

Feedback on Writing in Multilingual ESL Classroom: A Study on Students' Beliefs

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative paper is to explore multilingual ESL students' beliefs about feedback on writing. Beliefs play a significant role in any human action and they are a central deciding factor in human behaviour and learning. Beliefs "act as very strong filters of reality and can be of enormous influence on the success of their learning" (Arnold, 1999, pp. 256-257). Since beliefs influence and play key roles in language learning and teaching, the role of learners' beliefs about language learning has been investigated. However, very few studies have focused on multilingual ESL students' perception of feedback on writing. The participants were 40 graduate students from one of the colleges in Kerala. This study used an open-ended questionnaire to generate data. The findings show that there is a serious discrepancy between what theorists and educationist suggest and what learners' view on error correction in writing.

Keywords: Beliefs, feedback, writing, multilingual classroom, language learning

Introduction

Beliefs influence and play key roles in language learning and teaching and they are culturally bound. Since beliefs are formed in early life, they differ from person to person. Beliefs play a significant and pivotal role in any human action and they are a central deciding factor in human behaviour and learning. Arnold's quotation on beliefs (given above) is pertinent here. Since beliefs influence language learning and

teaching, the role of learners' beliefs about language learning has been investigated. However, very few studies have focused on multilingual students' beliefs in feedback on students' writing. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to fill the gap found in the literature.

Feedback on Errors

Researchers and language educators have not reached a unanimous conclusion about feedback: whether to correct errors, what errors to correct, how to correct them and when to correct them though they have studied it intensively and extensively (Hendrickson, 1978; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). According to behaviourists and cognitivists feedback contributes to language learning. Similarly, structural and communicative approaches to language teaching consider feedback foster learner motivation and ensure linguistic accuracy. Brown (2007) commented that second language learners "will make mistakes in the process of acquisition, and that process will be impeded by if they do not commit errors and then benefit from various forms of feedback on those errors" (p. 257). Although scholars like Krashen (1982) argue that corrective feedback is ineffective, it is generally viewed that feedback plays a significant role in improving knowledge and acquiring skills in any educational contexts (Azevedo & Bernard, 1995; Bangert- Drowns, Kulik, Corbett & Anderson, 1989; Moreno, 2004). Cohen (1985) claims that feedback "is one of the more instructionally powerful and least understood features in instructional design" (p. 33). Feedback not only influences learners' achievement, but also it motivates them in learning (Lepper & Chabay, 1985; Narciss & Huth, 2004). Since feedback is "the drive which steers the writer through the process of writing into product" (Keh, 1990, p. 294) and it is connected to revision in the process of writing, it gives more opportunity to learners to discover meaning and rewrite their texts better. In short, feedback enables the learners to know whether they are successful or not and evaluate their progress in the process of writing. It tells the teachers whether their teaching is effective or not and it shows learners' weaknesses. In writing students must get feedback to rewrite their draft since the multiple drafts in the process of writing will help them to improve their writing skills.

Teacher Feedback and Peer Feedback

Teachers' feedback is a type of motivation in writing which tells the

learners what to do to improve their writing (Raimes, 1983, p. 143). According to Tribble (1996), teachers' feedback during the process of writing would eliminate most of the existing problems in writing. Teachers' feedback can help to improve learners' writing by raising the right questions, pointing out gaps in information, ambiguities, discrepancies and making suggestions that guide students in revising their text.

It is viewed that peer feedback is effective and suitable to adult learners in the process writing class as the peers provide dynamic reader-text interaction immediately. Mendonca and Johnson (1994) studied the revisions of advanced ESL learners at the graduate level and reported that peer feedback enhances students' communicative power by encouraging students to express and negotiate their ideas (p.766). According to Alkuhuli (1996), peer correction enables students to learn working together and get them cooperate and exchange their ideas which eventually help them to improve their level of writing skill. In other words, peer feedback is a learning experience because learners learn how to evaluate others work maturely; furthermore, they learn to trust and respect each other's judgment.

