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Azad, Tairen

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Ineffective Feedback: A Study of EFL Student Writing at the Tertiary Level

Tairen Azad,¹⁶ Marzia Rahman Trisha and Ananna Debnath
East West University

To achieve educational goals and to do well in exams, having a good command over writing is inevitable. As students get a chance to memorize other's work to pass in the exams until the tertiary level, writing own words, using cohesive markers, and brainstorming become very challenging for learners at this level (Hasan and Badi, 2015). Although learners face problems in writing, they can improve their performance by working on the given feedback even at university level by their teachers and peers. According to Ur (Ur, 1996 in Ali and Kabir, 2012) feedback is a response to evaluate learner's proficiency level and to develop it. However, teachers give feedback to their students but their improvement in writing is not noticeable even after their post graduation, which is a matter of concern. Thus, this study aims to investigate what is considered as the ineffective feedback in terms of writing and what factors are working behind to make a feedback ineffective. It is found from the findings of both teachers and students that there are mismatches between students' and teachers' preference of feedback. Both teachers and students responded that feedback in writing is different from feedback of other skills as in writing there are a lot of aspects to comment on by the teachers. It is also found that though teachers are giving feedback, because of the rigid, fixed and inflexible nature of feedback in writing, it is sometimes demotivating for the learners. So, in order to make the given feedback effective, teachers need to take into consideration students' demands and needs, and they should also make the feedback flexible so that learners can work on it easily.

Keywords: Writing, feedback, ineffective, tertiary, challenging.

Introduction

In the education system of Bangladesh, English is taught from the beginning of school life and among the four skills of this Language, writing is significantly focused as this is the skill of assessing a student (Khan and Akter, 2011). Zaman and Azad (2012) state that expressing good ideas has become very challenging for students because of their low proficiency in writing English. They also find that the syllabus of English used in grades 1 to 12 gives pupils a chance to memorize other's work rather than developing their own writing as a skill. As a result, most of the students are unable to write correct sentences by their own even at the tertiary level.

However, learners get an opportunity to develop their writing skill at the university level by working on the feedback they get from teachers and peers. According to Ur (Ur 1996 in Ali and Kabir, 2012), feedback is a response on learner's performance to improve their present proficiency level. That means, the goal of giving feedback is to improve learner's level of proficiency gradually. If learner's development is not noticeable, the purpose of giving feedback will not be served.

¹⁶ Correspondence should be addressed to Tairen Azad, E-mail: tairenazad@gmail.com

To make the feedback successful and to achieve the goal, both teachers' and learners' preferences of feedback need to be addressed. Students' choices of getting feedback sometimes vary from the teachers' (Zaman and Akter 2012). According to Zaman and Akter (2012), students get feedback on their writing but most of them do not rewrite it and teachers cannot compel them to do so because of time limitation as well as the large number of students. As a result, the purpose of giving feedback remains unsuccessful and learner's writing skill does not improve. The alarming part is that many students find writing very challenging even after their higher education.

Central Research Question:

1. What is feedback in terms of writing?
2. What is ineffective feedback in terms of writing?
3. What factors make a feedback ineffective?

Literature Review

Definition of Feedback

Srichanyachon (2012) states that in language learning, feedback is used to make learners aware of their language level and also make them able to understand their strength and weaknesses. He also mentions that, the main objective of feedback is to improve learner's performance and feedback is information which is used for making the learning language effectively. Peer Feedback, Direct Feedback, Motivational Feedback, Conferencing Feedback, Use of codes are the different kinds of feedback used for evaluating learner's performance.

Student's Problem in Writing at Tertiary Level

In Bangladesh, writing skill is considered as the assessing skill. Without having a good command over writing, students face many difficulties to get good grade in academic life. Even at the tertiary level, writing for academic purpose becomes also challenging for the learners as they are not familiar with these kind of writing. There are some reasons behind the problem in writing at tertiary level. According to Fadda (2012), academic writing needs an organized thought, discipline and also generating own ideas which seem very challenging for the learners to cope up. At this level learners are expected to read first and then write on their own word, which they fail to do because of their grammatical mistakes. To avoid this they prefer copy and paste rather than paraphrase and summary (Amin & Alamin, 2012). Hassan & Badi, 2015 also point out that before the tertiary level, learners get many chances to memorize other's work to pass in exam but in University level, they need to write their own words which becomes challenging for them. They also mention some other difficulties faced by learners in this level which are paraphrasing, using cohesive marker, expressing own voice, citation, referencing and so on.

