Effective Feedback to Improve Students' Writing Skills

Yasinta Wulandari[1]

[1] Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Purwokerto. E-mail: y.wulandari@unupurwokerto.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Feedback is one of the important elements of teaching and learning which aims to help learners to improve their quality of learning, including in writing activity. This research aims at conducting a library research on how teachers can give their effective feedback in writing classes. Several opinions by experts and previous research related to feedback for writing skills are compiled to provide some strategies that can be used by the teachers for giving effective feedback in writing activity. It is found that by considering the students' need and purposes of writing, effective feedback that given by teachers can help the learners to know their level of proficiency and their weaknesses. By doing this, students can appreciate their own achievement and fix their weaknesses to make betterment in writing. Teachers can decide which certain kinds of feedback based on the writing purposes and the students' needs. Therefore, by giving effective feedback, teachers are expected to encourage students' motivation in improving their writing skills. And it is hoped that the further research will provide in information about oral and written feedback for writing activity.

1. Introduction

Teaching English as foreign language in Indonesia can be both complex yet simple. It becomes complex since English has many language rules which are quite different from the ones in Indonesia. This can cause various problems. Yet, it becomes simple because there are many experts of language learning providing general theories in overcoming the problems that learners may encounter. The solutions and strategies which are offered by experts can be done by students and teachers. One of the ways that can be done by teachers in overcoming problems faced by language learners is providing feedback.

Feedback is one of the elements of teaching and learning process that helps both teachers and students improve the quality of teaching and learning process. Hattie (2009) mentioned that feedback was among the most powerful influences on achievement. So, teachers should consider feedback as an important part of their teaching (van der Kleij, 2019). According to Shadiev & Yang (2020) feedback is information that a learner receives about their language learning and most commonly refers to information about their language production (speaking and writing), although it can also concern reading and listening, study skills, attitudes, effort and so on. It should provide information about what the students have achieved compared to the learning goals. By doing so, the students are expected to know what they need to improve and give their effort to reach the learning goals.

However, teachers sometimes do not know how to give an effective feedback that can help their students improve their ability especially in writing skills. A previous research by Junining (2014) which focused on the formative feedback in writing, mentioned that in current practice, giving feedback in writing classes tends to be conventional such as correcting grammar, spelling and editing instead of giving more emphasis on the purpose, audience and text type. She highlighted that formative feedback would be the best one for students' writing. On the other hand, the researcher sees that corrective feedback is also important in writing skill. In writing activity, both content and mechanics are important. Yet, students may make mistakes and errors in composing ideas in a good and acceptable English language rules. Therefore, this research intends to provide strategies on how to give effective feedback to help students improve their ability in writing skills without ignoring certain kinds of feedback.

2. Research Methodology

Khatibah (2011) explained that library research is a systematic activity to collect, analyze and concluding data using certain method or technique in order to find an answer of a problem. Further, George (2008) explains that library research involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question. Therefore, it can be concluded that library research can be done by collecting, identifying and deciding certain information or experts' opinion on certain issues. When a researcher conducts a library research, he/she needs to engage his/her mind at every stage of the research. By doing so, a researcher can focus on what kinds of information and opinion should exist to answer the research question.

This library research employs some strategies which are suggested by George (2008), as follows;

2.1 Reading background information on the research question on specialized encyclopedias.

2.2 Starting to compile several lists which include relevant terms or phrases, books, experts' opinions, and journals related to the topic.

2.3 Searching the information that needed by doing systematic browsing.

2.4 Searching relevant indexes and databases to identify specific articles on scholarly and popular publications.

2.5 Skimming everything to determine which sources may be the most useful and to get leads to additional specific sources.

2.6 Repeating steps 3 through 5 as necessary until all kinds of sources are gathered to answer the research question.

3. Writing Skills

According to Nunan (2003b) writing is a mental work of inventing ideas, thinking how about to express them and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader. A writer should think about ideas and the mechanics of writing so the reader can understand the writing well. This suggestion also strengthens by Zemach and Rumisek (2005) who said that writing is more than just putting words together to make sentences.

English as second or foreign language may bring different process since the writers have different competence about the language. Some issues may appear in writing and learning process of L2 students, such as; different cognitive, social, cultural, and linguistic factors. Therefore, they need to have certain competences to enable them become a good English writer, such as; grammatical competences, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence (Ken Hyland, 2007). Grammatical competence deals with a knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and language system. Discourse competence is about knowledge of genre and rhetorical patterns. Sociolinguistic competence is the writer's ability to use language properly in various context, understanding readers and adopting appropriate authorial attitudes. Then, the strategic competence is about the ability to use various communicative strategies.

