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USING ONLINE CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK IN THE EDITING STAGE OF ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG ESL UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

It cannot be denied that the internet is an indispensable medium in the teaching and learning environment. As such, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using online corrective feedback for academic writing classrooms compared to conventional corrective feedback methods. It would be interesting however, to find out if a more innovative form of corrective feedback can be introduced into the ESL writing classroom by means of interactive computer tools namely Microsoft Word Processor. In order to do this, an experimental design has been selected to compare a control and an experimental group of undergraduates pursuing the English for Academic Purposes course. A survey would also be conducted to determine how feasible the use of online corrective feedback is when used to help students improve from the first draft to second draft stage which involves editing in the process writing approach for academic writing classrooms. Statistical SPSS tools would be used to compare the conventional and experimental methods for analysis. Basically, the online corrective feedback should save time and cost, besides improving writing skills among ESL undergraduates, besides providing an enriching experience for both instructors and learners for effective teaching and learning in writing classrooms. The results of the study should help in determining this method's feasibility for application to the academic writing classroom.

1.0 Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) is being taught widely all over the world. Among the various language skills, writing is usually regarded as a painstaking activity. Most of the time, writing is used to gauge students' overall performance and grasp of the language in examinations. Thus, it is important for ESL instructors to find ways to ensure their students master writing skills to excel in the language. However, over the past two decades, the microcomputer has begun to play the role of an important tool of learning. The use of computers by non-native speakers has become vital in learning English as a Second Language. Having realised the important role that computers play in learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language, ESL instructors have begun to look for effective ways to integrate them into various types of English language courses. Several computer-aided approaches, methods and techniques have been presented thus far. Many computer-based programmes like word processor have also been used for teaching different language skills including writing.

1.1 Problem Statement

ESL instructors constantly try various ways to improve their students' writing skills. However, in spite of them spending numerous hours tediously identifying and correcting their students' errors, students do not take the trouble to read the comments in order to rectify their mistakes. Hence, ESL instructors need to seek better methods to address this issue. On the students' part, they do not seem to comprehend the meaning behind the red markings, let alone the illegibility of the instructors' handwriting. Therefore, there should be a better solution to address this problem.

In trying to address this issue, the following research questions were asked:

- Is the students' performance using online corrective feedback better than the conventional corrective feedback in the ESL academic writing classrooms?
- To what extent is it feasible to use online corrective feedback for academic writing classrooms among ESL tertiary learners in terms of grades and preference?

1.2 Objectives

This study embarks on the following objectives:

- To examine students' performance using online corrective feedback as opposed to conventional corrective feedback in the ESL academic writing classrooms.
- To investigate the feasibility of using online corrective feedback for academic writing classrooms among ESL tertiary learners in terms of grades and preference.

2.0 Related Literature

The issue of whether corrective feedback is effective for improving writing skills has been controversial and inconclusive up till date. Ferris (2004, as cited in Guenette, 2007) concluded that it is not easy to determine that error correction works. ESL teachers, for the past twenty years, according to Guenette (2007), are faced with the dilemma of whether to correct, or not to correct the grammar of their students' essays due to the contradictions that have been brought up about the effect of error correction. Feedback is surely important but the focus now is on which type of corrective feedback would be effective to enhance students' written performance. As educators, ESL teachers only want the best for their students and therefore, constantly investigate their pedagogical procedures, whether conventional or contemporary, to identify the most suitable strategy or strategies that can be adopted with the hope of improving their students' written performance.

2.1 Corrective Feedback

Feedback can be divided into different treatment groups such as content comments only, error correction or combination of contents and error correction, and error identification but no correction. Truscott (1996) reported that studies conducted by Kepner (1991), Semke (1984) and Sheppard (1992) found significant differences across any of these treatment groups but when the evidence from studies that have considered other feedback distinctions is examined, there is no doubt that giving any kind of conclusion at this point should be given careful treatment.

