

EFFECTIVE WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

MAKLUM BALAS BERTULIS DALAM PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA: SATU TINJAUAN LITERATUR

Norarifah Mazlan¹
Parilah Mohd Shah²

¹Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia, (E-mail: noniefa@gmail.com)

¹Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia, (E-mail: drparila@gmail.com)

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Abstract: *Giving effective written feedback plays an essential role in improving students' second language (L2) writing. It is an effective tool for language teaching and learning as it captures students' attention on their strengths and weaknesses in L2 writing as well as enhancing students' writing skills development. This allows unlimited chances for students to improve their writing accuracy as written feedback is a crucial medium in acknowledging students' writing ability. Many researchers have used various written feedback strategies to show its effects on students' improvement in writing. However, giving effective written feedback is not widely practised in Malaysian L2 classrooms as the teachers tend to focus more on the overall marks and grades that need to be achieved. The students are also always interested in knowing the marks and grades rather than focusing on how good the writing is and what makes a good writing. Therefore, this paper, based on reviews of past literature will explore the techniques of giving effective written feedback on students' L2 writing. The findings show there are various effective techniques in giving written feedback on students' writing. This study is useful to prove the effective use of various written feedback techniques on students' L2 writing.*

Keywords: *ESL, Malaysian Secondary Schools, Writing, Written Feedback*

Abstrak: *Memberi maklum balas yang efektif memainkan peranan besar dalam meningkatkan penulisan pelajar dalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua. Ia merupakan satu strategi yang berkesan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran kerana dapat menarik fokus pelajar terhadap kekuatan dan kelemahan penulisan dan seterusnya dapat menggalakkan peajar untuk memperbaiki penulisan. Hal ini memberikan peluang kepada pelajar untuk meningkatkan tahap penulisan dan memaklumkan pelajar tentang kebolehan menulis mereka. Kajian-kajian terdahulu telah menunjukkan pelbagai strategi yang sesuai untuk meningkatkan penulisan pelajar. Namun, memberi maklum balas yang efektif tidak dipraktikkan secara meluas di Malaysia kerana guru sentiasa memberi tumpuan kepada gred dan markah keseluruhan yang*

perlu dicapai. Pelajar juga lebih cenderung untuk mengetahui markah dan gred peperiksaan daripada menilai hasil penulisan mereka. Kertas konsep ini adalah berdasarkan tinjauan literatur kajian-kajian lepas mengenai strategi maklum balas bertulis yang efektif dalam penulisan bahasa kedua pelajar. Dapatan menunjukkan pelbagai strategi efektif bagi memberi maklumbalas bertulis terhadap penulisan pelajar. Kajian ini bermanfaat dalam menunjukkan kepentingan pelbagai strategi maklum balas bertulis sebagai satu strategi efektif dalam penulisan bahasa kedua.

Kata Kunci: *ESL, Maklum Balas Bertulis, Penulisan, Sekolah Menengah di Malaysia*

Introduction

The English Language is established in Malaysia as a second language and is a compulsory subject in all schools both at the primary and secondary school levels. Students are formally exposed to the four language skills; speaking, listening, reading and writing. These are the four basic skills that would enable them to master English as their second language. However, in Malaysia, apart from reading, speaking and listening, writing is considered as the most important basic skills required in the English Language Learning especially in facing the Malaysian formal examinations. Therefore, the students hold full responsibility on the clarity of the written work.

In writing aspect, Malaysian students are facing the challenges of the complexity to understand the second language. According to Misbah et al (2017), teaching the second language to those who are not exposed to the target language atmosphere is challenging. This causes a barrier for students to produce good written work. Yunus and Chan (2016) state that students face major problems in writing due to lack of chances to practice writing and a study by Darus and Subramamiam (2009) observe that a number of studies on English as a second language (ESL) in Malaysian secondary school students' writings are full of errors. This causes the students to feel apprehensive in their English Language writing and this relates to their weak performance in writing.

Other than the barriers in writing practices, another factor that leads to students' poor performance in writing is the Malaysian exam-centered system. The Ministry of Education has decided to emphasise on writing skills in their mainstream courses, therefore it is formally tested and emphasised in the national curriculum (Ghabool & Kashef, 2012). In the current format of the national exam papers, students are required to produce two essay writings in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English Language Paper 1119. Essay writing sections are mostly covered in the paper as it contributes 85 out of 155 marks for the overall paper. Additionally, there are two more writing tasks which are assessed as the requirements of Paper 2 which are summary writing and literature question. Both sections require students to produce good written work. This leads the teachers to grade the students on the final mark of the writing, not on giving feedback on the weaknesses for the students to focus on. Thus, the teachers tend to focus on the marks and grades that need to be achieved by the students.

