Corrective Feedback: Perspectives on Corrective comments in EFL and ESL writing

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Abstract

This reviewed article aims at critically analyzing and evaluating four articles that include: 1. would you perhaps consider’....: hedged comments in ESL writing by Nurmukhamedov and Kim (2010), 2. The impact of teachers’ comment types on students’ revision by Sugita (2006), 3. the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing by Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005), and 4. Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be? by Ferris and Roberts (2001). A comparison is made in terms of research design, instruments used, strengths, weaknesses, participants and results. Following is my review of previous studies that their researchers carried out studies on Corrective feedback in ESL or EFL writing to examine factors relating to the errors among L2 learners. My article ends with a call for more research that may include error correction and corrective feedback to situate a better comprehension of ESL, EFL and L2 language learners.

Keywords: Corrective Feedback, Corrective comments, Error correction, ESL, L2 language learners

Overview Of The Study

Feedback is one of the most significant components of teaching learning process, as it attempts to ensure that errors are corrected and language acquisition achieved. Hsiao and Oxford (2002) underline, “Feedback serves as an indispensable step in the learning process by extending instruction beyond the initial question or activity”. Further explaining the point, Hsiao and Oxford (2002) discovered that integration of corrective, imperative, explanatory, developmental or encouraging, and result-oriented feedback appears to increase success. The study best fits to the above context as it is based primarily upon the issue of feedback in ESL writing at broader level and the possible effects of teachers’ using different comment types on student’s revisions at the narrower level.

Purpose Of Corrective Feedback

According to the studies of four articles, the main aim of comments or corrective written feedback is to;

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• enable students to revise their own writing
• assist students to acquire correct English
• provide learners to correct errors

1. About Research Type

The research in four articles is based on descriptive quantitative design, which “involves a collection of techniques used to specify, delineate or describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation” (Shohamy, 2000). It begins with perceived hypothesis and a comparatively narrow scope of investigation. It is different from experimental research because the group of students exists in natural contexts, whereas in experimental research, such groups are specifically formed. Although the self reports/interviews after the data collection are used normally in qualitative research, these can also be used in the descriptive research when only a specified type of information is gathered (Shohamy, 2000). This study may be placed towards the quantitative side of the qualitative-quantitative continuum. In that, it may be labelled as exploratory-confirmatory study as it tries to find evidence to support a hypothesis (Perry, 2005). It is predominantly quantitative study because quantification of the data and numerical analysis has been carried out to test the hypothesis (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The present study kept a perceived hypothesis from the very beginning that subjects might misinterpret the newly added hedged comments due to its vagueness and complexity. However, the results extracted from the quantitative analysis of the data on students’ revised drafts were contrary to the hypothesis as majority of revised drafts turned up with substantive and efficient revision. The further introspective analysis of the data through stimulated recall interviews however, proved that some of the subjects did find hedged comments misleading as was expected in hypothesis.

1.1 In Nurmukhamedov and Kim’s (2010) study, the participants were ten upper intermediate students of different L1 backgrounds. They were enrolled in academic reading and writing class in a Midwestern university in the United States. As part of classroom activities, students were asked for writing a compare and contrast essay on home schooling vs traditional schooling. Unlike the conventional practices of treating writing as finished product and students having no right working on teachers’ feedback (Lee, 2010), the present study follows more a developmental approach by adopting multi-draft method (two in this study) allowing students to work on the teachers’ feedback and bring something substantial and effective in the revised version, which they did.

1.2 Sugita (2006) conducted her study on the same issue but different in the context of EFL in a Japanese university. The aim of her study that is to devise pragmatic recommendations on making of commentary types effective, the other purposes too are well-defined for the study i.e. to contribute in the applicability of the findings of her study, to see whether or not significant and efficient revisions are made by the ESL writers on their essays by following the individual comment types, to observe which particular type motivates students the most in their process of revision, and to find out in particular, the attitude and beliefs of learners on
various commentary types that in a way would assist teachers to improve upon their different comment types, by avoiding complexity and vagueness. The Students were provided with 184 electronic comments on their 20 drafts (10 for each, first and second) from all four types of comments. The revised drafts were analysed to make sure if any revisions were made on both content and form. In order to achieve the intended results, researchers applied same standard coding scheme applied by the first study. Subsequently, stimulated recall interviews were administered on the next day of feedback given to avoid biasness in students’ responses and helped researchers to clarify ambiguities.