According to Imsa-ard (2020), researchers have developed approaches in writing, such as product approach, process approach and genre approach. Harmer (2015) suggests product approach as writing approach that focuses on the product of writing. Students need to write accurate grammar usage, correct and consistent spelling and well-organized ideas. There are four stages employed in this approach; familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing (Steele, 2015).

Different from the product approach which emphasizes more on form and written product, process approach emphasizes on the procedures of drafting and redrafting a written product (Nunan, 2003a). If writers can improve the quality of writing process, the quality of the written product will certainly improve. Seow (2002) mentioned planning, drafting, revising and editing as stages done in process writing. In genre approach, writers need to consider the social purpose, organization and language features in various form of writing (Tuan, 2011). According to Derewianka (1998) and Gibbon (2009) the stages employed in this genre are building context, modelling of text, joint construction of text and independent construction of text.

Teacher can decide what approach they will use for students' writing activity by considering the needs and the purpose of writing. The important thing is students start to write a paragraph.

A paragraph should consist of clear arrangement of ideas. It can be constructed by writing clear topic sentence which indicates the main idea and supporting sentences which indicate the supporting ideas of the paragraph. Further, Folse et.al (2010) suggested five elements should exist to make a good writing namely **purpose, audience, clarity, unity** and **coherence**.

Talking about the **purpose** of writing, writers should consider the purpose of certain paragraph is written to make them stay focused on their topic. Writers can state the purpose of the paragraph to help them still on topic and avoid including material that does not fit in the paragraph. The second element is **audience**. It is important to keep your reader in mind as you write. Writers should use consistent pronoun usage and formality to avoid ambiguity. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) in Akhtar and Riaz (2019)define formality as avoidance of ambiguity and describe formal style as detached, impersonal objective, explicit and less context-dependent and fuzzy. Avoiding the shift between first, second and third person within one piece of writing can make a good writing.

Clarity deals with how writing is easily understood by readers. Points are explained clearly by using descriptive or precise words and clear pronoun references. It is not recommended to use vague and unclear words which cannot represent the idea. The use of adjectives or prepositional phrases can help your writing become more specific. The next element is **unity**. Writers should use sentences which show the topic sentence and supporting sentences are relating each other.

Wirantaka (2016) stated that **coherent** paragraph results in sufficient development of main idea reflected by appropriate supporting sentences, which will help readers find the main idea and supporting details of the paragraph. The ideas are organized from one to another smoothly and logically by considering the logical order, repetition of key words and the use of transitional words and phrases.

4. Feedback

Feedback is information about learners' language learning and mostly on their production (Kerr, 2020). Through feedback, learners are expected to be aware on their own weaknesses and strengths. They would appreciate their own achievement and know which part should be improved. Teacher's feedback plays an important role in writing class. Teachers as readers are expected to read and respond to the students' works. The response from teachers aims to encourage the development of students' writing. Therefore, Hyland (2003) suggested feedback emphasizes a process of writing and rewriting where the text is not seen as self-contained but points forward to other texts the student will write. This will help students work deeply on the text potential, comprehend the writing context, and offering the sense of audience and purpose of their writing.

According to Lee (2017) feedback as a part of assessment that can be given during the learning process (formative) and end of the learning as part of evaluation (summative). During the learning process, teachers can give feedback for students know what to do to make good learning progress.

Park (2006) suggested three types of teacher written feedback in L2 writing class; 1) form-focused feedback, 2) content-based feedback and 3) integrated feedback. Form-focused feedback is feedback concerning in the mechanics of writing, like grammar, spelling, and others. The content-based feedback is the feedback focusing on the content and organizational features. The third one is integrated feedback is the combination of the two previous feedback. This type of feedback suggested that feedback is focused both in content and grammar matter. Hyland, K., & Hyland (2006) further mentioned that research suggests that second language writers tend to highly value the teacher written feedback and many learners ask for feedback on their grammar. So, it is recommended to give feedback both in content and grammar of the students' writing.

There are types of feedback such as peer feedback and corrective feedback (Kerr, 2020). Peer feedback is feedback where a learner gives feedback to another. There are some benefits in doing the peer feedback. Peer feedback is likely effective because this activity focuses on the learner-centered and most students are more open to their friend's suggestion. This can initiate the successful of learning. On the other hand, students tend to focus only on grammatical matters without paying attention on the content and organization.

