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Synchronous and asynchronous teacher electronic feedback and learner uptake in ESL composition



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ABSTRACT

We know little about how teacher feedback and student revisions are influenced when feedback is given electronically. This study contributes to a better understanding of teacher electronic feedback (TEF) in second language writing by investigating its effectiveness in face-to-face and online ESL writing classes in which TEF was offered asynchronously, as Word comments and track changes in electronic drafts, as well as in synchronous text chats between teachers and students. TEF was extracted from 93 drafts written by 64 students and 93 chats in which they conferenced with their teachers. Students' perceptions about TEF were then solicited via a survey. Additionally, the three participating teachers were interviewed about their use of TEF. Findings show that most TEF was successfully implemented or attempted, and that it was focused on content. Important conclusions are that TEF is effective, and synchronous TEF effectively reinforces asynchronous TEF.

Whether teacher feedback on L2 writing is effective remains an important discussion in applied linguistics. Research aside, feedback is “a central aspect of L2 writing” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006a, p. 83) primarily because learners expect to receive feedback and teachers feel obligated to offer it (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Guénette, 2007). With the recognition of the importance of fine-tuning feedback to specific populations and contexts (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013) comes the need to expand the research on feedback to new settings – including electronic and synchronous contexts.

Electronic contexts have increasing relevance in L2 writing pedagogy, especially in higher education. In the contemporary L2 writing class, the provision of feedback via electronic files, chats, wikis, and blogs is no longer unusual (Elo & Oskoz, 2017; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a). Both automatic, computer-generated feedback and human-generated, computer-mediated feedback can be provided electronically, synchronously as well as asynchronously. However, electronic feedback and its effectiveness have been understudied (Ene & Upton, 2014; Goldstein, 2006). The current study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of teacher electronic feedback (TEF) in L2 writing by investigating the effectiveness of TEF as well as student and teacher perceptions about it in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classes at a U.S. university.

1. Background

1.1. Feedback effectiveness

Feedback as a generic term includes comments/commentary/response as well as corrective feedback (CF), which focuses on

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formal aspects of learners' language and is provided with the intent to improve linguistic accuracy. Feedback is often categorized based on the source: teacher-, peer-, or tutor-feedback. It can be provided by the person giving feedback (handwritten or computer-mediated) or computer-generated (automatic). The sections below summarize the current understanding of the effectiveness of feedback categories relevant to this study, including CF, commentary/response, and human-generated teacher electronic feedback (TEF) in synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC).

1.1.1. Corrective feedback

Many recent studies about teacher feedback on ESL writing continue to examine grammar correction or written corrective feedback (CF/WCF) (e.g., Diab, 2015; Ferris et al., 2013). While researching linguistic development has value for shedding light on the effects of feedback on accuracy, studies have been criticized (see Ferris, 1999, 2010; Xu, 2009) for isolating feedback that focuses only on a few forms (e.g., nouns or syntax) or selected types of feedback (e.g., coding, circling, or error description). However, some notable findings have emerged from accuracy studies. It has become clear that, particularly at lower proficiency levels, the most effective CF is direct (it provides a correction where an error exists), explicit (it states that an error exists and may explain how the error can be corrected), and systematically focused on forms selected according to a guiding principle such as error gravity or patterns. Indirect CF – which identifies errors through the use of a code or mark – can be as effective as direct feedback when it is accompanied by meta-linguistic feedback consisting of explanations about which rule should be applied and what steps should be followed to correct the error (Baker & Bricker, 2010; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, 1993; Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Ene & Upton, 2014; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2007). Ferris (2010) has proposed that direct and indirect CF complement each other, with direct feedback supporting accuracy while indirect feedback better engages learners in “guided problem-solving” (p.190). In sum, a sizeable body of research has demonstrated that CF is useful (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

1.1.2. Teacher comments/response

To widen the focus of the research on feedback, a number of studies have taken a compositionist perspective, looking at the effects of teachers' comments/responses about content and organization on student writing and revision. Such studies have usually found that ESL teacher feedback focuses primarily on global issues of content/ideas and organization (2001, Ferris, 1997; Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Zamel, 1982). Ferris et al. (1997) observed that teacher commentary on 111 drafts consisted primarily of comments written in the margins of the papers and focused more on content and organization by asking questions and requesting text-based information. In a later study, Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) identified text-specific commentary given in the margins of student papers as appearing to be the most effective feedback in terms of uptake. Ferris et al. (1997) also indicated that content- and organization-related comments were given equally to strong and less strong writers, although the “weak” writers received more grammar feedback. Other researchers have noted that the most effective feedback balances global and grammar feedback (Straub & Lunsford, 1995), which students seem to be able to attend to equally, in the same draft (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990). As Bitchener and Ferris (2012) have suggested, studies that portrayed teacher feedback as “overly controlling, directive, and excessively focused on form may no longer accurately describe the practices of modern composition instructors” (p.79). However, the impact of teacher feedback on student writing development is still not completely clear (Goldstein, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). Importantly, we know little about how teacher feedback and student revision are influenced when feedback is given electronically, although electronic tools affect potentially all aspects of learning (Elola & Oskoz, 2016).

1.1.3. Electronic feedback in L2 writing

Electronic feedback (e-feedback) has gained recent attention due to the rapid growth of the use of CMC in language classes. It has become common for teachers of university writing to require students to submit their papers electronically through classroom/learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard or Canvas) and to provide feedback on student papers electronically in online chats, forums, or via e-mail or word-processing software (Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b). Computer-mediated feedback can be provided either synchronously (typically through online chats) or asynchronously.

Synchronous CMC adds a sense of presence, spontaneity, and democracy to the L2 writing classroom (Blake & Zyzik, 2003; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001). As a “conversation in slow motion” (Beauvois, 1998, p. 198), synchronous CMC is an environment in which students can stay on task and have equal opportunities to be guided by the supervising teacher (DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001). Studies have documented improvements in linguistic accuracy following the use of chats. Sauro (2009) considered the pace of the text-based chat to have contributed to the effectiveness of the recasts and metalinguistic feedback provided, as both resulted in higher accuracy. Morris (2005) determined that the feedback realized as negotiation between peers led to immediate repair of lexical and syntactic errors. In her study on peer feedback and essay revision in a French class, Schultz (2000) deemed synchronous CMC less time-efficient than face-to-face peer review but noted that the more advanced students benefitted the most from the alternative use of synchronous CMC and face-to-face feedback; additionally, specific ideas discussed in synchronous CMC were successfully used in revisions. However, some warn that synchronous CMC may increase focus on lexicon and grammar (Blake & Zyzik, 2003; Schultz, 2000). In addition, synchronous CMC can be time-consuming and inefficient for peer-review and revision of essays (Schultz, 2000).

Asynchronous e-feedback (such as email, discussion board messages, or comments/track changes in Microsoft Word) also has a number of positive effects on language and writing development. Studies examining the effectiveness of asynchronous peer e-feedback determined that it led to improvements in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary (Tolosa, East, & Villers, 2013); grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and discourse (Vinagre & Muñoz, 2015); and morphosyntax (Ware & O'Dowd, 2008). Tolosa et al. (2013) and Vinagre and Muñoz (2015) warned of the students' tendency to focus on form more than discourse, despite the linguistic

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