

THE CONTRASTIVE STUDY BETWEEN WRITTEN FEEDBACK GIVEN BY LANGUAGE AND NON-LANGUAGE TEACHERS ON ESSAY OF STUDENTS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

One cannot overemphasize the importance of providing corrective feedback on essays of students in order to effect improvement on their writing skills. This paper presents the difference in the nature of feedback given by Language and non-Language teachers (N=11) of San Beda College Alabang on essays of their students. The result of the survey and actual corrections given on student' essays reveal a contrast between Language and Non-Language teachers. While Language teachers focus more on local issues when giving corrective feedback, non-Language teachers do not make clear feedback, if at all, any correction was provided. Non-Language teachers may find it time-consuming to discuss these matters, as they are more concerned with the subject matter at hand, leaving the task of correcting the writing skills of their students to Language teachers.

Introduction

There have been several research studies that examined the importance of providing corrective feedback in writing classes, and whether these corrections have indeed improved the writing skills of L2 students. The nagging question remains, "*Should teachers correct their students' essays and if so, should form precede content in the hierarchy of importance?*" As an attempt to answer these questions, the following research studies from the Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW) have been reviewed to give light to the plight of writing teachers on the effectiveness of providing feedback. In the four articles reviewed, not one has proposed the "no correction" as it was clearly revealed in their experiments that correction has positive effects on L2 writing classes except for one, John Truscott.

Truscott (2007) examined the findings of Chandler (2004), Ferris (2004), Lalande et.al. (1982), to find the best estimate of the overall effect of correction on accuracy and to determine an upper limit on how helpful correction might be through a meta-analysis, relying on the measure most

widely used, *Cohen's d* . The conclusion gleaned from his investigation revealed that the best estimate is that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately and that he can be 95% confident that if it actually has any benefits, they are very small.

The study of Truscott (2007) emphasized the effect of correction on accuracy without regard to whether any type of feedback is the more effective method. The study of Ashwell examined the best method of feedback: Content feedback on early drafts followed by Form feedback on later drafts, the reverse pattern, mixed pattern or no feedback. Advocates of a process writing approach to second language writing pedagogy suggest that teachers should focus on content on early drafts before focusing on form on later drafts. Ashwell experimented on four mentioned patterns of teacher feedback and found that the recommended pattern of content feedback followed by form feedback is not superior to the reverse pattern or to a pattern of mixed form and content feedback.

The above research studies dwelt mostly on feedback in the perspective of the writer and the feedback provided by the teacher. Not too many examined the self-assessment of the teacher of the type and amount of feedback that they provide to students. All these three aspects were investigated by Montgomery and Baker (2004), when they investigated the compositions of ninety-eight students at Brigham University ELC. The study revealed that teachers were not completely aware of the amount of local and global issues throughout the writing process although students perceived receiving more feedback than teachers perceived giving.

However, despite all research studies' contrasting views about the effectiveness of feedback on students' writing skills, Guenette (2007), after reviewing numerous experiments, argues that a generalized conclusion may not be arrived at as yet, because these studies seem to have not considered other variables that may have contributed to the conflicting results gleaned from these investigations. These variables include research design and methodology. From this standpoint, Guenette(2007) suggests creating an ideal experiment scenario where students, belonging to almost the same proficiency level in terms of speaking and writing in the second language, are given ample time to learn from the corrections given by their teachers. Other variables that stand to confound the result of this experiment may be the type of feedback given, whether content-focused or form-focused, and the classroom context. Lastly, Guenette(2007) emphasized the importance of motivation of the students in wanting to improve their writing skills.

All these mentioned, teachers should keep on providing corrections on the essays of their students as part of teaching pedagogy to improve the

writing skills of their students in the second language no matter how complex and demanding the task of providing feedback is to the teachers. As to the question of the focus of feedback, most researchers have found that L2 writers still needed to have more of local corrections in the first drafts before they could develop a sensible essay but teachers are encouraged to provide feedback on form even on early drafts. These discussions seem to be a call of challenge to writing teachers but only those dedicated and committed teachers will heed with an uncomplaining obedience. Sad but true.

The study was conducted in the second semester of school year 2009-2010 at San Beda College Alabang, a leading learning institution in higher education in the south of Metro Manila. Presently, the school has a total of 60 fulltime and part time college faculty who are, in the study, classified as Language and non-Language teachers. The manner by which either teacher provides corrective feedback on essays given as part of classroom activity or assignment will be examined. My guess is that Language teachers focus more on local issues when giving written feedback while non-Language teachers focus more on content, ideas, and organization when writing feedback on essays of students. This could probably be because Language teachers believe that it is more their responsibility to check the grammar of the students than it is of the non-Language teachers. This hypothesis is based on the finding of Leki (2006) which suggests that students prefer lots of comments especially on local issues (e.g. Cohen , 1987), however, the analysis of actual teacher feedback suggests that teachers gave little feedback on global issues.

