

TUTEES, TUTORS AND TUTORIALS: THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH WRITING AT DOĞUŞ UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of verbal and written feedback that the students receive in the process of producing an academic research project. It is argued that feedback plays an important role in the improvement of quality of student writing. It is also claimed that students can produce better compositions and become autonomous learners who can reflect the skills they acquire in the process of conducting research and presenting it in the form of an academic research paper in their further studies during their university education.

Key words: *Feedback, Writing, Process Writing*

Özet: Bu makale, öğrencilerin akademik bir araştırma proje üretimi boyunca aldıkları sözlü ve yazılı geribildirim etkilerinden bahsetmektedir. Makalede ayrıca geribildirim öğrenci kompozisyon ve projelerindeki gelişme üzerinde etkili olduğu savunulmaktadır. Ayrıca, öğrencilerin akademik araştırma raporunun oluşturulması sürecince öğretmen tarafından verilen bu geribildirim sayesinde edindikleri yazı yazma yeteneklerini gelecekte de başarılı kompozisyonlar üretmekte de kullanabileceklerinin savunulduğu bu makalenin son kısmında Doğuş Üniversitesi birinci sınıf öğrencileriyle yapılan bir geribildirim anketi ve sonuçları sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Geribildirim, Kompozisyon yazma*

INTRODUCTION

Writing, a skill which students start learning and practising from primary schools through universities, is considered to be drudgery by the students as it is a difficult task to learn. Both in EFL and ESL situations, this learning period starts from the beginning of early stages of language learning. The prominence of writing for the EFL / ESL students becomes most apparent, however, when they start studying at a university in which the medium of education is English, as students in those universities are required to produce academic products like reports, term projects or take essay type exams in their departments. Therefore, it can be concluded that the writing skill is essential for the students to be successful at an English-medium university.

It is possible for a student to have many years of exposure to English, to get a high score on a proficiency test with the emphasis on vocabulary and reading comprehension but still be an "unskilled" writer, who takes less time to plan and monitor their work less than the successful writers do, and consider their first drafts as final copies. These "unskilled" writers, especially, are unwilling to write in class, because they have to use their mental and emotional resources which involves considering "overall text structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure (syntax) and word structure" (Colliens and Guther, 1980, cited in Kroll, 1991:140). This attempt of considering all these is a staggering job. And this is where the teachers start helping their students through providing feedback to the written work of students to help them in their writing.

With the developments in teaching writing, L2 writing teachers started using different strategies and techniques for teaching writing and helping their students both while producing and examining their own written work through feedback. At this stage, the L2 language teachers' job is to guide the (un)skilled writers and turn them into experienced writers through the feedback process by being the "dialoguer" who echoes, questions and challenges what the students produced, the "co-creator" who brings out the the students' incipient meanings, the "coach" who sets contexts, offers strategies and engages students in interactive practice and the "evaluator" who assesses the goals that are reached (Lauer, 1989, cited in Lawson, Ryan and Winterwood, 1989:121).

With these developments in teaching writing, L2 writing teachers stopped expecting their students to produce finished products the first time around as well as approaching the draft copies the students produced as the final copies. This was when writing was first seen to be a process in which the written product emerges after a series of drafts, and the L2 teachers understood that the composition has to go through several teacher and/or self- assessments before students submit their work to the teacher to be assessed. And most important of all, they understood the importance of teacher feedback to the written work of L2 students.

Although these changes were found to be beneficial for improving the quality of student writing – and helped students become autonomous learners, "when" and "how" to provide this feedback has been an issue of debate. In addition to this, the

question of whether the feedback technique applied in the class really made a difference was raised (Semke, cited in Cohen, 1990:170). This paper addresses the issue of teacher feedback to the writing of L2 students at an advanced level and aims to investigate how beneficial teacher feedback (both written and oral- through tutorials) is. It is argued in this paper that when students receive feedback during writing both through traditional written way and through tutorials, they can produce better compositions and especially tutorials help them become autonomous learners who can reflect their improvement in further writing.

WHY TEACH WRITING?

Despite its being a complex and difficult process, the importance of writing can never be underestimated. With the introduction of different approaches to teaching writing, different objectives and purposes were added to the teaching of writing. Cumming (1989a, cited in Cohen, 1990:104), lists three specific kinds of learning that teachers try to help students derive from their writing:

- 1- **Assessing and seeking out improved uses of language** – searching for words that produce the best phrasing.
- 2- **Testing functional hypothesis about appropriate language usage while writing** – attempting to match their expressions to target language forms for producing grammatical structures in writing.
- 3- **Comparing cross-linguistic equivalents** – using writing as a way to try out hunches about ways that native language words and phrases are represented in the target language.