Teacher's assistance to motivate learners to read more, brainstorming before writing, introducing academic writing strategy make learners able to face the challenges in writing (Amin & Alamin, 2012).

Feedback in Writing at Tertiary Level

Although both form and content are important, generally feedback in form gets more priority in EFL context (English as a foreign language) like Bangladesh.

Researchers like Truscott, Robb et al do not support the corrective feedback and they find it harmful, demotivating and distracting for learners. On the other hand, researcher like Ferries, Fathman, Walley feel that no matter how much beautiful an idea is, if there are grammatical mistakes, it seems very frustrating to the teachers (Zaman & Azad 2012).

Ineffective Feedback

There should always be feedback ‘mechanism’ to observe and assess learning activities. Through this process, teachers are able to evaluate whether the learning takes place or not (Ali & Kabir 2012). As feedback is for developing student’s performance and confidence, giving preference to learner’s opinion about the feedback should be emphasized. Lee states that, there should always be a connection and negotiation between learners and instructors about the choice of feedback. If the used feedback is not preferred by learners, they will not be able to work on it which will not serve the purpose of feedback (see Ali & Kabir 2012).

Moreover, feedback needs to be the balance of both positive and negative. Learner’s individual needs and preference should get more emphasized about the choice of feedback; otherwise they will not be able to work on the given feedback and it will also not be appropriate for them (see Lee 2008).

Methodology

This study is both qualitative and quantitative and triangulation in nature. Data was collected from one Private University of Dhaka city on the basis of convenience and personal contact. Questionnaire was used for the learners of Basic Writing course. Opinions of 44 students were collected from two sections. All the instructors who took this course in the semester were interviewed to get their opinions. Along with this, learner’s writing samples were collected at the beginning and also at the end of the semester on the same topic to investigate their improvement in writing. All the data from three perspectives were collected, tabulated, explained and analyzed by using the theory of ‘product and process’ and ‘fossilization’ theory.

Results and Discussions

Teacher’s response, student’s findings, findings from the sample writing paper are mentioned in this section and discussed on the basis of central research question.

Table-1

Teacher’s Perception to the Interview Question

Question	Response
1. feedback in student’s writing	100% teachers give a lot of feedback in student’s writing
2. preferred kind of feedback	40% said that they prefer all types of feedback depending on the error made by students, 40% use of codes, 10% motivational and 10% only on grammatical error
3. giving feedback in writing task is difficult than the feedback of other skill	60% said difficult, 20% said easier and 20% said it is equal
4. emphasize on student’s write-up	it depends on the level of the students, grammar and organization
5. ask students to rewrite their write-up after giving the feedback	70% said yes students are bound to rewrite and 30% said if the writing is very bad
6. used feedback effective for learners	50% said it is effective if the learners want to learn, 20% said it is 50% effective, 30% said the

	percentage is less than 20%
7. personal preference of feedback in writing	20% give emphasize on students need, use of codes is preferred by 40%, 20% preferred motivational feedback , 20% corrective form
8. peer feedback in writing class	90% do not use peer feedback in writing class as students take it negatively, 10% use peer feedback in writing class but monitor it properly

Table-2
Students' Response to the Questionnaire

Questions	Response 1	Response 2	Response 3	Response 4	Response 5
1 .Do you feel any difficulties while writing at tertiary level?	37 students (92.5%) face difficulties	Only 7 students (17.5%) said they do not have any problem			
2. What kind of problem do you face?	23 students (57.5%) said- - They face lack of vocabulary problem in writing.	12 students (30%) face grammatical problem while writing.	Grammatical, lack of vocabulary, spelling the problems are faced by 5 learners (12.5%).	One student (10%) mentions that he/she has lack of concentration while writing	
3.If yes, what kind of feedback do you get from your teacher?(You can choose as many as are suitable)	44 students (100%) get use of codes as feedback 16 learners. Only 6 students.	44 students (100%) get use of codes as feedback 16 learners. Only 6 students.	36%) said they get motivational feedback.	The use of conferencing feedback is mentioned by 20 students (45%)	(13%) said that they get peer feedback also
4.Do you find feedback in writing is different from the feedback of other skills? How? (Please specify)-	16 students (36%) find the feedback of writing skill is not different from the feedback of other skills.	8 participants (63%) find the feedback of other skills is different because- Every skill has different features. Choice of words,			

		vocabulary, spelling and content are checked by teachers in writing skill is not different from the feedback of other skills			
5. Do you find feedback effective in developing writing?	40 students (90%) mention what feedback is effective to develop their writing because- It helps not to repeat the same mistake It develops the vocabulary skill, idea and thoughts and also free handwriting. Teacher's positive words definitely motivate them to write better	10% do not find feedback effective			
6. What is the purpose of giving feedback in writing?	65% said purpose of giving feedback is to improve grammatical mistakes, ideas, vocabulary and spelling.	35% mentioned it also helps to write better in other courses			
7. What kind of feedback do you like most?	26 students (59%) mention that they like conferencing and corrective feedback	18 learners (40%) prefer motivational feedback			