Another way of providing feedback is either through direct or indirect feedback. Direct feedback or explicit feedback takes place when an error is identified then, provided with the correct form by the instructor. On the other hand, indirect feedback occurs when the instructor indicates that an error has been made but does not provide the correct form, leaving it to the student to study the error and correct it. This indirect feedback is further aided by providing codes to recognize the types of errors made. Coded feedback locates the error and indicates the type of error using a code, for example, *vt* to represent verb tense error while uncoded feedback refers to instances when the instructor underlines, circles or places an error tally in the margin. In both cases, students need to diagnose and correct the errors independently. An investigation conducted on the effects of different treatment conditions on text revisions and essay writing that direct error correction produced more correct revisions (88%) compared to indirect error feedback (77%). However, at the end of the semester, it was found that students who received indirect feedback had reduced the frequency of the errors made much more significantly than those who received direct feedback (Ferris et al., 2000).

Ferris (1991) believes that error correction can help students to improve their writing but the method used must be selective, prioritized and clear. This is supported by studies conducted by Ashwell (2000), Fathman and Whalley (1990), and Ferris and Roberts (2001) that showed how corrective feedback had positive results. The positive results upon examination of three different feedback treatments which include errors marked with codes, errors underlined but not marked and no error feedback, proved a significant difference between both error feedback groups as they outperformed the no feedback group (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). This proves that feedback indeed is beneficial for students to improve in their written performance. Prior to that, Nassaji and Swain (2000) had found that corrective feedback given within the zone of proximal development (the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult supervision or in collaboration with more capable peers) was more effective when they conducted a study to two Korean L2 writers on the usage of English articles. Another study done by Bitchner, Young and Cameron (2005) on the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing revealed a significant effect for the combination of written and conference feedback on accuracy level in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article but no overall effect on accuracy improvement for feedback types.

2.2 Computer-Assisted Feedback

Li (2000) conducted a study on the use of task-based activities into a process-oriented writing class and found that students had benefitted in terms of more syntactically and lexically complex essays. Feedback given via e-mail attracted their attention and provided more fun learning compared to the conventional pen and paper corrective feedback where students struggle to decipher their instructors' handwriting. Razagifard and Razzaghifard (2011) examined corrective feedback in a computer-mediated communicative context and found that students who received computer-mediated corrective feedback outperformed those who did not receive any feedback. Ali (2011) however, argued that motivational levels of learning are the same whether using computers or not. He believes that either way, it is still a form of correction which students fear most.

2.3 Opposing Views of Corrective Feedback

Although there have been some researchers who have found the use of online feedback fruitful, there are others who beg to differ. Truscott (2007) opposed the idea of the value of correction in writing classrooms, arguing that it is ineffective and in fact produces negative results. Students feel pressured when they are notified of the errors and this, in some way hinders them from writing or finding writing an interesting learning activity. Rami (2012) supported this view stating that Saudi students do not think highly of feedback and that the feedback they desire is significantly different from what they received. This is linked with cultural factors and perceptions towards corrective feedback.

2.4 Students' and Teachers' Perceptions about Corrective Feedback

Although there are many views about corrective feedback, there is a need to investigate the perceptions of students and teachers regarding this matter. L2 learners who learn a foreign language look forward to different types of feedback. Most of these students prefer to focus on accurate forms and thus, expect their grammar to be corrected at sentence level. Students' preference is also related to motivation, initiative and whether they consider the type of error correction as a chance to improve. Lee (2005) conducted a study in Hong Kong and found that secondary school students wished their teachers would correct their errors directly because these students believe that their teachers were more competent in the language.

Hence, they were not in favour of indirect feedback. According to Liang (2008), students preferred the use of underlining and description of errors (coded feedback) because they wanted to know what kind of errors they had made. In this way, they could reduce their errors in future.