Raimes (cited in Cohen, 1990:103) also has six groups of objectives and purposes to be covered in a writing class two of which are:

- 1- **Improving fluency** . The purpose of it is to engage the student in writing without worrying about the accuracy of language form. The techniques used aim at generating and discovering ideas. The students are asked to keep daily journals, do free writing, brainstorming, drafting and revising.
- 2- **Integrating imitation, training, reinforcement, fluency and communication.** The emphasis here is on improving the whole performance, not just one of its aspects.

Behind all these reasons mentioned above, lies another fact: Writing is essential for university students as they are expected to submit term papers, lab reports, term projects and do many other writing tasks in their own departments.

ROLE OF FEEDBACK IN WRITING

The role of teacher feedback given to the writing of L2 learners can never be underestimated. However, it is also true that one of the most problematic areas in writing in a foreign language is providing feedback to the writer. However, there has always been a growing interest in defining how learners can take charge of their own

learning and in clarifying how teachers can help students become more autonomous.

Cohen (1990:111) presents a list of three conditions which are needed to make feedback on written work have a positive effect. According to him, teacher feedback works:

- 1- **When students are knowledgeable enough about the area of comments / corrections in order for the feedback to work** . If the student has necessary information to understand the correction, or receives an explanation that provides the missing knowledge, feedback is likely to have a positive impact.
- 2- **When the feedback is in an area which the student considers important for his immediate or long-term needs** . If the student is particularly concerned about vocabulary for a specific domain or behaviour or about complex syntactic structures that s/he tends to use frequently, s/he may be more careful of that feedback in those areas and is more likely to benefit from it.
- 3- **When the feedback is clear** . If the teacher uses some vague comments or some symbols that the students are not sure of, feedback is unlikely to work.

If an effective feedback procedure is put into operation, then students will welcome the feedback as they receive benefits from it. Teachers will be able to observe the effects of their feedback through improvement in their student's writing, in their attitudes toward writing and in their language acquisition in general.

HOW FEEDBACK WORKS AT DEGREE ENGLISH IN WRITING CLASSES

The content of Eng. 102 at Doğuş University is designed in such a way that it provides the students with the necessary basis for producing research reports of around 3000 words based on students' own ideas, explanations and examples, and support them through research which involves library search, source selection and synthesizing relevant information from these sources. A secondary aim which also has to be fulfilled to reach this objective is to help students consolidate their knowledge of the language (i.e. mainly enabling them to practise and further develop the reading, writing, and study skills they have acquired previously). In addition to these, students are introduced to research techniques and methods as they are expected to make use of all these while working on producing written work (i.e. the research project) of appropriate quality and quantity which will fulfill academic standards.

General instructional goals that instructors aim at helping students develop are problem solving skills through systematic research, data obtaining and presenting skills in appropriate ways, working independently and monitoring the quality of their own work, producing academic writing of appropriate quality and quantity and making use of the library and computer laboratory. All these stages involve extensive student participation from choosing the topic and conducting the research through to writing up the project.

Eng. 102 at Doğuş University is designed on a three-hour-per-week class hours basis.

In addition to this, there are "tutorial" sessions for each student during which the students consult the instructor, and discuss with the teacher every part of the project. In short, whatever part of the writing process the student goes through (e.g. brainstorming, topic selection, outlining, drafting, etc.), the teacher is involved as the "advisor, coach, facilitator, judge, evaluator, interested reader and copy editor" (Lauer, 1989, cited in Lawson et al., 1989:121).

As well as being required to attend the tutorials on a weekly basis, the students are also asked to submit components of the weekly assignments which are related to their projects. These weekly assignments comprise different parts of their projects (e.g. note-taking from the sources they have read, finding the relevant quotations to be used in the project, etc.) and are assessed according to a specific criteria.

The Process Approach has been adopted by Degree English lecturers for the Eng. 102 course at Doğuş University. This approach emphasizes the concept that writing is a process during which the finished product emerges after a series of drafts (Cohen, 1990:105). The composition goes through several rounds of teacher and/or self assessment before the final copy is produced. In this approach, monitoring of the writing and issues related with goal setting (e.g. what to write about, structure to write in and the audience to write for, etc.) depend on the writer.

Cohen (1990:107) presents some strategies which are employed in Process Writing:

- 1- Going back to go forward. The context for writing is the text which has been created so far. Therefore, successful writers need to go back over to what was written to determine where to go next (Cohen, 1990:107).
- 2- Repeating key words and phrases.
- 3- Planning
- 4- Postponing major revisions until all ideas are written down.
- 5- Making decisions by assessing different aspects of writing in conjunction. The writer should make decisions on the content of one section and the appropriate discourse markers or connection to convey some idea when necessary.
- 6- Searching extensively for the right words.
- 7- Distancing self from text. Writers who concentrate on their texts may not see the strengths and weaknesses easily. To do this, they should "step back" from their text and leave it for some time.
- 8- Keeping in mind the goals and the audience.
- 9- Writing multiple drafts. A draft may be a partial or total rewrite of the product.