8. Is there any feedback with which you are not comfortable with? If yes, why? (Please mention)	28 (64%) students said that there is no kind of feedback that is uncomfortable to them. .	But 13 (30%) of them mentioned that they do not like peer feedback and use of codes.	3(5%) of them mentioned that they are not comfortable with meeting the TAs for counseling		
9. Do you like writing activities?	30% (13) students answered in negative.	Other 31(70%) students said yes to that question.			
10. If yes, what kind of activities do you like?	22(50%) Student opted for creative and free writing.	8 (18%) of them mentioned that they like descriptive writing	2% of them opted for report writing.		
11. Do you work on your errors which are identified in your writing?	52 % (23) students answered in yes.	Other 17 (39%) students mentioned that sometimes they do work on their errors.	Only two of them ticked on 'No'	2 admitted that they do work on their errors if only asked by their teachers	
12. Do you want your teacher to help your writing skill? How? (Please specify)-	Most of the learners opined that they want teachers' help through correction and motivation.	Some of them answered that they would like to get conferencing and extra time to solve their mistakes individually.	Few of them stated that they want grammatical rectification in their script.	Surprisingly one of them admitted that she/he would like to get motivation with smiley face	
13. Do you work on group to develop your writing?	12 (27%) students responded in yes whereas	17 students(39%) responded in no.	Other 15(34%) students mentioned sometimes they do work on group, but not always.		

14.Are you interested to spend more time on writing based on the feedback you get?	23% (10) of them answered in no and mentioned- they find it as a boring and time consuming.	Other 37(77 %) students answered in yes and stated several reasons.	Some answered they like to spend more time on their feedback	Few of them answered that spending more time on feedback is helpful to analyze their errors	One of them likes to spend time on feedback to get a good job in future.
15.Do you think working in a group can be more effective? Why? (Please mention)	89% (39)students answered in positive.	30% of them finds it effective as in a group work they can find each other's mistakes.	Some of them find group work effective as they can brainstorm quickly in a group	Some mentioned that they like group work as it derives fun.	11% students answered in negative they find group work generates chaos
16.Do you find checking each other's scripts can help you to identify your mistakes?	32% (14)students do not lie to get peer feedback as they think students themselves are not able to evaluate a piece of writing	Rest of the students answered in yes and they mentioned- peer feedback helps to identify their own mistakes, make aware of the kind of mistakes may occur and also motivates them.			

Analyzing the Writing of Students

By analyzing the collected samples, it was found that 5 students (83%) did not have any improvement in their writing. They made the same mistakes what they did in their 1st write up. Among them, 2 students (33%) improved their writing organization. 16% students found who improved both grammar and content throughout the semester. Only content and organization were improved but grammatical problem remained same in student's 2nd write-up.

Discussion

From the findings of students and teachers response, some important aspects of feedback are expressed. Teachers use different kinds of feedback for giving guideline to their students. Both mention that feedback of writing is different and difficult also from the feedback of other skills. It is found that-

- In writing, student's vocabulary, spelling, grammar, informal words and also content are focused while giving feedback even at the basis courses. On the other hand, in spoken learners are encouraged to have confident and maintain the content at the beginning level.
- In reading, teachers can easily provide students reading material to give them guideline to practice but in writing, understanding student's level is also considered while providing material.
- Mistakes of writing are different from the mistakes of other skills. For example- in spoken language, students do not need to maintain the formal words but when those words are used in written form are identified as 'informal words'.
- Giving feedback in writing is time consuming and hardworking also. Teachers need to read it with concentration to give feedback.
- 83% learner's make the same mistakes even at the end of the semester which they have done in their writing at the beginning of the semester. That means the given feedback is ineffective to develop learner's writing skill.
- Even most of the teachers mention in their interview that the purpose of feedback is partially served. They find the using feedback is very rigid and fixed to assess learner's writing progress and motivate them to perform better.

