

Original Paper

The Effects of Immediate Versus Delayed Teacher Feedback on L2 Writing

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Abstract

This study examined the differential effects of immediate versus delayed teacher feedback. It attempted to explore how best to give feedback on student writing. The focus was on the effects of feedback on the use of cohesive devices in L2 writing. Immediate feedback was provided during the writing process, while delayed feedback was operationalized after the completion of drafts. Six adult ESL learners were divided into two groups: an immediate feedback group and a delayed feedback group. The learners conducted two writing tasks and received feedback at different stages of the writing process. The results revealed that providing immediate oral feedback by asking questions during the writing process was a more effective way of responding to student writing and that it could benefit not only high proficiency students but also those who were at low proficiency level with no awareness of their writing problems.

Keywords

writing, process approach, cohesive devices, immediate feedback, delayed feedback.

1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, with the emergence of the process approach to writing, which refers to a multiple-draft process including prewriting, writing and rewriting, great importance has been attached to teacher feedback because it can provide useful information for student writers for revision. For example, Hyland (1990) claimed that teacher-response is an essential step in the writing process. Leki (1990, p.57) suggested that “how best to respond to student writing is part of the broader question of how to create a context in which people learn to write better or more easily”.

Many previous studies (see, for example, Lee, 2017; Banaruee et al., 2018) on L2 writing have already explored this issue and they may investigate the effects of different types of feedback, such as written corrective feedback versus oral feedback and recasts versus explicit feedback. The present study is also

an attempt to explore how best to give feedback on student writing. However, it mainly focuses on feedback timing by comparing the effects of feedback provided at two different moments of the writing process. Therefore, the research question is whether the immediate oral feedback to students' questions can benefit student writing more than delayed oral feedback. The research question was based on evidence that the immediate oral feedback usually had greater positive effects on L2 writing and the acquisition of linguistic structures, as reported by some previous studies (see, for example, Fu & Li, 2020; Yasaei, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Although Krashen (Krapels, 1990, p. 37) pointed out that "studies of second language writing are sadly lacking", it can be seen that many studies have investigated the effects of various forms of teacher feedback on students' writing and the best way of providing feedback in order to help students improve the quality of their writing.

Above all, previous studies have shown very little evidence of the positive effects of written feedback based on students' completed drafts. For example, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) stated that there existed discrepancies between teacher feedback on compositions and what students actually expected to get. In a study with 217 students from a variety of language classes and levels, Cohen (1987) also reported that teacher comments in the form of single words or short phrases could not be easily understood by students. In a study with 141 university students studying German as a foreign language, Semke (Cohen, 1987) found that although teachers spent hours marking and correcting students' writing, corrections did not make significant difference in students' writing skills. Moreover, Hillocks (Leki, 1990) noted that existing studies had usually found written feedback to be ineffective.

Moreover, recent studies have found possible reasons to illustrate why teacher feedback provided on written drafts cannot produce significant effects on student writing. For example, Charles (1990) stated that writer intentions probably could not be provided by the draft text adequately since in some cases student writers might not be able to express their meaning successfully, which was very likely to lead to unsatisfactory teacher feedback. Fankenberg-Garcia (1999, p. 101) claimed that "the first or final texts handed in to the teacher are not entirely representative of problems the writer had to face while writing". Moreover, he (1999) further reported that teacher feedback provided on written drafts was only based on the product of students' writing decision instead of the decisions themselves.

Therefore, it appears that there is a need to develop new ways of giving feedback which can provide the opportunities not only for students to reveal their problems in writing but also for teacher to help students deal with the problems in their writing process. It can be seen that recent studies (see, for example, Fu & Li, 2020; Yasaei, 2016) have tried to develop various forms of feedback to increase teacher-student interaction and some of them have been proven to be effective.

For example, Charles has developed a technique of "self-monitoring". He (1990) indicated that in doing so, students underlined those parts they were not sure in the drafts during or after their writing

and noted down what they wanted the teacher to know on their drafts, and then the teacher responded to students' comments in written form. It is true to say that compared to providing feedback on a written draft, this form of feedback seems more effective because teacher have an access to students' ideas when responding to their drafts. However, some problems still need to be considered seriously when using this technique because the effectiveness of this technique probably lies in students' proficiency level to a large extent. That is to say, higher proficiency level students, especially those who have awareness of evaluating their drafts, can benefit much more than lower level students.

