

Chapter 1 Introduction

It is universally acknowledged by ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) writing teachers that grading and responding to student writing is a very complex, time-consuming and cognitively challenging work. Diverse factors are involved in the workings of teacher feedback on students' essays. This study examines whether and how these factors affect the effectiveness of teacher feedback in EFL writing. Following an inductive approach, the researcher devised an original analytic model that links teacher feedback with corresponding student revisions with reference to Ferris (1997) and Bai (2007). Three major factors, such as feedback strategy (i.e. how explicit the feedback is), feedback focus (i.e. whether the feedback addresses content, structure, or language problems), and language error type (i.e. morphological, lexical, syntactic errors, and errors at the discourse level), were singled out for analysis. The way they interacted with one another to exert an effect on student writing improvement was also examined by using the multi-dimensional interactive analysis (Lan, 2010; Jaccard & Turrisi, 2012). 43 college students mostly majoring in engineering participated in the study. 43 pairs of first drafts and second drafts, and 296 teacher feedback points were analyzed by using SPSS 21. Paired-Samples T Tests, One-way ANOVA, All-Factorial Variance Analysis, Multiple Comparisons, and Multiple Linear Regression are the main statistical methods used in the current study.

This study is the first of its kind to analyze the interactive effects of multiple factors in teacher feedback practice. It also offers insights for teachers with regard to effective and time-efficient ways to respond to student essays in similar EFL contexts.

1.1 Research Background

Teacher feedback is considered an essential component of education to encourage and consolidate learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Since the 1970's, its importance has been widely acknowledged in process-oriented and genre-oriented writing classrooms (Hyland & Hyland, 2010; Guo & Qin, 2006). According to the process writing approach, teachers help students develop necessary skills through multiple drafts, giving feedback in the process of writing, rather than at the end of it. In genre-oriented approaches, learning is seen as a social experience in which feedback acts as a key element of scaffolded instruction (Hyland & Hyland, 2010). Even though feedback is widely used by teachers, and students seem to greatly value teacher feedback, its contribution to student writing is still unclear (Hyland & Hyland, 2010).

It is of special interest to composition teachers who may feel the time and effort they invest in the arduous work of grading and responding to students' essays and papers may not have been spent in the wisest way, and therefore are seeking for the "best cure", the best way to do it. It is of special value to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Second Language Writing (SLW) researchers because of its complexity and opportunity. "Many questions and issues underlie the

process of reading student papers and providing effective commentary and of reading teacher commentary and revising successfully.” (Goldstein, 2004, p. 64) Many factors, linguistic, socio-cultural, and contextual factors are intricately intertwined to act upon the workings of teacher feedback. Not surprisingly, this is a much researched topic, and yet, conflicting results exist, no consensus has been reached, and many guidelines for composition teachers offered by research remain largely speculative and far from being conclusive.

The current study is conceived out of the researcher’s reflection on her own practice teaching EFL writing. At the university where she works, the usual English class size is around 35 students. Normally, she teaches 4 such parallel English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) reading and writing classes at the undergraduate level. The classes meet for 1 and a half hours every week, half of which is spent on reading activities, and the other half on writing instructions, writing workshops and peer review sessions. During the 16-week semester, each student is required to complete three to four writing assignments. Considering the size of the class and the time constraint on face-to-face meetings, effective teacher feedback takes on much more importance than it would be in a teaching context with ample opportunities for peer responses and teacher-student conferences.

Under the process writing multiple-draft approach, the sheer workload of grading and responding to students’ essays is gigantic. Besides its multitude, grading and responding to students’ papers proves to be the most cognitively challenging. When faced with piles of students’ papers, teachers face tough choices concerning *what, how,*

and *how much* to respond to in a way that helps students improve their writing in the long run. Take the researcher as an example, she normally meticulously marks students' language problems, underlining them and indicating error types through the use of error codes; she carefully phrases her comments on the essay content and organization, blending encouraging comments with suggestions for revision. After marking each batch of student essays, she would feel totally burnt out. However, do these feedback practices really work? What happen when the students receive the feedback? Do they understand what the teacher means? Do they act upon the feedback? Do they transfer what they learn to future writing tasks? According to the researcher's observation, a mismatch between teacher effort and student uptake is not unusual. The observation that students keep repeating similar mistakes in writing, and that they seem to care more for the grades they receive is rather frustrating. Her communication with other colleagues reveals similar concerns and questions: how should language, content and structure problems in student writing be treated in an effective and time-efficient way, so that students can obtain long-term benefits, and teachers can avoid being "composition slaves"?

1.2 Research Questions

The current study aims to explore the following research questions:

- (1) Is teacher written feedback effective in significantly improving student writing? Is teacher written feedback effective in significantly improving the content, structure, and language of student writing?
- (2) Whether different factors—feedback strategy, feedback focus,

and error type—significantly affect student revision separately? How do these factors affect student revision separately?

(3) How do the multi-dimensional factors interact to affect student revision?

(4) To what extent do different factors and their interactions contribute to student writing improvement?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The current study contributes to our present knowledge about teacher feedback and related research in the following two aspects:

Pedagogically speaking, this study contributes to a better understanding of the workings of teacher feedback, which may not only offer practical guidance as to effective ways to respond to student writing, but also help teachers become more aware of the major factors at play in the writing and revision process, and make informed judgment about adopting the best approach in their own EFL writing instruction.