There are several reasons are identified for ineffective feedback from the writing sample, response of students and teachers.

- Learners are not motivated at all to develop their writing. They are not concerned about their writing; they are just concern about CGPA.
- Low proficiency learners are not able to work on writing only by getting the feedback. They need extra time, effort and concentration from the teachers whereas teachers cannot give them the time and attention because of the scarcity of time.
- Learners are asked to rewrite the write-up after getting the feedback but a huge number of students admit that they do not write it by their interest.
- It is also found that they do not work on writing outside the classroom to perform better.
- From the teacher's interview, it is also noticed that learners make lots of mistakes which remain the same even after their teachers make them realize it by giving feedback. It is needed to improve otherwise they will not be able to write the correct form and will be fossilized (Hasbin, 2007).
- Teacher's choice of feedback also varies from the preference of student's feedback. Teachers mostly prefer use of codes whereas learners like corrective, conferencing and motivational feedback. This may also work as a factor behind the ineffective feedback.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of giving feedback in writing is to improve students' proficiency. But the findings suggest that for some specific reasons the purpose is not being served. The following recommendations can be made from this study-

- It is crucial for teachers to find out what kind of feedback is appropriate for learners.

- A feedback can start with something positive about the writing so that students would not be too frustrated and would be encouraged to improve. Motivation can drive students to do better in their writing.
- As giving feedback is difficult in a large classroom, a teacher can involve the students of his/her class in group/pair work. It will make the written task interesting to the students whereas the teacher will also get enough time to give feedback as the number of copies will be half in number.
- A classroom is full of diverse learners. Though it sounds challenging, teachers need to take into consideration each student individually while giving feedback.
- To cope with the time limitation of the class, a teacher can use his/her office hours for counseling students.

Although it is very time consuming and difficult, teachers should consider the mistakes of each and every student individually and give feedback according to their mistakes. Moreover, students need to be aware of the importance of writing so that they can be motivated to work on the given feedback to perform better.

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Appendix- A

Questionnaire for students

- 1) Do you feel any difficulties while writing in tertiary level?
-Yes -No
- 2) What kind of problem do you face?
-Grammatical - Lack of vocabulary - Spelling
Others (Please specify)-
- 3) Do your teachers give you any feedback in your writing?
- Yes - No
- 4) If yes, what kind of feedback do you get from your teacher?(You can choose as many as are suitable)

- Corrective - Motivational - Use of codes
 - Conferencing - Peer feedback
 - Others (please specify)-
- 5) Do you find feedback in writing is different from the feedback of other skills?
How? (Please specify)-
- 6) Do you find feedback effective in developing writing?
Why? (Please specify)-
- 7) What is the purpose of giving feedback in writing?
- 8) What kind of feedback do you like most?
- 9) Is there any feedback with which you are not comfortable with?
If yes, why? (Please mention)
- 10) Do you like writing activities?
-Yes - No
- 11) If yes, what kind of activities do you like?
Please specify-
- 12) Do you work on your errors which are identified in your writing?
- Yes -No - Sometimes - If only asked
- 13) Do you want your teacher to help your writing skill?
How? (Please specify)-
- 14) Do you work on group to develop your writing?
- Yes - No - sometimes
- 15) Are you interested to spend more time on writing based on the feedback you get?
Why? (Please mention)
- 16) Do you think working in a group can be more effective if working in a group?
Why? (Please mention)
- 17) Do you find checking each other's script can help you to identify your mistakes?
Why? (Please specify)

Appendix – B

Interview Questions

- 1) Do you give their students feedback in their writing?
 - 2) What kind of feedback do you prefer in terms of writing?
 - 3) Do you think that giving feedback in writing task is difficult than the feedback of other skills? 4)
- According to you, how feedback in writing is different from the feedback of other skills?
- 5) What do you emphasize on your student's write-up?
 - 6) Do you ask your students to rewrite their write-up after giving the feedback?
 - 7) Do you find the used feedback effective for your learners?
 - 8) Do you have any personal preference of feedback in writing?
 - 9) Do you want your students to work on groups in writing?
 - 10) Do you use peer feedback in writing class? Do your students take it positively?
 - 11) Do you take any initiative to improve the writing skills of low proficiency learners?
 - 12) Do you think the low proficiency learners are able to work on writing only by getting the feedback?
 - 13) Do you think that learners are motivated enough to develop their writing?
 - 14) What is the purpose of giving feedback?
 - 15) Do you think the purpose of giving the feedback in writing is served?