Teachers have their preferences too. Some teachers prefer to be heavy correctors, correcting each and every error which they can identify. This is referred to unfocused feedback where “a teacher corrects all (at least a range of the errors in learners’ written work” (Ellis et al., 2008, p.356). ESL instructors may feel contented that they have thoroughly marked their students essays but the question here is whether being overly corrective is effective in enhancing students’ written performance towards accuracy. Focused corrective feedback, on the other hand, which targets one linguistic feature at a time is favoured by some ESL instructors who believe in the cognitive theories of L2 acquisition which explain that, when students are able to pay attention to single or limited number of errors, they understand better and therefore, are more likely to reduce making the same errors in future. However, it is important for ESL instructors to find out students’ preferences as well before conducting writing lessons so that their students write effectively.

The reviews thus indicate that while there are controversial views on the effectiveness of corrective feedback, online corrective feedback seem to have positive impact. Thus, it would be interesting to see if tertiary ESL learners are able to improve their writing skills through online corrective feedback.

3.0 Research Methodology

Writing Term Paper

This study uses the experimental approach. There are two groups, an experimental group and a control group. Each group consists of 24 participants who work in pairs as suggested in the course (BEL 311 – English for Academic Purposes) specification. Each pair is required to select a topic, research on it, prepare an outline and write a term paper using the process approach. The whole process took about seven weeks. When their first drafts are ready, they are submitted to their instructor. The participants from the Experimental group submit their

essays via e-mail while the participants from the Control group print and submit them directly to their instructor.

Corrective feedback is given to the participants of the Control group using the conventional approach, which is pen/pencil and paper. Feedback was conducted the conventional way of scribbling at the errors made before a grade is awarded. However, the participants from the Experimental group received their feedback via e-mail. Their errors were highlighted in yellow and symbols are used to indicate the type of error made. Both groups had their essays graded upon 10 as required in the course specification. Next, they attempted writing their second drafts by correcting errors and thus, improving their writing. Once again, their drafts were submitted via the conventional method and online respectively. This time their essays were graded upon 15 as required in the course specification. Both sets of grades were converted to 100 percent for the purpose of statistical analysis.

The figure below shows the research design and the flow of activities contained in the study.