The research of Leki (2006) demonstrates a difference in the type and amount of feedback given on disciplinary-based papers (i.e., papers written for their specific field of study) which is the context of my study.

In order to substantiate the hypothesis, a survey (see appendix A) was conducted inquiring whether teachers give essays as part of classroom activity or assignment and if they do, are the corrections more focused on local or global issues. Specifically, the paper sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the profile of participants in terms of :
 - 1.1 gender
 - 1.2 subject taught
2. What is the most common type of essay that teachers in the tertiary level require their students to write when grouped according to:
 - 2.1 Language

- 2.2 Non-Language
- 3. How do Language and non-Language teachers differ in the type of feedback given to students in relation to:
 - 3.1 self-assessment
 - 3.2 actual corrections on students' paper

Methodology

The study was modeled after the research carried out by Montgomery and Baker (2007) at Brigham University in which self-assessment of teachers' corrections given to students on their essays were compared with students' assessment on feedback given by teachers. Also, the said study determined the focus of corrections of teachers in terms of whether the corrections are global, focused on meaning, or local, focused on grammar. The researcher modified the study by comparing the self-assessment of Language and non-Language teachers on the feedback that they provide to students' essays through a questionnaire. A nine-item questionnaire (see appendix A) was given to teachers to determine the type of essay they require students to write, the focus of corrections, whether a revision is required and whether there was an improvement in the essay after feedback was provided. To determine whether the self-assessment of teacher participants are in conjunction with the actual corrections provided on essay of students, sample essay of students were collected, coded, analyzed, and compared.

Participants of the Study

The survey was given to 11 tertiary level (out of 60 fulltime and part time faculty) Language and non-Language teachers of San Beda College Alabang. (3 male, 8 female); four of which teach in the Languages Department and six teach in other departments. One of these 11 tertiary level teachers teaches both Japanese Language and Psychology subjects. However, for purposes of classification, she was classified as a non-Language teacher as the sample essay of student by this particular teacher was an output in her non-Language class.

Language teachers are teachers in the Languages Department of San Beda College who teach English Communications Skills (EN101), Speech Communication in English (EN 103), Technical Writing (EN 102), Technical Writing with Business Application (EN 104), Art, Man, & Society (Hum101), Philippine Literature (Lit 101), World Literature (Lit 102), and all equivalent subjects in Filipino.

On the other hand, non-Language teachers are the teachers who teach Mathematics/Science, Social Science, Business, Accountancy, Theology, and Psychology.

Data-Gathering Procedure

The data were collected from the responses given by the teacher-participants to a 9-item-questionnaire to answer research questions no. 1 and 2; however, in answering question no. 3, the researcher examined the type of feedback that teachers give to students, whether local or global. Sample of students' essays (one student sample essay for every teacher) were provided by the participants. Students' output include art criticism, answer to essay test questions, narrative essay, reaction paper, and argumentative essay.

Research Instrument

A nine-item questionnaire was utilized to gather pertinent information about the participants (see appendix A).The questions were prepared by the researcher to seek answer to the research questions. Items 1 and 2 give the profile of the participants in relation to gender and the subject/s they teach which answer research question no.1a and 1b respectively. Item 2 determines whether the participant is a Language or non-Language teacher. Items 3 and 5 provide information on whether they ask students to write essays as part of classroom activity or assignment and if they do, what is the common type of essay they require their students to write

To answer research question number 3, item no.6 asks the participants what the focus of their correction is, whether it is local – focused on grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or global – focused on meaning, content, and organization.

In answering research question no. 3, the researcher analyzed the sample essays by:

- coding the students' output from L1 to L5 for Language and NL6 to NL11 for non-Language with each letter-number code corresponding to a sample essay where L stands for Language and NL stands for non-Language
- copying the exact specific teacher correction of both Language and non-Language;

- determining whether corrections are local or global for both Language and non-Language; and
- comparing corrections of Language and non-Language teachers

Items 7 and 8 are questions answerable by yes or no referring to students' revisions after teacher corrections are given and improvement in writing skills after revision was made. Since there were no data by which the researcher could investigate whether there was an improvement in the essay of students after corrections were made, these pieces of information could not be considered valid, as it was merely assessment of teachers, the researcher decided not to include items 7 and 8 as part of research questions.

