Puzzling About the Teaching of English in my Context: Why Does the L2 Teacher of Writing Provide Feedback?

Jiahe Wang

Beijing College of Social Administration (Training Center of Ministry of Civil Affairs) 102600

Abstract: Giving students feedback has been as issue in the field of L2 writing teaching as teachers feel pressed even hopeless when they were confronted with mountains of papers and the effectiveness of such practice await to be explored. Focusing on a L2 writing teacher in the researched context, this paper conducted qualitative research to scrutinize why L2 writing teacher provide feedback and particularly discussed the strategies and impacts of such practice.

Keywords: Second language teaching; Feedback; Writing

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Exploring puzzles occurred in second language (L2) teaching benefits teachers to formulate understandings of issues in the classroom rather than arbitrarily solve certain problems, which is also regarded as one effective way to conduct sustainable and productive investigations (Allwright and Hanks, 2009). Thus, the current study is launched with intentions to explore and understand one of my teaching puzzles.

1.2 Research question

1.2.1 How does the L2 writing teacher provide feedback to students' writing?

1.2.2 What are the effects of providing feedback on L2 teaching of writing?

1.3 Paper structure

Under the guidance of research questions, the current study falls into 7 parts. Part 1 briefly introduces the rationales and research questions. The second part touches upon the research context in which the investigation is conducted. In part three, pertinent literature is reviewed, serving for further discussions. The fourth part briefly describes the research methodology employed in present essay, the methods of data collection and the limitations of the study, followed by prudent analysis of findings and discussions. The last part reaches a conclusion, summarizing the key points of the study.

2. Research context

Specifically, in accordance with the main trend of teaching L2 writing, Linda, the only full-time writing teacher in Year 1, predominately focuses her teaching on fostering students' communicative competence. Students' academic skills alongside language skills are emphasized in her writing classes where Linda prefers to employ the up-to-date teaching methodologies to prepare her students for forming and delivering proper meanings in the writing classes. Thus, more emphasis is placed on students' written works after class when Linda carefully checks students' writing assignments and provides detailed feedbacks.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Teaching tasks for L2 writing

Since the emphasis of current study is placed on writing teachers and their teaching, it seems necessary to scrutinize what teachers mainly do for preparation of L2 writing classes so as to further pinpoint how providing feedback affects teachers' day-to-day work.

It is therefor to conclude that L2 teachers of writing play the roles not only as resource providers, but also as supporters and feedback providers (Harmer, 2012), making joint efforts to cultivate students' writing abilities.

3.2 Previous studies of L2 teacher feedback to students' writing

Most L2 teachers of writing would reach consensus on what K. Hyland (2003, p.207) noted, "feedback is central to learning to write in second language" as such formative feedback provides an additional layer of scaffolding to consolidate L2 writing skills and comprehensively improve the quality of writing productions. It is therefore not surprising to see that many researchers in the area in L2 teaching of writing put every effort on revealing the nature of feedback and discussing its efficacy.

The above-discussed characteristics indicate both contributions and deficiencies that early studies have. Thus, considering the purpose and context of current research, it is not difficult to say that findings from this article might shed light on what have not been widely explored.

3.3 Strategies of providing feedback to writing

Besides, in terms of teacher written feedback, forms of commentary, cover sheets, minimal marking and electronic feedback were also widely discussed.

In the light of previous studies, we cannot only gain a deep insight of all kinds of alternatives to provide feedback, but also form a brief understanding of how effects of those feedback strategies vary in certain context. As a matter of fact, front-line teachers concern little about how various types of feedback are classified, but what matters to them is "whether any one of these types of feedback is more effective than another in helping learners…" (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012, p.132). Thus, systemically identifying the various options available for responding to students' writing becomes the prerequisite for making the pedagogic decisions (Ellis, 2008).

3.4 Effects of teacher feedback on L2 teaching of writing

In other words, responding to learners' written works represents a significant pedagogic technic, not only exerting influences on learners and learning, but also in turn affecting teachers themselves and teaching practices.

On the one hand, "formative feedback is at the heart of effective teaching" (Black and William, 1998, as cited in Harmer, 2012, p.137). He claimed that such scaffolding practice was facilitative to tutors when they "did not have a ready solution to a particular problem in the students' texts" (p.260) and could depart their teaching from quick fixes to process-focused.

On the other hand, negative impacts of providing feedback on teaching and teachers were also examined.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants and ethical issues

Besides, Linda was informed that she would be anonymized in the research and her information would be untraceable. I also mentioned to her that if any discomforts caused by my research, she preserved every right to stop me.

