

Form and Content Feedbacks in Foreign Language Writing: The Case of Omani Learners of English

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Abstract

Feedback is helpful in improving second language learners' writing skills. Consequently, giving either form or content feedback to students' writing has become a common practice in English composition writing classes for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This paper examines the use of form and content feedbacks in composition writing of Omani students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). More specifically, it examines how Omani EFL students respond to the form or content feedbacks given by lecturers. There were 17 EFL students from the Salalah College of Technology who took part in the study. Students were asked to write an argumentative essay and underwent three revisions (D1, D2, and D3). Each revision was done after giving the form and content feedbacks to find out how students responded to the feedbacks given. The revisions were analyzed and compared whether students rely on form feedback or content feedback in the first, second, and third drafts. The findings reveal that students rely heavily on the form feedback than that of the content feedback. Such findings may serve as a basis to improve the teaching of writing and develop the writing skills of EFL learners in Oman.

Keywords: form feedback, content feedback, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Omani English learners

1. Introduction

Feedback is an essential element of process approach to writing as perceived by teachers and students (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 2002). The feedback can either be form or content feedback, which guide the students and help them produce better written output. Bruton (2009) explains that correction helps students to reduce their errors in writing after they receive feedback from their teachers. Despite Truscott's (1996, 1997, 2007) and Truscott and Hsu's

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(2008) arguments that corrections do not contribute to the development of accuracy in writing and in fact can be considered harmful in the learning process, a number of L2 writing teachers still provide such feedback. Other studies however show that corrective feedback in L2 composition writing can be effective in improving the learners' composition writing (Ferris, 1999, 2003, 2004; Bitchener, 2008). In fact, feedback, such as praise, motivates the learner to develop positive attitudes when writing. It can be a form of reward, which consists of information used by a learner to change a particular performance (Kulhavy & Wager, 1993).

To make feedback in writing effective, there is a need to distinguish clearly between learning and performance. Learning refers to the knowledge gained through the transfer of tasks. This means that learning how to write can be acquired through writing new assignments. On the other hand, performance refers to the knowledge gained on repeated tasks. This can be achieved by writing multiple drafts.

It is also evident that learning and performance can be affected differently by feedback. According to Chi, Bassok, Lewis, Reimann, & Glaser (1989), feedback without explanation can improve performance but not learning. However, Gick & Holyoak, (1980; 1983) argued that the use of examples can influence both learning and performance.

Based on the positive results of giving feedback or teacher-response in writing, it has become essential in the writing process. It helps students to discover the errors they make in writing. Diligent marking may provide students with an idea of the criteria by which their works are judged and might offer useful information to avoid similar errors in the future (Hyland, 1990). Therefore, teachers should be clear in giving feedback on their students' writing where they can focus either the form or content to guide them to achieve better writing output. Teachers should make the effort to spend time reading their students' writing and provide insightful feedback to help their students learn from the feedback and improve their revised drafts. Richard Leahly (2000) argued that revision is the most important stage in the whole writing process where raw materials are turned into coherent and readable communication that has focus and shape.

To facilitate revision, it is essential that teachers' feedback should encourage and motivate students to revise their writing. The success in achieving coherent and readable writings

is dependent on the nature of the teacher's feedback. There are writing teachers who believe that form feedback is effective in improving accuracy in writing. Ferris (2006) found that teachers' feedback has shown that they focus more on local issues such as grammar and mechanics. In another study conducted, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) believed that the underlining errors appear to have more positive effect on long-term students' improvement in accuracy and editing skills and such type of feedback is known as the form feedback. Similarly, Chandler (2003) believed that any feedback which focuses on form improves students' ability to recognize and fix the errors they committed. In another study conducted on form and content feedback, Ashwell (2000) found that changes of revision on students' writing are focused more on form feedback than that of the content feedback which reveals that form feedback helps students to improve their writing. Form feedback is highly preferred by teachers and students because it affords opportunities for guided-learning and problem solving (Lalande, 1982). However, others believed that it is better to focus at multiple-sentence level issues such as cohesion, organization, paragraphing, and relevance rather than focusing on grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors.