Corrective feedback is the most type of feedback given by teachers. This type of feedback is undeniably essential to facilitate L2 knowledge, as mistakes and errors are expected I all stages of learning (Lee, 2017). Mistakes occur when learners are unable to perform their competence while errors show the learners' inadequate competence. Yunus (2020) states that correcting students' errors and providing feedback to students has become routines and norms in exploring students' potential in acquiring the language. By doing correction, students are expected to be more aware on kinds of mistakes or errors they commit and improve their performance in writing.

5. Strategies of giving effective feedback

Feedback indeed gives positive effect towards students' awareness on improving their writing skills. However, according to some experts', excessive feedback can result to less motivated to rewrite their writing. Junining (2014) states that negative effect of feedback can result to unmotivated students where they seldom edit or proof read their task so that they repeated the same mistakes during the process of writing. Therefore, it is important to give feedback to students wisely. According to Kerr (2020), the following are some effective strategies in giving feedback by teachers based on several researches and writer's experience on giving feedback in writing classes.

5.1. Effective feedback is about learning task

Writing is about how writers organize their ideas in structured grammar and forms, so the concern is not only on either grammar or content. We also talk about writing as product and writing as process, in which teachers can guide students in doing their writing. Teachers are supposed to focus their feedback not only on the performance in the written product (product approach) but also the way students achieve the certain learning task (process approach. Hyland (2002) argues teachers can help students in different strategies to reconstruct their writing. Teachers can encourage students to discuss, analyze and evaluate feedback given, discuss why it is given and how it is intended to affect their writing (Barkaoui, 2007). Therefore, they know what they need to do regarding the process of writing. In the product approach writing, teachers can show the learning target related to grammar, vocabulary and organization of certain texts that the students have written.

5.2. Effective feedback is specific and related to learning goals.

A research by Yunus (2020) showed students want the feedback to be as detailed as possible. No students wanted only marks/grades on their writing. They preferred explicit correction rather than implicit ones. Teachers are expected to mark, correct and explain the errors to students. These help students understanding the kinds of mistakes and how to overcome it. According to writer's experience in giving feedback in writing classes, students tends to "slip" their performance. When students are shown underlined mistakes or errors, most of students could not know why certain sentences were wrong. Right after the writer gave question initialing the mistakes or errors occurring in their writing, they were able to understand why those sentences are incorrect. Some of them were able to revise it right away, some were not. So, it is important to give specific or detailed feedback on students' writing.

5.3. Effective feedback is appropriately challenging.

Effective feedback is about improvement of learning that is possible to achieve based on what they have learned recently. It is recommended to show the things that can be developed better. Teachers can give feedback which focuses more on what students can do better according to their previous knowledge or feedback (Kerr, 2020). Teachers can encourage the students to modify their knowledge to improve their writing. Without ignoring the acceptable rules in writing, students are expected to level up their effort in writing based on the knowledge that they have.

5.4. Effective feedback entails the active involvement of the learner.

Ferris & Hedgcock (2014) suggest that teacher should avoid taking over students' writing. Teacher may give feedback about the content, organization and mechanics but the final decision in on the students' hand. Let the student improve their ability in adopting the feedback given by the teacher. By doing so, the students will not lose motivation to write by their own. Give students opportunities, support and encouragement to practice writing often by deciding the usage of feedback even though they have not mastered the skills needed in writing (Barkaoui, 2007). When students are exposed to process of writing and things related to the mechanics of writing, their ability in writing will improve.

5.5. Effective feedback is a combination of the positive and negative.

Feedback should optimally include a balance of praise and constructive criticism. Some scholars acknowledged that giving negative and positive feedback on students' writing lead to high improvement in their writing (Wen, 2013). Teachers need to inform the students about the students' achievement and weaknesses. Positive feedback can be seen as praise of students' good achievement which encourage them to keep that achievement well. Mayasari et al (2017) states positive feedback can be done by showing the acceptable rules. This will inform the students that they have done their tasks according to acceptable rules. According to Sprouls (2011) negative feedback shows behavior or task which is not performed correctly and proposes a change of them to indicate a successive behavior towards the goals. Students are shown what part they are lack according to acceptable rules and let them find the solution to fix their mistakes by themselves.