Moreover, Frankenberg-Garcia (1999, p. 103) proposed "revision feedback" which refers to responding directly to what student writers themselves choose to revise by asking students to write in a way that the early versions of the emerging text can still be read. It seems that revision feedback can be used to overcome some of the limitations of feedback on a written draft, for the early versions of the emerging text reveal much information about writers' concerns about their own writing and may eliminate the discrepancies between teacher feedback and students' expectation. However, Frankenberg-Garcia (1999) pointed out that it only worked in a very small group because of students' requirement of receiving comments on revision feedback.

In addition, Hyland (1990) found that using limited number of symbols to indicate the general areas of students' errors, such as surface form, expression, and logical development and then reassessing their revised drafts was an effective way of stimulating students to act on teacher feedback. However, although revised drafts may reveal students' understanding of teacher's comments, it is still possible that some parts of the draft text that students are really concerned may not be revised because the indication of errors are made by teacher instead of students themselves. Therefore, it seems that this method still cannot provide adequate interaction between teacher and student writers.

It can be seen that although the above-mentioned teacher response is still based on student written drafts, these forms of feedback on student writing seems to be more satisfactory for using these techniques can stimulate students to present more adequate information about their ideas during the whole process of writing their drafts. In fact, another better choice for teacher to gain access to students' ideas during the writing process is to respond to students' questions. It is true to say that Frankenberg-Garcia has already observed the advantages of directly responding to students' questions by promoting writing workshops, in which teacher feedback is given during the writing process. However, according to Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990), no agreement has been made concerning when feedback should be provided, although Freeman (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990) pointed out that teachers preferred to give feedback during the writing process.

Therefore, based on the previous studies conducted by Frankenberg-Garcia (1999), the present study attempts to explore what the best time for providing feedback to student writing is by promoting a similar writing workshop, in which the teacher responds to students' questions with oral feedback during and after the process of writing. The research question of the present study is whether immediate oral feedback to students' questions can benefit students writing more than delayed oral feedback.

Immediate feedback refers to the feedback during the writing process while delayed feedback refers to the feedback after the completion of drafts. Based on the previous findings, this study hypothesizes that immediate oral feedback is more effective than delayed oral feedback.

3. Methodology

3.1 A comparison of Three Experimental Designs

In order to address the research question, the following three-way design was explored.

The first way seems to be the easiest to manipulate. In this situation, all students in the writing class are classified into two groups: one group is encouraged to ask questions when problems arise during their writing process while the other group can only ask for help after finishing their writing, and the teacher behaves as a facilitator and responds to the questions raised by both groups at different moments. However, the risks seem to be that students are very likely to ask few questions or even request no assistance because the teacher has not enough time to train participants to get used to the way to ask questions in a writing class and to report the problems they face in their writing process.

Considering the problem with the first possibility, the advantages of the second option seem to be very obvious because students only need to underline three points they are not sure about during or after their writing instead of asking questions and then the teacher responds to what students underlined. This method probably can be accepted by students more easily and needs no much time to train them in the use of the skill of underlining. However, the drawback of designing the study in this way is that some information about the problems they experienced during the writing process may be lost because students are very likely to make decisions like avoiding using the words and structures that they are not very familiar with in their writing, which usually cannot be revealed by the underlined parts of their drafts.

Therefore, it seemed that a better choice should be to motivate students to ask questions. The third option is such an attempt. In this case, every participant have three coins and each coin should be spent to ask the teacher one question. In doing so, students are forced to ask for help, however the possibility that few students spend their coins may still exist.

With consideration of these three ways of design, the third option was finally selected for the present study because its advantages seemed to outweigh its disadvantages. In this study, student drafts in a writing class were collected as the main data, and some useful information came from interviewing one of the participants as well.

3.2 Participants

Six College students studying in the UK participated in the present study. Four of them were from the lower-intermediate class. Their main purpose of joining this class was to achieve IELTS 4.5. One of the other two participants was an intermediate level student from foundation class and had already obtained IELTS 5.0. When the study was carried out, he was in the fifth week of his study in the UK and prepared himself for his postgraduate study. The other student was an advanced English learner from

MA class. Their participation in the study was voluntary for every participant had signed the consent form for the present study. Moreover, the participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 and they were of mixed nationalities: four from China, one from Korean, one from Thailand. The participants consisted of five male students and one female student. They had been staying in the UK for no more than seven months.