Studies have proven the effectiveness of teachers' feedback on students' writing. Hyland (1990) argued that feedback encourages students to revisit and re-asses their work particularly if the feedback provides suggestions, evaluates positively and adds information. Such feedback will be perceived positively as they engender trust and build relationships between teachers and students (Todd et al., 1990). Todd is of the view that content feedback helps to establish trust and build good relationship between teachers and students in achieving better writing output. There are claims that content feedback is effective in improving and correcting students' writing. Ferris (1993) for instance highlighted that content feedback helps to improve students' cohesion in paragraph writing. In fact, students who are writing for the real world purposes and whose aim in writing is to communicate certain content, helps them improve their writing development as compared to the artificial writing tasks which focuses only grammatical accuracy.

However, studies show that focusing on form and content could be more effective than an exclusive focus on form or content (Biber, Nekrasova and Horn, 2011). Feedback which focuses on a combination of form and content may result to a much greater improvement of grammatical accuracy than feedback that focuses exclusively on form.

The issues on whether form feedback or content feedback or a combination of both could

be more effective in developing students' writing are somehow divided into two opposing views. Although, both form and content feedbacks can be useful in developing students' writing, the challenge is on how the students respond to the feedbacks given to them by their English language writing teachers. It is therefore the focus of this study to examine how the students respond to both form and content feedbacks and further investigate which of the two types of feedbacks is highly and least preferred by learners of English as a foreign language. This study will specifically examine the Omani English students who were currently taking the English courses during the data gathering. As learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it is interesting to examine how the selected EFL Omani learners respond to the form and content feedbacks given by the teachers from draft 1 (D1) to draft 2 (D2) and draft 3 (D3).

This study analyzed how the form feedback and content feedback in EFL writing facilitate revision and improve the students' writing. This study limits its scope on the average number of errors and the difference in the percentage error reduction of students' writing starting from the first draft (D1) up to the third draft (D3). The findings of the study could perhaps provide new insights to English teachers in Oman on how they should give feedback to their Omani learners of English in order to facilitate learning.

1.1 English as a Foreign Language in Oman

English continues to be the most widely used language in many parts of the world. With the emergence of globalization, the demand of English continues to rise. Consequently, the speakers and the varieties of English continue to increase.

In Oman, the importance of English is gaining more popularity. As a result, it is introduced as a subject in schools, colleges and universities. According to Al-Busaidi, (1995) as cited in Khalid Salim Saif Al-Jardani (2012), the use of English in Oman has become an "institutionalized domain" which is used in business, media and education. Furthermore, English is also used as the medium of instruction in private and public higher education throughout the country (Al-Isaa, 2005).

Despite the development of English in Oman, English is considered as a foreign language since English is still used in limited domains of communication. According to Kachru (1991) in his three circled model of Englishes that speakers of English are categorized into three groups

such as the inner circle which includes the native speakers such as people from the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand while the outer circle includes a number of second language speakers of English such as those in India, Singapore, Philippines and other countries where English is used as a second language. The expanding circle includes speakers for whom English is a foreign language such as those in Japan, China, Korea, Oman and other countries where English is a foreign language. In countries where English is widely spoken, speakers tend to use the nativized variety of English for intra-communication which is seen to be more advantageous because speakers share similar linguistic and pragmatic knowledge about variety of English used.

English as a foreign language in Oman has played an important role in developing the learning of English among Omani learners. However, the use of English is somehow limited due to limited opportunities where English is spoken. Such limitation eventually influences the students' development in English language learning because the language is not enhanced outside the classroom. Consequently, such limitation might have an effect either the spoken and written language proficiency of Omani learners of English. It is therefore the focus of this paper to examine the written English of selected Omani learners. More emphasis is given on how students respond to the feedbacks given and how such feedbacks enhance the student's writing.

2. Methodology

There were 25 EFL students from the Salalah College of Technology who took part in the study. However only 17 students were finally considered since 8 of them did not complete either the second or third revision stage of writing. This means only 17 students completed the 3 revision stages. The participants were chosen based on their English language proficiency level in English. Consequently, only the first year Diploma students from three different departments and had just completed their Foundation Program. This is to ascertain that all participants have almost similar level of English language proficiency. All participants during the data collection were currently taking the English Foundation courses.

To carry out the study, a written consent was given to the university and the students. After the permission was granted, the data collection started by asking the participants to write an argumentative essay on "the importance of learning English and other languages." All students who participated the study underwent three revisions such as first draft (D1), second

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draft (D2), and third draft (D3). Each revision was done after giving the form and content feedbacks to find out how students responded to the feedbacks given. The revisions were analyzed and compared whether students rely on form feedback or content feedback in the first, second, and third drafts.