In the light of the problems above, it is thus important to further explore the importance of giving effective written feedback to overcome the aforementioned problems and to ensure that students' written products are at the best level. Giving effective written feedback would provide the benefits of feedback on students' process of writing. Besides, in order to give an effective written feedback, teachers need to know their roles in supporting students and the various

techniques that can be used for assessing writing. In addition, students' expectations from the written feedback are also highlighted. Researches (Brookhart, 2017; Sadler, 2010; Cullen, 2002) have valued teacher's feedback as a support to students' learning and to overcome the difficulties in learning as well as improving students' motivation in their learning.

Literature Review

Formative Written Feedback

Formative feedback on writing is a very useful approach to promote students' development in second language writing (Storch, 2010). It focuses on the on-going process of assessing students writing which usually involves various stages and steps in order to get into the final product of writing. Students will get to know where their levels are and provide future steps to overcome the problems. In other words, the comments bring great impacts on students' writing development as it supports them in the whole process towards the final product (Brookhart, 2017). Paran (2012) adds that the formative feedback focuses on students' cognitive process of writing, generating ideas, drafting, getting feedback and revising in the whole writing process. It clearly shows that formative feedback provides opportunities for students to improve, where to improve and what to improve. It is perceived as a means for students to revise and to edit their drafts if it is given while they are in the process of writing. It is useful in term of giving praise, encouragement, strategies and the actions that the students should take to improve their learning (Bryan & Clegg, 2006). In other words, formative feedback helps students to recognise their strengths and weaknesses in the target areas that they need to put more focus on.

The Roles of Teachers in Giving Written Feedback

In the process of writing, teachers have to ensure that they can facilitate learners' first draft. The purpose of written feedback on students' process writing is to get the draft that is much better than before. As mentioned by Petrus & Mohd Shah (2017), teacher feedback plays important role in ESL classroom as teachers know best and students are expected to produce written works which resemble the teacher's ideas. Hence, there are higher possibilities that students will be inclined to use and revise their drafts according to the feedback given.

In order to motivate students to improve their writing process, teachers have to give students written feedback that increases their motivation. Students need encouragement along the way of their learning. They will then take initiative to improve their draft before re-handing it. Wang & Wang (2012) acknowledge that giving encouragements and constructive comments on the written feedback will avoid students from being demotivated on their writing. Indirectly, students will feel that the teachers care for them. This will lead students to have meaningful support on their performance. This is because students will show a high level of interest in using the feedback as their main reference and they themselves want to make improvements. This is supported by Cotos (2012) who certainly believed that effective feedback motivates students to be able to expend effort, be persistent and attentive to the task at hand. It is therefore important for the teachers to act as a motivator on students' process writing as it maintains positive values on students' learning.

In assessing students' writing, the teacher should act as an instructor on students' writing process. Firstly, being an instructor means that the teacher needs to point out and identify the area of weaknesses and ask the students to work on them by providing guidance on how the weaknesses can be improved (Chodorow et al (2010). Teacher as an instructor will help and guide learners towards accepting responsibility for their learning improvement. However, there

is an argument saying that the teachers should give the guidance on the easy-to-identify aspects of performance such as the spelling mistakes rather than on the difficult aspects such as the strength of arguments in the written work (Storch, 2010). The author believes that the teachers' role as the instructor depends on students' levels and needs. The higher level students might find it helpful if the teacher identify and guide them on the difficult aspects of writing as compared to lower level students. As the matter of fact, teachers as the instructor should acknowledge students' mistakes and achievement and provide them with a future reference concentrating on few important improvements needed.

Students' Expectations from the Written Feedback

In order to get effective written feedback, it is important the students get prompt feedback. Students need to have immediate feedback on their writing. When they received prompt feedback, they can take immediate action regarding their own progress. Delayed feedback in some cases will make it difficult for the students to focus on their learning improvement. This is because delayed feedback makes it difficult for the students to correct their mistakes in their writing as they tend to forget what they have written (Brookhart, 2017). Thus, the students tend to repeat the same mistakes in their next written work as what they had done previously. This is because they have not been informed the instant the mistakes are made. Thus, students want feedback that is given to them immediately as the work is still fresh in their memory. Burke and Pieterick (2010) mention that students expect prompt feedback from the teachers because they can identify the problems in their work; put them right and avoid replicating the same problems in their next writing. With prompt feedback, students are able to monitor their performance and make the improvements needed before they hand in their final draft.