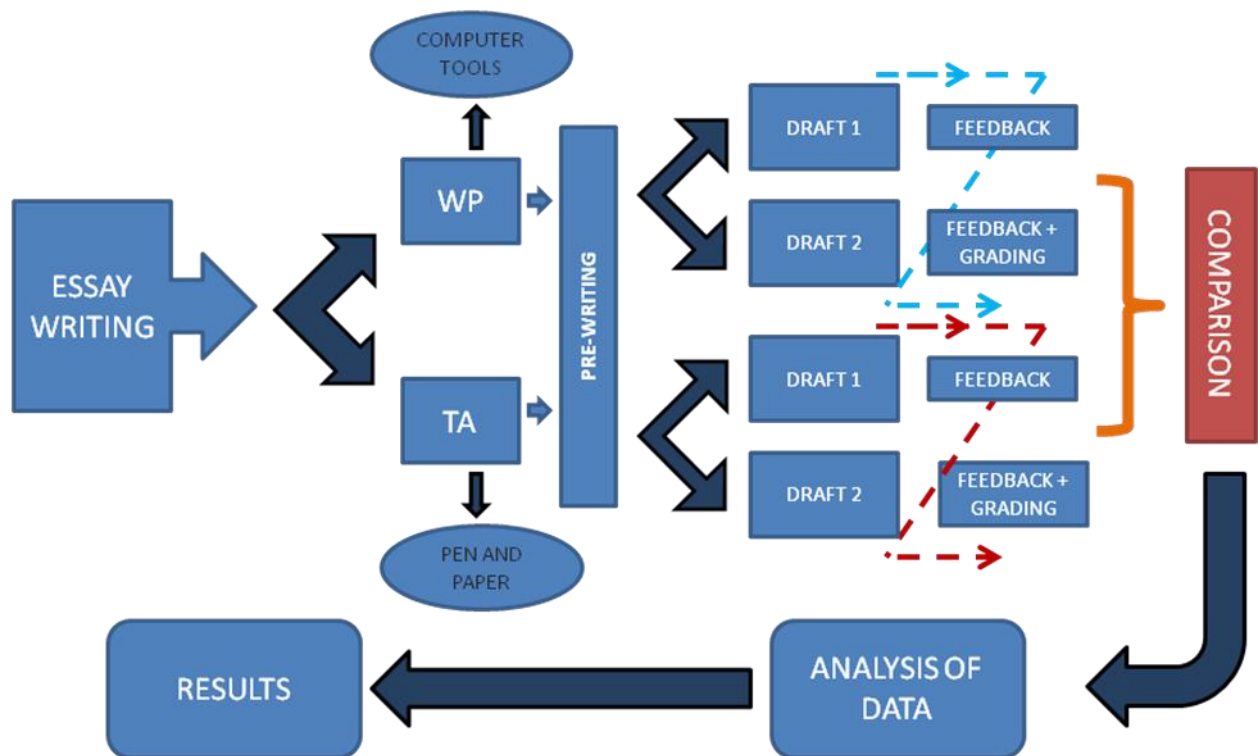


Figure 3.1 Research Design for both Control and Experimental groups

Informal Interview

An informal interview was conducted to enquire students' preferences on corrective feedback and their perceptions towards it. Notes were taken while discussion took place within the Experimental group.

Analytical Procedure

This study uses a descriptive approach in comparing the data from the control and experimental groups. The scores were tabulated in mean percentages and a T-test was run to investigate if there are significant differences in both the groups' scores. Notes from the informal interview were taken to find out the learners' preferences and perceptions in using the conventional writing approach as compared to the online approach.

4.0 Discussion of Findings

Effect of Corrective Feedback on Term Paper

A Paired Samples T-test usually compares the means of two variables with the assumption that both variables are normally distributed. The following results were obtained.

Table 4.1 Paired Samples Statistics

Pairs	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1 (1 st Draft)	.830
Pair 2 (2 nd Draft)	.000

The table above shows that for Pair 1 (1st Draft between the Control and Experimental groups) the p value is .830 ($p > .05$) which means that there is no significant difference in the performance. This also shows that both groups are of similar ability and show similar performance in the writing of their first drafts. However, Pair 2 (2nd Draft between the Control and Experimental groups) shows a significant value of .000 ($p < .05$) which means

that there is a significant difference in the performance. In other words, the Experimental group, whose essays were given corrective feedback online showed better performance compared to the Control group, whose essays were corrective using pencil/pen and paper.

Informal Interview

The informal interview conducted in the experimental group showed that students were more interested in being given corrective feedback via e-mail. They admitted that they looked forward to receiving replies as soon as they had sent their attachments. Using the same symbols that were used in the prescribed textbook for this code to highlight their errors, students were able to understand the type of error made and made corrections to them immediately. For those who did not understand clearly, they were allowed to write to the instructor for extra coaching and hence, found this method an opportunity to initiate a rapport with the instructor. They believe that receiving written comments on paper is frightening and also at times, when the markings are illegible, students face a hard time deciphering them. Traumatized by the scribbling written all over the essay, they are hesitant to ask for further assistance. Besides that, online corrective feedback is more convenient as students do not have to print their corrected essays and submit to their instructors. Most convenient of all, with the existence of high-tech gadgets like the mobile phone, students are able to read their essays and the feedback anywhere there is internet access, making it easy for them to work on improving their essays without much hassle. However, there were some complaints from students about the poor internet connection within the campus which makes it difficult for them to work efficiently enough.

5.0 Conclusion

This research has helped in determining whether the use of an online corrective feedback method is feasible for the teaching of writing skills. Due to the small sample size and short treatment time, only preliminary conclusions can be drawn from comparing the students' performance between the two groups. However, since the results are positive in this study, it is recommended for more extensive research in teaching academic writing in the ESL classroom.

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