Item 9 gives opportunity for the participants to provide information about other forms of feedback aside from the ones suggested by the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

The table below reveals the profile of participants in terms of gender and the subject they teach. Also included is the number of teacher-participants from both the Language and non-Language disciplines.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Teacher	Gender	Language	Non-Language
1	Female	Art, Man, & Society	
2	Male	Filipino	
3	Female	Filipino	
4	Female	Filipino	
5	Female	Technical Writing	
No. of Male = 1		No. of Female = 4	
Total no. of Language Teachers = 5			
6	Female		Psychology
7	Male		Psychology
8	Male		Business
9	Female		Psychology
10	Female		Social Science
11	Female		Social Science
No. of Male = 2		No. of Female = 4	
Total no. of non-Language Teachers = 6			
Total No. of Participants = 11			

Based on the data gathered, out of 11 participants, 5 are language teachers, 4 female and 1 male, and 6 are non-Language teachers, 4 of which are female while 2 are male.

Language teachers are teachers in the Languages Department who teach English Communications Skills (EN101), Speech Communication in English (EN 103), Technical Writing (EN 102), Technical Writing with Business Application (EN 104), Art, Man, & Society (Hum101), Philippine Literature (Lit 101), World Literature (Lit 102), and all equivalent subjects in Filipino.

On the other hand, non-Language teachers are the teachers who teach Mathematics/Science, Social Science, Business, Accountancy, Theology, and Psychology.

Table 2. Most common type of essay required

Type of Essay	
Language	Expository
Non-Language	Argumentative Comparison/contrast

In relation to the most common type of essay teacher participants required their students to write, the expository essay was the most common type of essay Language teachers asked their students to write. On the other hand, non-Language teachers most commonly required their students to write either an argumentative or comparison and contrast type of essay.

Table 3. Focus of corrections based on self-assessment

	Language	Non-Language
Local	16%	0%
Global	33%	50%
Both Local/Global	33%	50%

Table 3 provides information about the focus of corrections of teacher participants when grouped according to Language and non-Language. As revealed by the data, only 1 out of 6 or 16% Language teachers focus on local errors and an equal number of language teachers or 33%, i.e. 2 out of 6, focus their corrections on global and both local and global errors. None of the non-Language teachers however, focused his/her correction on local errors, giving more emphasis on global or a combination of both local and global.

Table 4. Focus of corrections based on actual students' essay

	Language	Non-Language
Local	60%(3/5)	
Global	40%(2/5)	16%(1/6)
Both Local/Global		16%(1/6)
Correction not clear		33%(2/6)
No feedback/ correction		33%(2/6)

The data gleaned from table 4 show that (see appendix B) majority, i.e. 3 out of 5 or 60% of Language teachers focused on local issues while majority, i.e. 4 out of 6 or 66% non-Language teachers were unclear about the feedback or corrections that they provided on essay of students. When compared, as revealed by actual students' essays and self-assessment of teachers' feedback/correction, there seemed to be a contrast in the correction or feedback that they provided on students' essays. Language teachers' corrections focused more on local issues although self-assessment revealed that this group of teachers gave an equal emphasis on both local and global issues except for one teacher who indicated focusing on local issues. On the other hand, the non-Language teachers, as revealed by actual students' essays gave an unclear feedback if not none at all. The self-assessment, however, revealed that this group of participants also gave an equal emphasis on both local and global which was the opposite of what was revealed on the actual essays of students.

Conclusion

This study was designed to find out the difference on the type of feedback given between Language and non-Language teachers. As shown in

the result of the survey and actual corrections given on student' essays, there seems to be a contrast between the result of the two data. Language teachers focus more on local issues when giving corrective feedback that supports my hypothesis that Language teachers are more concerned in correcting the grammar of their students' essays. Although, it may be wrong to generalize that non-Language teachers are not concerned with the grammar of their students' essays because the data from survey revealed that they focused on both local and global issues; actual students' essay revealed the contrary. It was found that non-Language teachers do not make clear feedback; if at all, any correction was provided.

To answer the research question no. 7 & 8 about the improvement of students' essays after corrective feedback was given and whether revisions were made, data from survey have shown that students' essays in Language classes seemed to manifest more an improvement in writing skills compared to student's essays in non-Language classes. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that corrections on the writing output of students were discussed in class since the subject is a Language course. Non-Language teachers may find it time-consuming to discuss these matters, as they are more concerned with the subject matter at hand, leaving the task of correcting the writing skills of their students to Language teachers.

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