In Process Writing, teachers use procedures which will help students generate and organize their ideas in the first draft and then make them rethink and revise their drafts.

Together with the Process Approach, Degree English instructors adopted the traditional feedback system of the same approach which comprises three steps:

- 1- The students' writing the draft version
- 2- The teacher's pinpointing the student errors in this first version by focusing on structural errors, indicating where an error takes place and adding some comments on the content.
- 3- The students' rewriting the first version in order to form the final version of the essay by making use of these clues, corrections and comments written in the margins by the teacher as feedback.

After this process, the teacher evaluates the paper once more and assigns a grade to the paper.

Because many of the students believe that revision is a task which creates high probabilities for error (Kroll, 1991:140) and either don't revise, or ignore teacher feedback because they do not know how to make use of it, the tutorials have proven to be beneficial to help students understand and make use of the feedback and improve their writing.

When the learning situations of students at Doğuş University are considered, it can be seen that writing plays an important role in their university life as they do many writing activities in their own departments. Therefore, it can be stated that students' writing needs should be taken seriously in the Degree English course in their freshman year, so that they become competent in writing before they face the writing tasks mentioned above in their own departments.

Therefore, in order to test how beneficial providing feedback through tutorials (i.e. each student's coming to consult the teacher in the office at a specific time and for a specific period every week) is, students were also asked to answer questions on a feedback form (for the feedback form, please refer to Appendix I). This feedback form was prepared to see if the students who attended tutorial sessions regularly could really benefit from them.

It focused only on the tutorial sessions and aimed at finding out what went on during these tutorials. It was found out that all of the students taking Eng 102 attended the tutorials and sometimes the office hours if they wanted to see their instructors more than once that week (office hours, unlike tutorials, are not specific periods allocated to certain students). All of the students stated that they found the tutorials beneficial and 92% of them reported that the comments the teacher made on their projects during the tutorials were helpful. According to 83% of them, a reason for tutorials' benefit came from the corrections the teacher made. For 75% of them, because the teacher answered the questions the student has on the project, the tutorials were helpful. The teacher's presenting solutions to the questions through showing other model projects was another reason for 58% of the students to agree that the tutorials were beneficial.

When the comments and correction types were asked, 2% of the students reported that they received feedback on grammar and mechanics while 23% of them agreed that comments and corrections were mostly made on content. Another 25% of them reported that they received feedback on organization. When an overall look at the answers to the feedback forms is taken, it is observed that 50% of the students reported that they received feedback on all the content, organization, grammar and vocabulary.

As an answer to the question "Which of these comments do you think were beneficial for you?", 42% of the students reported that feedback given on organization was the most beneficial for them. 58% of them, however, reported that the most beneficial comments which helped them improve their writing were the ones related to the content.

As an answer to the last question, all students who took Eng. 102 reported tutorials provided by the teachers to be beneficial.

CONCLUSION

The paper focused on the importance of writing and feedback provided for freshman students of Doğuş University. It also aimed at investigating if the tutorial sessions, which act as a part of the feedback provided, are beneficial for the students. Hence, a feedback form was given to the students who took Eng. 102 – and therefore attended tutorials- to see if the students find tutorials beneficial and worth attending and lead to improvement in their subsequent writing. Now that the students are taking courses from their own departments and producing written work in these departments, whether or not they could reflect what they have learnt in Eng. 102 to their own courses gains importance. In addition to this, now that they have passed Eng. 102, how they, at the moment, react to tutorial sessions which they attended last year is of great concern for the instructors teaching Degree English courses. After giving out the feedback forms and having several informal interviews with the students, it became apparent that feedback provided through tutorials lead to an improvement in their subsequent writing and no matter which departments they attend, students regard these tutorials as beneficial for them to achieve a higher rate of success in writing.

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APPENDIX I

FEEDBACK FORM ON TUTORIALS IN ENG. 102

1- Did you attend the tutorials while taking Eng. 102?

Yes

No

2- If your answer is "YES", how frequently did you attend these tutorials?

a) every week

b) twice a month

c) once a month

d) other (pls. specify)

3- From what aspects did you find these tutorials beneficial? (You can choose more than one option)

a) The teacher made comments on the project.

b) The teacher made corrections on the project.

c) The teacher answered my questions on the project.

d) The teacher presented solutions to my questions through showing other model projects.

e) Other

4- If the teacher made any kind of comments and/or corrections on your project, what were they about?

a) grammar and mechanics (punctuation, capitalization)

b) content

c) vocabulary

d) organization

e) all

Which of these comments do you think were the most beneficial for you?

5- In short, were the tutorials beneficial according to you?

Yes

No