3.3 Measurement of Writing Development

Development in writing can be seen from many different aspects, such as the use of new vocabularies and structures, cohesive devices and good paragraph formation. However, for the purpose of better measuring the immediate effects of teacher feedback on student writing in a short time, this study mainly focuses on the use of cohesive devices, because student writers are very likely to meet similar problems of using cohesive devices even though they are asked to write about different topics. Therefore, in this study both teacher feedback and students' questions are restricted to the use of cohesive devices. Moreover, the total number and range of cohesive devices were chosen as the measurement of development.

3.4 Group Assignment and Procedures

The six students were divided into two groups: group A and group B (see Table 1) Group A was a mixed proficiency group including one lower-intermediate student, one intermediate level student and one advanced level student, while Group B included three lower-intermediate students. Each group was given two slightly different tasks and each task lasted roughly 15 minutes. In the first writing, students in group A were allowed to spend their three coins whenever they had questions about using cohesive devices in their writing process while students in group B could only spend their three coins after finishing their drafts. In doing so, the teacher could immediately respond to group A with oral feedback during the process of their first writing while providing delayed oral feedback to group B after the completion of their first writing. Then students in both group A and group B had another 15 minutes to write about a slightly different topic.

Table 1. Group Assignment

Group	Treatment	Group size
A	Immediate oral feedback	3
B	Delayed oral feedback	3

Group A and group B were of different English proficiency levels, which was actually not corresponding with my original ideas that participants should be at the same English proficiency level and might impact the comparison of these two groups. In spite of the weakness of involving different proficiency level students, these two groups were still used in the present study only because no other students available at the time of collecting data.

3.5 The Real Situation

The writing workshop promoted in this study did not work well because none of the students took initiative to ask the teacher questions about using cohesive devices although all of the students were encouraged to spend their three coins during or after their writing process. Therefore, in the case of having nobody ask questions, teacher had no choice but to go around and check what they had written down. Then she provided oral feedback for group A during the writing process and responded to group B with oral feedback after the writing process by the same way of asking questions such as “Do you mean ...?” or giving some suggestions like “It would be probably better if you can add a cohesive device like...” In this situation, it seems that the data collection could not examine the original hypothesis because the teacher provided both groups with feedback on what they have written down.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 2. The Use of Cohesive Devices in the First Writing Task (Group A)

Student	Total Number	Range
a	4	2
b	13	4
c	4	2
Mean	7	2.67

Table 3. The Use of Cohesive Devices in the Second Writing Task (Group A)

Student	Total Number	Range
a	6	6
b	15	8
c	3	3
Mean	8	5.67

Table 4. The Use of Cohesive Devices in the First Writing Task (Group B)

Student	Total Number	Range
d	5	5
e	3	2
f	6	6
Mean	4.67	4.33

Table 5. The Use of Cohesive Devices in the Second Writing Task (Group B)

Student	Total Number	Range
d	3	3
e	5	2
f	3	3
Mean	3.67	2.67

4.1 Total Number of Cohesive Devices

With regard to group A, we can see from Table 2 that the mean total number of cohesive devices used in the first writing task is 7, while Table 3 shows that the mean total number in the second writing task is 8. Therefore, it is clear that the average improvement is 1.

Moreover, in terms of group B, Table 4 shows that the mean total number of cohesive devices used in the first writing task is 4.67 while from Table 5 we can see that the mean total number used in the second writing task is 3.67. The average improvement is minus 1.

Table 6. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Total Number of Cohesive Devices Used by Group A and Group B in the Second Writing Task

	Group A	Group B
Mean	8	3.67
Standard deviation	5.1	0.94
Student number	3	3

In addition, according to the statistics shown in Table 3 and Table 5, we could calculate the mean total number and standard deviation of the total number used by group A and group B in the second writing task respectively (see Table 6).

Therefore, in order to compare the performances of group A and group B in the second writing task, a t-test was conducted. Based on Table 6, we got a t value for comparing the total number of cohesive devices, which indicated an insignificant statistical result, although it seemed that group A achieved a comparatively higher mean. The results can be summarized as: $t=1.444$, $df=4$, $p>0.10$.

4.2 Range of Cohesive Devices

Concerning the range of cohesive devices used by group A, Table 2 shows that the mean range of cohesive devices used in the first writing task is 2.67 while from Table 3 we can see that the mean range used in the second writing task is 5.67. Based on these statistics, it seems that a marked improvement has been achieved by group A after the treatment because the average improvement is 3.