1.3  Bitchener, Young, and Cameron’s (2005) study is comprised on 53 post-intermediate ESOL (migrant) learners who had only just entered a post-intermediate ESOL programme. They were predominantly Chinese adult migrants, but participants from a number of other countries were also represented, including Sri Lanka, Romania, Iran, Turkey, Serbia, Russia, Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan, and India. Ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties, but the majority were in their late twenties and early thirties. Most had arrived in New Zealand over the last 2 years as permanent residents and had brought with them some form of tertiary qualification. The participants were divided into three treatment groups according to whether they had decided to study in a full-time post-intermediate class for 20 hours per week, a part-time post-intermediate class for 10 hours per week, or a part-time post-intermediate class for 4 hours per week. Despite different amounts of instruction, the same amount of time was spent teaching grammar in each of the three classes. Because the focus of the part-time classes was on writing, all three classes received the same amount of attention in this skill area. Group one, the full-time class of 19 participants, received direct written corrective feedback and a 5 minute student–researcher conference after each piece of writing. Group two, the 10 hours per week part-time class of 17 participants, received direct written corrective feedback only. Group three, the 4 hours per week part-time class of 17 participants, received no corrective feedback on the targeted features but, to satisfy ethical requirements, they were given feedback on the quality and organisation of their content.

1.4  In Ferris and Roberts’ (2010) research, 72 ESL students and 8 teachers were involved in the data collection process. Demographic information collected from all of the students indicated that the vast majority (82%) were immigrant students and that the largest first language groups were Southeast Asian (55%) and Chinese (12%). Both sets of students wrote an in-class, 50-min diagnostic essay during the first week of class. Though the two classes wrote on different essay topics, in both cases students were given a short reading and asked to respond to a question raised by the reading by giving their opinion and supporting it.

Comparison

- The first study applies the desired analytic-heuristic approach in order to answer those questions well and to devise pragmatic recommendations, for making commentary types more effective. Shohamy (2000) describe analytic-heuristic approach as any study which is not sure of the results or has possibility of change at later stages.
• The first study under analysis unlike the second, third and fourth studies applies fourth commentary type called hedging (as evident from title of the article) to the list of three i.e. imperatives, questions, statements.

• In the first and second studies, the researchers were not sure of its outcomes, as tentative hypothesis for this comment type was that students might find hedged comments complex and vague. However, the actual results turned other-way round i.e. the students came up with substantive and effective revisions.

• However, the first study seems almost the replication of second, third and fourth studies, with some differences of research design.

• In the first study the participants were ten upper intermediate students of different L1 backgrounds in Midwestern University USA. Whereas in second study, there were 184 participants in EFL context at a Japanese University. On the other hand in the third study, the participants were 53 post-intermediate ESOL (migrant) learners who came to New Zealand. In the fourth study, there were 72 ESL students and 8 teachers.

• In the first and third studies, participants belonged to upper-intermediate learners while second and fourth studies show EFL OR ESL background.

• In the first, second and third studies followed the direct or explicit written feedback in terms of content, language and organization in the piece of written essays or narratives where as in fourth study, indirect or implicit feedback was made on the next day.

2. Strengths of the Studies

Though all studies have some weaknesses too, they qualify in attaining major strengths which became the reason for their publication in the renowned English Language Teaching and Second Language writing Journals.

2.1 One of the major strengths of Nurmukhamedov and Kim’s (2010) study is its introspective inspection of the quantitative data through stimulated recall interviews that makes triangulation in research which gives the study validity and credibility. Introspective methods as Mackey and Gass (2005) explain, is “a data elicitation technique that encourages learners to communicate their internal processing and perspective about language learning experiences.....can afford researchers access to information unavailable from observational approaches” (p. 201).

2.2 In Sugita (2006) research also indicates a major strength based on its contextualization, which assists the researcher in broadening the overall perspective of the research, while at the same time helping him in narrowing down the topic and formulating a focused research question, which is ultimate purpose of the research Shohamy (2000). Moreover as Perry (2005), states “the motivating force behind research is the inherent curiosity of human beings to solve problems” (p. 9) the study under consideration is highly motivated by the earlier study by Sugita (2006).