In order for the students to be expected to make full use of the feedback, they need to first understand it. To enable the students to get the message across and articulate the comments given, the feedback has to be clear and legible in meaning (Lizzo & Wilson, 2008). Thus, it is crucial for the feedback to have comprehensible language and suitable comments that suit the students' level of competence in English. Similarly, it is also suggested by Sampson (2012) that feedback is incomprehensible to students because the feedback comments are not detailed enough and unclear to the students and the language is not on par with students' level. In relation to this, Lee (2016) ascertains that the given feedback should not make the students struggle to understand it.

In addition, students expect constructive feedback that provides information and comments with a detailed explanation to close the gap between the actual performance and the reference level (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). When the students receive feedback that is constructively helpful for them, they can make comparisons to their earlier works and measure what they should do to achieve better written work. At this stage, it is also important for the teachers to acknowledge the learners' achievement and provide them with advice for improvements in their writing (Sampson, 2012). These equip the learners with the knowledge of their current performance and encourage development in writing. In addition to that, constructive feedback "not only including feedback directed at supporting improvements in the next assignment but also providing guidance that supports" learning (Storch, 2010, p. 39).

Teachers' feedback should be descriptive to address students' learning needs and to indicate the parts that the students did well and the parts they did not do so well. Students need clear information on their performance in the aspects of their strengths, weaknesses, efforts, languages and level of understanding. Nicol & Milligan (2006) point out that descriptive

comments that provide information about students' performance is more effective and more likely to be acted upon by students rather than non-specific advice or unclear statements. This is supported by Storch (2010) who claims that insufficient guidance and information on students' work possibly will provide few opportunities for students to reflect on the comments provided. Thus, descriptive information increases learners' opportunities to learn and to apply changes where necessary.

Techniques in Giving Written Feedback

Commentary

Bitchener & Ferris (2012) remark that informative commentary is usually helpful for the learners to gain a thorough understanding of the particular skill or concept they are trying to improve on.

Marginal Comments

Marginal comments are usually being used in marking students' written work as a way to interact to students' ideas. This type of comment is used by the teacher to specify the areas of students' writing that need to be improved or ambiguous to the teachers. It does not focus on every aspect of students' learning as it is useful for the students to concentrate on the specific weak areas. This is essential as it teaches the students to look at their writing thoroughly and to encourage the students to improve the ideas in each paragraph. Sampson (2012) advocate that marginal comments focus mainly on students' development in their arguments particularly commented on paragraph-by-paragraph. A marginal comment also suggests that the meaning of the text is not fixed, and the students need to do more research to develop the meaning of ideas (Sadler, 2010). Similarly, Brookhart (2017) also confirms that marginal comments help students to necessitate better words or phrases and to polish students' written work. Thus, this type of commenting provides students with particular areas of what is right and what is wrong. It also indicates how the teachers interact to the students' writing and engage with the students' idea.

End Comments

End comments take place at the end of the students' written work. The teachers give summary remarks at the end of students' writing. It is usually related to the marginal comments but it is written in a general overview on what areas the students need to develop further. The end comments should usually begin with positive remarks, followed by the evaluation on students' work such as strengths or weaknesses and provides suggestion and assistance for students. Burke and Pieterick (2010) discuss that the end comments tend to provide more evaluative information about the task-related performance and the comments are specific to the learners' overall needs on their written work. This general comment on students' work will guide them to have an overview on what aspect of writing that they need to pay more attention on.

Error Corrections in Marking

Focused Marking (Detailed Marking)

The teachers mark the errors on students' writing and provide the correct forms for the students. The students can revise their writing and they can transcribe the corrected versions of their errors into their next written works. This marking technique can be considered as an in-depth marking on students' written work where it looks through for specific mistakes that the students have done. Lee (2016) declares that this type of marking is a marking which highlights and focuses on students' errors and improvements needed. This is actually a type of marking that

requires a thorough reading and analysis of the learners' written English. Detailed marking may be effective to help both the weak and bright learners in helping them to improve their written English (Lee, 2016), where the teachers aid them with the correct forms of errors to revise.