Methodologically speaking, this study is the first of its kind to quantitatively analyze the interactive effects of the different factors of teacher feedback on writing improvement. This multi-dimensional and interactive analysis proves to be valuable in analyzing complex human behaviors that involve diverse interrelated factors. It attempts to offer tentative explanations for some of the contradictory findings and a research method replicable for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The sociocultural theory (SCT) developed by the developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, is often cited as a theoretical framework for understanding the social-cognitive dimensions of L2 writing development, particularly teacher feedback and peer response. Essentially, according to SCT, mind and consciousness are social in nature (Villamil & de Guerrero, 2010). Learning is also considered “a social phenomenon embedded in specific cultural, historical, and institutional contexts.” (ibid, p. 23) Vygotsky postulated that children’s relationship with the world is mediated by symbolic tools such as materials and language. The transformation of lower forms of thinking into higher forms of thinking is socioculturally mediated. Social interaction is essential in this cognitive development. Furthermore, the optimal scenario for development is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In the ZPD, “those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) have the potential to develop through mediation by others.

The central construct “mediation” was later expanded by Feuerstein and his colleagues to emphasize the role played by the human mediator. Feuerstein developed the theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) to explain the differences in children’s cognitive development. According to MLE, human cognitive abilities can be modified in

response to appropriate forms of interaction and instruction, in the process of which human mediator plays a central role (Lee, 2014). In education, MLE is seen as a form of intervention that can improve learning. For an interaction or instruction to qualify as a mediated learning experience, three criteria have to be met: (1) intentionality/reciprocity; (2) transcendence; and (3) meaning. Put in the context of responding to students' papers, "intentionality/ reciprocity" means the teacher's deliberate effort in prioritizing certain problems in student writing and directing students' attention to the use of necessary strategies to solve the problems. "Reciprocity" refers to the involvement of both teachers and students in the interaction, emphasizing students' active role in interacting with the teacher in the feedback process. "Transcendence" refers to students' ability to transfer the knowledge and skills that are learnt from one writing task to future tasks. Lastly, "meaning" emphasizes the importance of students' understanding the significance of the writing, being aware of their own strengths and weaknesses (Lee, 2014). In light of MLE, the conventional teacher-centered approach to giving feedback in which teachers indiscriminately correct errors, and students play the role of passive recipients does not qualify as MLE, and thus is unable to promote learning. "Teachers' focused, purposeful feedback that aligns with instruction (intentionality), active student involvement through dialogic interaction with the teacher (reciprocity), multiple drafting (transcendence), and diagnostic feedback (meaning) will be able to provide MLE for students." (Lee, 2014, p. 205)

2.2 Relevant Studies

Since the 1980's, there has been a vast array of relevant research on teacher feedback on ESL and EFL student writing. Major teacher feedback and student revision research concerns include:

- whether teachers should correct mistakes in students' papers (e.g. Truscott, 1996, 1999; Ferris, 1999; Chen & Li, 2009);
- if so, what forms of teacher feedback are the most effective (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986; Ferris, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2004; Chen and Li, 2009);
- should teacher feedback be best focused on form (language accuracy) or on meaning (content and organization), and at what stage of the writing process (Ashwell, 2000);
- how do students perceive and make use of teacher feedback (Ferris, 1995);
- how do teacher feedback compare with feedback from peers (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Tsui & Ng, 2000, Miao, Badger & Zhen, 2006; Zhao, 2010).

Several controversial issues in the field are directly relevant to the current research: the efficacy of providing grammar corrective feedback, the contention between form- and meaning-focused feedback, and the most effective feedback strategy (i.e. "optimal" level of explicitness of teacher feedback). Each line of research offers useful insights, but also conflicting results, a detailed account of which will be reviewed in the following section. Studies that analyze the types of errors in student writing will also be reviewed because it pertains to the analysis and classification of errors in the current study. The final

section of the literature review focuses on relevant literature on multi-dimensional interactive analysis, the major analytic tool used in the current research.

2.2.1 The Efficacy of Grammar Correction

The grammar correction debate concerns whether or not teachers should correct language errors in student writing. It started with the 1996 article “The Case Against Grammar Correction In L2 Writing Classes”, in which Truscott made a strong proposition that grammar correction should be abandoned because it was ineffective, time-consuming, and potentially harmful. The paper instantly became the focus of a heated published debate (Ferris, 2004), which to certain extent is still going on now. Since then, researchers conducted diverse empirical studies which claimed to falsify or testify Truscott’s view (e.g. Ashwell, 2000; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Robb, et al., 1986; Polio et al., 1998; Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Chen & Li, 2009) in both ESL and EFL learning contexts.

Conflicting results exist, according to Ferris (2004) and Guénette (2007), mainly due to inconsistencies in some major parameters in research design, e.g. setting up control group or not, longitudinal or cross-sectional, different subjects (ESL learners or EFL learners), different treatment and instruments. The influence of external variables beyond the control of the researchers, such as error types, classroom instructions, individual learner differences, particularly motivation, and teacher-learner relationship, may also lead to confounding results. Ferris (2004) concluded that