Moreover, with regard to group B, Table 4 shows that the mean range of cohesive devices used in the first writing task is 4.33 while Table 5 shows that the mean range used in the second writing is 2.67. It can be seen that the average improvement is minus 1.66.

Table 7. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Range of Cohesive Devices Used by Group A and Group B in the Second Writing

	Group A	Group B
Mean	5.67	2.67
Standard deviation	2.05	0.47
Student number	3	3

Additionally, in order to make a comparison between the range of cohesive devices used in the second writing by group A and group B, the statistics in Table 7 can be obtained according to Table 3 and Table 5. What's more, Table 7 seems to reveal that a comparatively marked increase in the mean range of cohesive devices was achieved by group A in the second writing considering the lower mean range it used in the first writing task. On the basis of these findings, the null hypothesis of no significance between the feedback given at two different moments can be rejected. The t value for the comparison of the range of cohesive devices was used with significance set at 0.10 level. Group A had a greater increase in the use of the range of cohesive devices than Group B and the t-test indicated a significant statistical result, which could be shown as: $t=2.466$, $df=4$, $p<0.10$.

In conclusion, the data analysis showed that the group receiving immediate feedback had a greater increase in the use of the range of cohesive devices.

5. Discussion

Although in this study both the immediate and delayed oral feedback were mainly based on the students' written drafts rather than the questions they raised, the significant result showed that the group who received the treatment of immediate oral feedback had a greater development in writing than the other group who received delayed oral feedback. There are several possible reasons for this significant result.

Primarily, it is possible that students may benefit more from the immediate teacher oral feedback provided on intermediate drafts than the delayed oral feedback provided on final drafts, which may be sufficiently illustrated by Knoblauch and Brannon's (Leki, 1990, p. 63) suggestion that "we need to look not at the responses written on final drafts but rather at responses written on intermediate drafts". Moreover, compared with delayed feedback, immediate oral feedback during the process of writing probably can motivate students to consider the comments more carefully, and quickly integrate the feedback into the next decision of their writing because planning, writing and revising usually seem to happen simultaneously (Smith, 1982).

In addition, it is possible that by asking questions immediately the teacher gained access to much more information about students' ideas than asking questions afterwards, because after finishing writing students usually could not remember all of their intentions and the problems they faced during the writing process. It would be true to say that students may have a better understanding of teacher feedback provided immediately at the moment of trying to put down their ideas on the paper.

Therefore, the significant result seemed to indicate that providing feedback by asking questions was no different from stimulating students to ask questions and that asking questions during the writing process could benefit students more than asking questions after the writing process. The findings of this study seemed to be significant for it revealed that providing feedback by asking questions during the process probably was a more practical and easier way to provide satisfactory feedback in ESL writing class, especially when teaching those low proficiency students with no awareness of the problems in

their writing. In fact, with regard to why the participants did not ask questions in this study, one of them, a lower-intermediate student, claimed that he did not have any problems with how to use cohesive devices. Therefore, it would be true to say that it usually takes a long time to make students aware of their own problems in writing and get used to the way of asking questions initiatively.

However, although providing feedback by asking questions during the writing process seemed to be effective, it still has drawbacks. For example, it probably can only be used in a small group because the teacher has to go around and check what students have written down immediately. Moreover, the teacher has to spend much more time in checking and guessing students' ideas and the teacher-student interaction may take much time in a writing class.

Although the above two reasons have been given to illustrate why there were differences between the performances of these two groups, it would be true to say that the significant result may also partly because the two groups were at different proficiency levels.

In addition, although it can be seen that the means obtained by group B in the second writing task are slightly lower than the means it obtained in the first writing task, a slight decrease did not suggest that delayed feedback provided by teacher had no positive effects on student writing, because in the second writing task they were given a different topic to write instead of just rewriting. This might just reflect their actual ability of using cohesive devices after receiving teacher feedback.

6. Conclusion and Further Research

This results seemed significant in terms of the practical issues regarding how best to respond to students in ESL writing classrooms although the data collection seemed not to be quite successful at the very beginning and the original hypothesis was abandoned in the case of having no students asking questions. The study suggested that providing immediate oral feedback by asking questions during the writing process was a more practical and effective way of responding to student writing in ESL writing class, and it probably could benefit not only high proficiency students but also those who were at low proficiency level with no awareness of their writing problems. Moreover, it would be true to say that these findings need to be exposed to further discussions. The original research question that could not be examined in the present study may still be an issue worth further exploration, requiring both larger number of participants and a longer time for student training.

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