6. Conclusion

Feedback is important for improving the quality of teaching and learning process, that teacher should consider some aspects of effective feedback given to students. Some of the consideration are what types of writing approach employed in writing activity, what learning task or objectives which are expected to achieve by students and how to give balance feedback. Good proportion of feedback can improve students' skill in writing, not only in the term of good written product but also the process of writing. It is hoped that other researchers could conduct a research about the strengths and weaknesses of written and oral feedback for improving students' writing skill.

References

Barkaoui, K. (2007). Rating scale impact on EFL essay marking: A mixed-method study. *Assessing Writing*, *12*(2), 86–107. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2007.07.001

Derewianka, B. (1998). A grammar companion. In *NSW, Newton: PETA*. http://proxy-net.snu.ac.kr/6a60485/_Lib_Proxy_Url/www.silvereye.com.au/documents/sample_pages/prod4665.pdf

Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2014). *Teaching L2 composition: Purpose, process, and practice (3rded*. Routledge.

George, M. W. (2008). The Elements of Library Research; What Every Student Needs To Know. In *Journal of AHIMA / American Health Information Management Association* (Vol. 64, Issue 2). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19936-5_3

Gibbons, P. (2009). *English learners, academy literacy and thinking: Learning in the Challenge Zone*. Heinemann.

Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (5th ed.). Longman.

Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). Visible learning. A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. In *Routledge*.

Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching*, *35*(2), 83–101. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444806003399

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. Longman.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge university press.

Hyland, Ken. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *16*(3), 148–164. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2007.07.005

Imsa-ard, P. (2020). Being an Effective Writing Teacher: Understanding Writing Theories behind the Product, Process, and Genre Approaches. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies*, *1*(2), 35–47. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v1i2.31

Junining, E. (2014). A Critique on Giving Feedback for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Writing. *Asian Journal of Education and E-Learning*, *2*(1).

Kerr, P. (2020). *Giving feedback to language learners. Part of the Cambridge papers in ELT series*. Cambridge University Press.

Khatibah, K. (2011). Penelitian Kepustakaan. *Iqra': Jurnal Perpustakaan Dan Informasi*, *5*(01), 36–39.

Lee, I. (2017). *Classroom Writing Assessment and Feedback in L2 School Contexts*. Springer.

Mayasari, I., Kasim, U., & Zulfadi. (2017). *The Effect Of Positive Evidence And Negative Feedback From The Teacher On Students' Writing In Subject-Verb Agreement*. 5–24.

Nunan, D. (2003a). *Practical English Language Teaching*. International Edition, McGraw-Hill.

Nunan, D. (2003b). *Practical English LanguageTeaching*. McGrawhill.

Park, E. (2006). *Review M c l e on "The Effectiveness of Teacher's Written Feedback on L2 Writing*.

Riaz, M., & Akhtar, R. (2019). Formality in Academic Writing: Investigating Stylistic Competence of Undergraduate EFL Learners. *University of Wah Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, *2*(1), 1–20. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335892543

Seow, A. (2002). The writing process and process writing. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 315–

310). Cambridge University Press.

Shadiev, R., & Yang, M. (2020). Review of Studies on Technology-Enhanced Language Learning and Teaching. *Sustainability*, *12*(2). https://doi.org/10.3390/su12020524

Sprouls, K. (2011). *Teachers' use of positive and negative feedback with students who are high-risk for emotional behavioral disorders*.

Steele, V. (2015). *Product and process writing: A comparison*. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/product-process-writing-a-comparison

Tuan, L. T. (2011). Teaching writing through a genre-based approach. *BELT Journal-Porto Alegre*, *2*(1), 121–136. http:revistaselectronicas.br/ojs/index.php/article/viewfile/9361/7023.pdf.

Van der Kleij, F. M. (2019). Comparison of teacher and student perceptions of formative assessment feedback practices and association with individual student characteristics. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *85*, 175–189. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.06.010

Wan Mohd Yunus, W. N. M. (2020). Written corrective feedback in English compositions: Teachers' practices and students' expectations. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal*, *3*(2), 95. https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v3i2.2255

Wen, Y. (2013). Teacher written feedback on L2 Student writings. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *4*(2).

Wirantaka, A. (2016). Writing of Academic Texts in an EFL Context. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, *1*(2).

Zemach, D. E., & Rumisek, L. A. (2005). *Academic Writing: From Paragraph to Essay*. Macmillan.