2.3 Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) focused more on the pragmatic applications of different commentary types, for that students beliefs and perceptions were given due
consideration, which is very rarely touched research area. Hence, it contributes its due share to this kind of literature.

2.4 The study of Ferris and Roberts (2001) is based on the newly added item, one other research question was added to the study which rationalizes the results and elicits the list of pedagogical implications of four commentary types by knowing the perceptions of students regarding feedback types. The natural classroom environment chosen for the study also gives a considerable strength to the study in context of contextualization. In this way, it attains its purposes to contribute to the applicability of the findings.

3. Weaknesses in the Study

3.1 One of the weaknesses in Nurmukhamedov and Kim’s (2010) study is regarding research subjects/participants, a non-random sample of (10) from one class is used, unlike the second, third and fourth studies, wherein some (50) or more participants from three different class levels were recommended through random sampling.

3.2 Sugita (2006) provides insufficient information about the previous learning, age, and gender of the participants which affects its generalizability as well as internal and external validity.

3.3 In Bitchener, Young, and Cameron’s (2005) study also indicates one weakness in the procedure of the study, which pertains “to the logistic issues related to what was actually done? How exactly was the task carried out? How was treatment administered? How and when was testing done”? (Mackey & Gass, 2005) Though the study pretends to be replication or rather extension of the first and fourth studies, it does not adhere to its procedures which are well-structured.

3.4 The study of Ferris and Roberts (2001) rely solely on the previous patterns for conducting study. They have not provided sufficient information about major details. It seems as if researchers were asking their readers to read the earlier study before reading the current study to understand the context.

4. Summary and Discussion

In summary, the results of all studies were more alike, i.e. firstly, the comment types do have noticeable influence on students’ revisions, and secondly, hedged comments and imperatives may encourage students to make substantive and effective revisions. However, as introspective data discovered, hedged comments can be occasionally vague and complex in understanding to some of the students. It further explored the attitudes of students towards their teachers, some of them considered teachers as authoritative so they obeyed their instructions and to others as the representative or facilitator in the class facilitating them with their various needs.
The research concluded that hedged comments and imperatives due to their self-explanatory nature bring substantive and effective revisions from students unlikely to the questions and statements which are more instructional in nature and hardly compel students to make revisions. However, as hedging can be complex and misleading, teachers should be more careful in applying comment types by focusing more on their pedagogical functions. Unlike the second, third and fourth studies, the first study does not specify any particular comment types as substantive and effective but rather recommends the integrated use of all four types of comments keeping in view their suitability in particular context. Furthermore, all studies emphasise on the need of teachers training in this context for the successful application of comment types in their feedback.

Some obvious discrepancies are seen from very beginning in four studies, like fewer details about the material used i.e. essay writing in first, third and in fourth studies, only the topic is disclosed but it does not mention the amount of practice which the learners were engaged in, such as drills and practice exercises and how the assessment of the written material took place. Next, in the analysis part of first, second and third studies, an element of partiality and biasness could be found as the researchers themselves analysed the comments in students writing but in the second study this was avoided by asking another teacher to analyse comments with researcher. Furthermore in results part, how and with whom the discussion was made to resolve differences in students’ comments needed more elaboration. One of the major purposes of adding hedged comments was to observe its cultural effects in adopting it as a teaching learning pedagogy. However, second study deviates on this point in results as it only mentions motivation and different perceptions of students on teachers’ role in the class. As a whole, I see some pitfalls in reporting of the four research studies.

I find one more weakness in the researchers’ choice of electronic feedback on students’ essays rather than hand written marginal comments used in the first study. This change can cause negative effects on construct validity in particular and affect its overall generalizibility and external validity. Online comments were very common in the USA, where the study was conducted; the situations for online comments was quite different in other parts of the world where this kind of comment technique may not be that common.

To sum up, in a context where a great deal of theoretical and empirical evidence reported a possible failure in the instructional approach of teachers, it was found of great importance and need to know the attitude and beliefs of learners on various commentary types that in a way would assist teachers to improve upon their feedback in different ways, keeping in view its suitability and appropriateness. The Present studies though have some weaknesses, however due to their major strengths they open a wide range of possibilities for the researchers to work more on the issue, which provides empirical and pragmatic solutions on EFL and ESL writing in general and feedback types in particular.
References