Distance Marking (Selective Marking)

Distance marking may appear to be more effective to be used for brighter learners. This is because the teachers are being selective in their marking and the students can focus on their areas of errors. The teachers only indicate the existence of the errors but do not provide the correction. Therefore, the students will know that there are corrections to be made. Using this type of marking, the teachers usually decide which areas should be given more attention to and which aspects of students writing to focus on in general. It may also be known as 'minimal marking' where the teachers mark only few errors that they think the students are weakest at. Distance marking requires a great effort from the learners because it offers minimal error corrections and thus leads to the process of 'making sense' of the learning (Clarke, 2000). Thus, this will increase students' awareness on their own mistakes and they will be learning autonomously in correcting the errors.

Correction codes

Correction codes are used by the teachers to correct students' written work using simple codes, symbols, signs and abbreviations (Sampson, 2012). Using correction codes can make the students realise their areas of errors as it indicates the type of errors they have made. When the students noticed the errors, it can directly help them to use the correction codes to self-correct their works. According to Lee (2016), students learn better when they are provided with direct prompting as they are able to correct more errors when the errors are directly shown to them. The students will then use the symbols, codes and signs as their guide and make the attempts to correct the errors by themselves. Thus, the self-correcting encourages their learning and improves their written work. This is evident by Sampson (2012); coded correction encourages students to discover the correct forms by themselves and to reinforce students' learning.

Questioning in written form

Closed questions

Closed questions often refer to right or wrong answers and it usually involves one direct answer from the students. Closed questions are often used in classroom activities where the teachers want to check students understanding on certain topic or instruction as it requires instant and direct answers from the students. Thus, in giving written questioning feedback on students' writing, teachers rarely use closed questions as they do not require the students to think and to improve. Cotos (2012) mentions that closed questions require no real thought and are given to the whole class with answers coming instantaneously. It would not be wrong to conclude that giving feedback closed questions form does not involve the students into the discussion and it does not help students to identify the improvements needed.

Open questions

This technique often used to comment on students language and content in their written work (Storch, 2010). Students will stimulate their learning on their own when they get the questions that require them to re-think about what they have written. This can help the learners to interact to the questions and take the appropriate actions to be taken in order to improve. However, Burke and Pieterick (2010) acknowledge that questioning is indirectly used to revise the topic, to deepen understanding and to encourage thinking, but it sometimes causes more confusion

and ambiguity on students' written work. But Storch (2010) ascertains that questioning helps the students to think again about what they have done and guide them to do better in the future. Similarly, this is supported by Lee (2016) that questioning feedback usually focuses on the specific aspects of students' written work such as grammar, language used and unclear content which later can help the students to understand the questions, to refer to their own writing according to the questions given and to identify the next step in improving their writing. Thus, open questioning is undeniably could help the teachers to comment and to add necessary changes on what the students have written. The teachers might make the questioning comments in order to ask the students to refer to their writing and look at the areas to develop.

Discussion

This paper explores the use of written feedback in second language writing by highlighting the effective techniques in giving written feedback and related past studies on students' expectations on written feedback and the teacher's roles in giving effective written feedback. The main concern for ESL learners' needs in writing improvement is due to exam-centered syllabus and lack of feedback given on students' writing. Hence, this paper points out the needs to expose the effective written feedback techniques and strategies on students' writing. It draws a conclusion that using these effective techniques in given written feedback are useful and advantageous options when learners are weak in their writing performance. This is because, written feedback creates students' involvement, revision, encouragement and further strategies on their writing performance. It requires more time for the learners to look at the writing and to reflect on the feedback given, but they are directly exposed to the improvements needed. Written feedback is beneficial (Paran, 2012) and it could motivate learners to improve their writing performance (Brookhart, 2017) whenever the effective feedback strategies are included and addressed appropriately to the learners (Wang & Wang, 2012). Gradually, ESL learners are able to improve their writing as they reflect and learn through the various techniques of effective written feedback.

Conclusion

Giving effective written feedback to students' writing acts as a platform which helps students to improve their written work. Teachers play various roles in motivating the learners, explaining their mistakes and guiding them to produce a better written work in the future. Without the awareness from the teacher, it is impossible to deliver guidance, support and constructive feedback effectively to the students. Therefore, the feedback would later be beneficial for the students' learning and written improvements.

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