing Performance

Considering the importance of content and structure-related feedback in writing highlighted by previous research, this study focused on the performance of students after receiving content-related feedback, and also differences between the impact of feedback on content and feedback on content and CF. It turned out that the overall performance of both students has improved, specifically in terms of content, organization, focus, and the overall coherence of their essays. Meanwhile, it can be concluded from the interview and through the revised version that students think most of the teacher's suggestions on content are reasonable. Therefore, they accepted the suggestions, and their logical thinking in subsequent writing has also improved. This indicates the effectiveness of content-related feedback in improving critical thinking proposed by Kepner [20]. Also, this study reached a similar conclusion as Rastgou, Storch and Knoch's study [6], that is, the student who received comprehensive feedback (including CF and feedback on content and structure) have promoted in most aspects and gained better improvement in overall performance. This implies the role of different types of feedback in improving different aspects. In order to improve the overall proficiency of writing, comprehensive feedback seems to be necessary.

5.3 Impact of Learner Agency on the Acceptance of Feedback

In order to explore the influence of learners' individual factors on their acceptance of feedback, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two participants separately. According to previous communication with other students, I knew that some students have doubts about the authority of this

foreign teacher, because his Asian face prevents students from combining him with a qualified foreign English teacher. Surprisingly, what the participants expressed in the interview was different from my prediction. It is gratifying that the sense of distrust was not reflected in the participants' interviews. They all stated that their judgments are based on the feedback itself, rather than their impression of the lecturer (see Transcription 1).

Transcription 1:

Student B: Emm... I don't think that he is Korean will affect my acceptance on his feedback. I still start from his own analysis. I have my own judgment.

The other influential factors mentioned by participants, including students' own belief and preferences, the differences between Chinese and western cultures, were also summarized from the interviews (see Transcription 2 and 3).

Transcription 2:

Student B: ... I tried his suggestion, and I moved that part to the first paragraph, but I felt that it made me very very uncomfortable. That paragraph became too long, not concise. So I thought my originally writing is better.

Transcription 3:

Student A: ... the not acceptance is just temporary. Because umm... according to my own writing habits, I like making comparisons, and to express my views. So I sometimes quote some irrelevant things to support my own views. This may be different from foreigners' ideas. They think irrelevant is irrelevant...

The participants' thoughts further proved that the influence of native-speakerism is not absolute, it varies from person to person. Native or non-native, or speakers' appearance is not the only criteria for judging the qualification of language teachers, other factors, such as learners' personality also matter [32]. These also echo the conclusions of previous studies that personal beliefs [24] and culture [26] in learner agency would have an impact on learners' perceptions of teacher feedback. These could be good examples in explaining the individual differences in students' acceptance of feedback even if they are receiving the same type of feedback from the same teacher, and it is a good start to better understand learner behaviors. Meanwhile, teachers can play a more active role in helping students build more positive learning beliefs and attitudes, and to help students make progress in writing [33].

6. Conclusion

This study explored the effectiveness of different kinds of feedback, verified the effect of CF in improving accuracy, and the positive impact of comprehensive feedback on overall writing performance. The importance of learner agency is also discussed. However, there are still some limitations. There are only 2 participants included, and the methods of testing and evaluation are relatively simple. Caution should be exercised when generalizing research results to a wider area. Some feedback provided by the foreign teacher is not consistent with what he claimed to do, which may have an impact on the final result. Meanwhile, due to the teacher-student relationship, students' answers in interviews may not fully express their true thoughts. However, the study still provides some enlightenment for subsequent L2 writing teaching. More reasonable feedback could be provided to better support students.

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