4.2 Instruments and procedures

To address the research questions, I took a qualitative approach by employing teacher interview, document analysis and on-site observation as complementary tools to ensure the validity of current study.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were coded and categorized by employing the method of content analysis. Specifically, I initially considered the totality of the data holistically, in its multi-textured presentation. Gradually, as I conducted the analysis on each item, I was able to wipe out irrelevant data (e.g. irrelevant answers to some interview questions) and categorize the key information into certain themes so I grouped these themes into several manageable units of meanings, which were carefully displayed in later part (Perpignan, 2003). Again, data collected from the interview were cross-examined and analyzed with that from observations to find out the correlations.

4.4 Limitations

The current study is by no means comprehensive and has its limitations in terms of research instrument and data collection, which should be improved in future studies. For starters, some interview questions were not so targeted as to particularly relate to research purpose, which to some extent disturbed the data analysis. Besides, video recording was absent from the stage of interview data collection, which was likely to neglect the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview, resulting in incomplete data collection.

5. Findings and analysis

5.1 How the target teacher provides feedback
5.1.1 Forms of provided teacher feedback

Based on my investigations, teacher written feedback and teacher-student conference were major approaches for Linda to provide feedback, among which both direct and indirect feedback modes were identified .

Apparently, Linda played the dominant role as a resource provider (see in Part 3.1) and an evaluator, pointing out the deficiencies

in the student's writing. From such perspective, writing conference not only enables the student to understand how to respond to Linda's feedback, but also assists the teacher to comprehensively evaluate the quality of student's writing. From another perspective, as conversation proceeded, the student began to show more initiatives and asked detailed questions apart from linguistic problems (such as how to generate ideas for certain topics). At such stage, Linda turned her role as a consultant who negotiated solutions to certain issues proposed by the student.

5.1.2 Focus of teacher feedback

Generally speaking, Linda employed a mixed method to provide feedback to students' writings. For one thing, findings show that Linda preferred an indirect strategy through both written feedback and writing conference in order to make students take more initiatives. For another, some direct feedback was also provided for dealing with the linguistic issues, but in an unfocused manner. Teacher's educational experiences, personal preferences and students' characters jointly affected Linda's alternatives in terms of feedback strategy.

5.2 Effects of providing feedback on L2 teaching of writing

As discussed in Part 3.4, "feedback is an interface between teachers' pedagogic goals" (Baily and Garner, 2010, p.188), so it was not oblivious for me to investigate how certain feedback Linda practiced affected her teaching.

5.2.1 Providing feedback affects the teacher's perceptions of teaching

First, the findings show that providing feedback exerted influences on teacher's perceptions, attitudes and emotions, which further affected the teacher's teaching.

(1) Anxiety and depressions

First, Linda showed anxiety and depressions, especially when it came to written feedbacks. Through observations, she frequently shook her head and sighed for noticing some basic linguistic errors repeatedly occurred in students' writings and for their ignorance of what had been taught in the class. On the other side of the coin, what can be also gained from the investigation is that providing feedback motivates the teacher, especially when the teacher realizes her endeavors are paid off.

5.2.2 Providing feedback affects teacher-student relationship

Besides, findings also demonstrate that through face-to-face conferences where full conversations and negotiations were conducted, mutual trusts between the teacher and students could be built up and the teacher's credit was also likely to be enhanced, because the teacher's qualifications and professions were further recognized, which facilitated the teacher "to teach in a more harmonious environment", discussed by Linda in the interview.

5.2.3 Providing feedback to students' writing affects teaching practices

Apart from the impacts on teacher's perceptions and teacher-student relations, providing feedback also exerts influences on teacher's teaching practices.

(1) Adjusting teaching contents

(2) Adjusting teaching methodologies

6. Discussions

Findings from this paper have certain implications to L2 writing teachers who may jump out of the monotonous zone of providing feedback and design innovative feedback strategies so as to not only better realize their pedagogic goals, but also promote mutual relationships by further catering to students' characters. After all, as widely recognized in early studies, the effects of teacher feedback vary from students to students. Only when teachers take specific teaching context into considerations, can they move forward and maximize the efficacy of teacher feedback.

7. Conclusion

Hopefully, the current study could also lend some supports to other L2 writing teachers, especially to those who work in the similar educational context. As mentioned in foregoing part, one strong implication to L2 teachers of writing is that they may adhere to the comprehensive outlook of feedback issues and try to consider more of students' characters so as to better implement their teachings. Besides, researchers in the field can probably turn their interests to further investigate teacher factors and explore how to mitigate the negative emotions caused by the practices of feedback providing. After all, English teaching should be an enjoyable journey for both teachers and students.

References:

[1]Allwright, D. & Hanks, J. (2009). The Developing Language Learner: An Introduction to Exploratory Practice. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[2]Bitchener, J. & Ferris, D. (2012). Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition and Writing. London: Routledge.