The study was conducted in three sessions for the whole month of April 2014. The first session was writing the first draft (D1). Students' essays were checked using the form and content feedback then the number of errors was counted and the average number of errors was calculated. Similar procedures were used in the second draft (D2) and third draft (D3). In every draft, the number of errors was counted and the average number of errors and the percentage error reduction were calculated to determine if there were changes in the revised compositions.

To maintain the validity of the feedbacks given there were three inter-raters who checked the corrected essays in each stage. The inter-raters were lecturers in English from the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

After the writing tasks, 10 selected students were interviewed about their experience in revising the paper from D1 to D3. The interviews were used to support the findings in the written tasks of students.

3. Findings

The findings of the study show that students respond more to the form feedback than that of the content feedback in their essays. It is evident that in the first draft (D1), second draft (D2) and third draft (D3), the participants reveal a trend where they responded highly to the form feedback during the three revision stages. The responses of the participants in both form and content feedbacks and the percentage of error reduction are presented in Tables.

3.1 Form Feedback in D1, D2 and D3

Table 1 shows the number of errors made by the participants who received the form feedback starting from the first draft (D1) up to the third draft (D3). Seventeen (17) participants obtain 35.41 as the mean of errors in the first draft (D1), a mean of 20 in the second draft (D2) and a mean of 10 in the third draft (D3). The results show the changes in the number of errors

made by the participants from D1 to D3. Such changes would tell that the students responded to the feedbacks made by the lecturers on their writings.

The findings further reveal that the number of errors decreased from D1 with a mean of 35.41 to D3 with a mean of 10. The trend in which the number of errors has decreased from D1 to D3 reveals that there is an improvement after providing form feedback on students' writings.

Table 1 shows the tabulated results on the number of errors in the three drafts where the form feedback was given by the teacher.

Participants	Number of errors in D1	Number of errors in D2	Number of errors in D3
1	46	15	10
2	21	18	13
3	23	14	10
4	51	28	13
5	37	23	12
6	52	24	16
7	33	23	15
8	38	26	6
9	28	19	16
10	33	29	12
11	25	10	6
12	47	31	3
13	39	25	6
14	57	21	8
15	8	5	4
16	18	15	12
17	46	14	6
N=17	M=35.41	M=20	M=10

Table 1: Number of errors in D1, D2, and D3 in the form feedback

Despite the high response of students in the form feedback, the output of their revised writing from D1 to D3 did not make their writings more informative, logical, or elaborated. It is only the grammatical structure and the correction of the misspelled word which makes the essay more readable and easier to understand. In some ways, form feedback helps but it does not necessarily help them to come up with a good and better essays. The following examples show the students' drafts from D1-D2.

D1

“Study English is very important today. in fact There are many people tod Spicin many langages but English today is very good. Of cors English today only own. There are many things is very good in every uses English. I see, learning English is more important than learning other foreig langueges.”

D2

“Studying English is very important tody. In fact; There are many people today speaking many languges, but English today is very important. There are many things to learn English. Learning English is more important than learning other foreign languges.”

The examples show that from D1 to D2 there are changes in the student’s writing most particularly on its form rather than the content.

3.2 Content Feedback

Table 2 shows the total number of errors made by the participants in the content feedback during the first draft (D1) until the third draft (D3). In the first draft (D1), a mean of 5.88 is obtained, 3.88 in D2 and 2.41 in D3. The results show a significant change in the number of errors committed by the participants starting from the first draft up to the third draft.

Participants	Number of errors in D1	Number of errors in D2	Number of errors in D3
1	5	3	2
2	5	3	2
3	5	1	1
4	7	6	4
5	7	4	2
6	5	4	2
7	5	4	3
8	8	5	3
9	8	6	3
10	5	3	2
11	7	5	3
12	4	2	1
13	8	4	3
14	7	5	3
15	4	2	1
16	4	3	2
17	6	6	4
N=17	M=5.88	M=3.88	M= 2.41

Table 2: Number of errors in D1, D2 and D3 in Content Feedback

The findings reveal that students responded to the content feedback given to them by the teachers and it shows that improvement in the writing is evident. Although, the response from the students was not really as high as the form feedback, there is improvement in D3. An example is provided below.

D1

“The last important in learning English is study. They are all the people study language English in the school and the college. The concentration of Arabic language was English the it. Become English and Arabic very important in the school, college and job.”

D2

“The last reason why it is important to learn English is to learn to speak the language. English language is important to learn the language. some people to English in you life like friend deosen’t speak Arabic, job, go to they country and so on. So if you want learn language you must study it very hard.”