Background of the Study

Although extensive research has been carried out on what students believe about error correction and feedback in and around the world (e.g. Alkhuli 1996; Lee 2005; Radacki & Swales 1998; Eng, Ibrahim, & Shamsuddin, 2015; Widiastuti et al., 2019), a number of studies focused on Indian ESL context (e.g. Kumar, 2020; Mukherjee and Chattopadhyay, 2017; Tripathi, 2017), no study has focused on students who study different first languages in their colleges. Therefore, this study was an attempt to add more on the research about feedback by investigating multilingual ESL students' beliefs in feedback on writing.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what multilingual ESL students think about feedback on writing. As a result, this study tried to find the answer to these two questions:

- Which types of feedback do you prefer in writing: teacher feedback or peer feedback? Why?

- Do you think that teacher feedback is useful? Why?

Contexts and Participants

This study was done in one of the colleges in Kerala, India. The participants were 40 graduate students from the English department who were studying Malayalam, Arabic, Urdu and Hindi as their first language and English as their second language. They were not volunteers, but they were selected according to the first language that they were studying in the college; as a consequence, ten students from each language were selected and given an open-ended questionnaire.

Methods and Data Analysis

Since the focus was on students' perception of feedback on writing, the study was interested in generating their views verbally. Consequently, this study used a qualitative approach because "the researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data" (Creswell, 2003, p. 18) and "Qualitative research is empirical research where the data are not in the form of numbers" (Punch, 2009, p. 3). An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect the data for this study since open-ended questions are used to collect opinion, feeling and evaluation (Wellington, 2000).

This study used qualitative data analysis framework given by Miles and Huberman (1994) and thematic interpretation was used to analyze the open-ended questionnaire. Since the data was primarily "textual data", it employed "interpretative analysis" (Croker, 2009, p. 5). Different levels of analysis were done by "moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). In short, the data went through four stages such as data reduction, data display, data conclusion and data verification. Three processes were combined throughout the study: collecting data, coding data and analyzing data (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Findings and Discussions

Three major themes emerged after analyzing the data: students' preferences of feedback, the reason for their choice and the use of teacher feedback over peer feedback. The themes that were identified for each question are presented here.

Which feedback do you prefer: teacher feedback or peer feedback? Why?

Analysis of the questionnaire shows that all the participants prefer teacher feedback regardless of the first language that they are studying. They prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback because of teachers' qualifications and experience, teaching skills, their professionalism, knowledge, and honesty. In other words, they want their teachers to correct their mistakes in their writing since the teachers are "older and more experienced" (participant 2), which helps them not only to illustrate their mistakes but also gives the reason for their mistakes as participant 19 wrote "my teacher shows me the mistake and explains the reason why I make mistakes." Furthermore, the participant students evaluate that the teacher's "English is excellent" (participant 32) and much better than their peers in all aspects. The participants also feel that their teachers are highly qualified and their classmates have just begun their bachelor programme; in addition, they even question their peers' eligibility to correct their writing. To illustrate, participant 13 wrote "my professors are doctors with Ph.D. in English or MA in TESOL with teaching diplomas that trained them in teaching writing while my friends are just like me who have just started studying for the Bachelor's Degree." As a result, the participants "can learn from him (teachers)" (participant 40); moreover, participants believe that it is the responsibility of the teacher to correct students' mistakes as participant 3 wrote "this is his or her job." They prefer teacher feedback in writing since they can trust their teachers and because their teachers want the students to improve their writing skills. To demonstrate, participant student 12 wrote, "I can trust my teacher because she wants me to improve my writing." To conclude, the participants strongly believe in teacher correction and think that teacher feedback is necessary for students to improve their writing skills.