D3

“The third reason in learning English is to study. Learning English is very important, for that in our school so we study it. After school, English became more popular because in higher education level in the world use the common language, that is English. So it helps people to understand each other through lecture.”

3.3 Error Reduction in D1, D2, and D3

Table 3 presents the average number of errors and the percentage error reduction in the form and content feedbacks. The first draft (D1) and the second draft (D2) in the form feedback show a percentage error reduction of 40, D2-D3 show a percentage error reduction of 44 and D1-D3 show a percentage error reduction of 65. The revisions in the form feedback show a slight difference in revising students’ composition from D1-D3.

On the other hand, the average number of errors and percentage of error reduction in the content feedback reveals a significant change in the students’ revision from D1-D3. The table shows the percentage error reduction of 59.41 from D1-D2, 34.88 from D2-D3 and 59.41 from D1-D3.

Drafts	Average number of errors in the content feedback	Percentage error reduction in the content feedback	Average number of errors in the form feedback	Percentage error reduction in the form feedback
D1	5.88	34.88 (D1-D2)	35.41	40 (D1-D2)
D2	3.88	36.35 (D2-D3)	20	44 (D2-D3)
D3	2.41	59.41 (D1-D3)	10	65(D1-D3)

Table 3: Average number of errors and percentage error reduction in the Content Feedback and Form feedback from D1 to D3

The findings show a significant difference on students' response in the form feedback as compared with the content feedback. Students respond heavily in the form feedback than that of the content feedback (see Table 3). Significant difference is seen between the form feedback and content feedback from D1 to D2, D2 to D3 and from D1 to D3. Participants who were given the form feedback obtain a percentage error reduction of 65 from D1 to D3, whereas in the content feedback, the participants obtain only 59.31 as the percentage error reduction from D1 to D3.

The findings show that the participants rely heavily on the form feedback which correlates with the findings of Ashwell (2000 where he found that the respondents rely heavily in the form feedback rather than the content feedback.

The study reveals that students respond to the two feedbacks differently. The difference is noticed after the participants revised the first draft, second draft and the third draft.

3.4 Students' Perspectives on Teachers' Feedbacks

Based on the interviews conducted, the students' perspectives on feedback are closely associated to grammar error correction. This means that students have the perception that the feedbacks may concentrate more into the grammatical forms or structures rather than the organization, content and other aspects of good writing. In the interviews conducted some participants said.

"I am not good in grammar. You can teach me grammar."

"I rewrote, I check if after writing, I check if there are any mistakes in the grammar. So I find no problem in this."

The students' perception in English writing is closely associated to grammar. This means that a good writing must be free from any grammatical errors. This is evident when one student said during the interview, *"I am not good in grammar. You can teach me grammar."* With this view, it is expected that when they write, the emphasis of their writings may not be on the content rather there is a tendency to focus on form.

Even during the revision stage, the emphasis on the grammatical structure in writing is higher than that of the content. This is evident when the participant said, *"I rewrote, I check if after writing, I check if there are any mistakes in the grammar. So I find no problem in this."* The students' perception of revision could be associated to grammar correction. Therefore, it is expected that when Omani EFL students rewrite their written tasks, there is a tendency for them to focus on form rather than the content.

4. Pedagogical Implications

The study provides new information to the English writing teachers that the use of feedbacks specifically the form and content feedbacks which facilitate better revision on students' composition, thus making their writings more presentable and reliable. The findings of the study show that the simultaneous feedbacks, form and content help in improving the students' writing in D3. This means, it would be helpful to do similar feedbacks to Omani students' writing to improve their written tasks.

In addition, English teachers should be clear and careful in giving their feedbacks to the students' writing, for the students might misinterpret their comments. In other words, they should give proper and accurate content and form feedbacks to remind the students of their mistakes. As a result, it will help them avoid the same mistakes in the future.

5. Conclusion

The differences between the form and content feedbacks can be a basis to conclude that the participants rely heavily in the form feedbacks during the revision stage starting from D1 to D3. Although it is evident that both feedbacks facilitate good revision, this means that form feedbacks may help to facilitate better revision in composition writing as compared with the content feedbacks.

Language teachers should be encouraged to provide both form and content feedback as such feedback facilitates revision of students' composition and helps student from making similar mistakes in the future. However, teachers should be clear when providing feedback as some feedback might be misinterpreted.

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