Interestingly, there was not a single participant student who preferred peer correction. The reasons why they do not prefer their peers to correct their writing are connected with students' attitudes towards their classmates. It is found that the students do not trust their peers' ability, maturity to provide feedback on writing and are sceptical about their usefulness. For instance, participant 8 felt that "peers wouldn't be fair because they could change my answer" while participant 18 thought their peers "cannot give a perfect answer." The participants believe that

they do not accept their peers' answer and correction as participant 20 wrote, "I may not agree with my friend, but I agree with my teacher" and participant 30 expressed, "Peers don't have background and experience in correction." In short, the participant students even question their peers' skills and eligibility to correct their writing.

Do you think that teacher feedback is useful? Why?

The study shows that the teacher feedback is useful for the learners. The participants feel that teacher correction is useful because it helps them to improve their writing, assist learning, avoid mistakes committing again, and enable them to score high marks in the exams. To illustrate, participant 36 wrote that the teacher "shows me the problem clearly"; they (teachers) teach, write exams and he knows "the correct answer". Participant 42 argues "I will learn and won't repeat that mistake next time" which leads to "good marks in the exam" (participant 4). The participants believe that teacher correction improves their writing as participant 28 wrote, "He can improve my writing when he catches the errors and he can judge because he has good experience and skill. He knows what I need to write. I knew my mistake and I avoid it next time." Furthermore, the participants point out that the teacher correction is more beneficial than peer correction since the teacher can "explain more logically and reasonably" (participant 22) and "specify the mistakes" (participant 7). Consequently, they "avoid the mistakes in the exam" (participant 47). According to participants, teacher correction enables them to review their own writing and rewrite it as participant 13 wrote, "I will correct my writing." Above all, teacher correction is very useful for the students since the teachers can convince their students that there is a mistake which needs to be corrected. For instance, participant 19 wrote, "He can persuade me to correct." Teacher feedback has affected the participants' English language skills positively. It has increased the students' confidence in writing as participant 33 wrote, "whenever the teacher corrects my writing, I find some suggestions which help me to improve my writing and now I am more confident than before."

This study matches Lee's (2005) finding that the learners wanted their teachers to correct their errors and believed that it was teachers' responsibility to correct learners' errors. It also corroborates Leki's (1991) discovery that the students were eager to get teachers feedback and they believed that it was useful. This study also goes with Cathcart and Olsen

(1976) who have shown that students need teacher feedback and want them to be corrected more than the teachers feel so. Nevertheless, this study does not go with studies done by Mendonca and Johnson (1994) who demonstrate that peer feedback enhances students' communicative power by encouraging students to express and negotiate their ideas. Alkuhuli (1996) claims that peer correction helps students work in teams cooperatively and improves writing skills. Giving and getting peer corrections is a learning experience because learners learn how to evaluate others' work maturely and they learn to trust and respect each other's judgment.

Significance of the Study

The study contributes significantly to research on perception in general and students' perception of teacher correction in particular. This study stresses the importance of including students' views in English language teaching. Since this study contrasts educationists, theorists and scholars' beliefs about the effectiveness and usefulness of peer feedback, it sheds light on the other side of the reality. Furthermore, this study clearly suggests that learners' views should be given priority in order to make any innovation successful.

Conclusion

This study in multilingual ESL classroom shows that the students' prefer teacher feedback to peer correction because teachers are more qualified to give feedback, skilled and experienced to correct their errors than their pairs. Moreover, they do not trust their peers' ability, maturity to correct errors in their writing and give feedback and are sceptical about their usefulness. It is found that the students feel teacher correction is useful because it improves their writing, learning English language, and it helps them to avoid mistakes in future. Furthermore, teacher correction boosts the students' confidence and helps them to get a high score in the exams including competitive exams..

Limitations

The result cannot be generalized since this study is a context-specific qualitative study. A study in a different context with another group of participants might generate an entirely different result. Moreover, quantitative data would indicate multiple direction of the perception.

Therefore, it is highly recommended to have a mixed study that compares teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions would provide a comprehensive idea about perception or beliefs of feedback on writing.

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