Students' Reactions to Writing Clinic Visits and Teacher-Student Conferences on Corrections Made Based on Coded Feedback

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Abstract

In a class of 16 Final Year Computer Science students with a low standard in written English in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in a university in Hong Kong, the course designer attempted to use a 3-step feedback-giving method to help the students improve their writing in a pilot study. The 3 steps include each student (1) paying compulsory visits to the writing clinic before submission of a major written assignment (2) making error corrections with the help of an editing checklist and (3) attending a teacher-student conference to discuss the corrections made. In this pilot study, an attempt was made to pilot this 3-step method in the course and investigate the students' reactions to feedback-giving method through a questionnaire and interviews. A questionnaire was given to all students to complete after they had finished with the three steps to find out their opinions on the helpfulness of each method and the best arrangement to help them improve their writing. All students were interviewed to provide further information about the rationale for their answers to the questions in the questionnaire. Frequency counts were made for the quantitative part of the questionnaire. Open-ended questions were analysed using the content analysis method. All interview data were tape-recorded, transcribed, tabulated and categorized. Results of the analysis of the questionnaire and interview data show that most students found each of the three methods helpful and all of them thought that the 3-step method was the best arrangement to provide them with feedback in order to improve their writing.

Keywords: Writing clinic visits, teacher-student conferences, coded feedback

Introduction

Complaints have been made by previous and current teachers about the overall low written English standard of one class of 16 Final Year Computer Science students in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in a university in Hong Kong and these teachers expressed uncertainty about whether the written feedback-giving method that had been used in the course to help the students' writing was effective. To find out ways to solve the problem, the designer attempted to explore and identify through literature review a more effective feedback-giving method to help students improve their writing, pilot it with the students and investigate how helpful the method was based on students' reactions to it to decide whether it could be used to replace the old method to help the students improve their writing in future.

A review of the literature shows that various methods have been used to provide feedback to students to improve their writing (Saito,1994). The two main categories of methods are written feedback and one-on-one consultations. Written feedback includes direct error feedback which provides corrections for the students' mistakes and indirect error feedback which involves prompting the students about the location of the errors (such as underlining the errors) or about the nature of the errors with the help of a correction code (Robb et al, 1986) without providing them with the correct forms or structures (Lee, 1997; Bitchener et al, 2005). One-on-one consultations are characterized by face-to-face interactions between a student and a feedback giver to discuss the piece of writing written by the student (Saito, 1994). Examples of these consultations are teacher-student conferences during which the course teacher interacts with the students and visits to a writing clinic in which writing tutors give individual help to the students.

In terms of written feedback, research evidence suggests that students benefit more from indirect feedback than direct feedback in their long-term writing development (Ferris, 2003; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 2004) because the amount of student engagement and attention to their problems increases in the former (Ferris, 2003) whereas

direct feedback encourages a passive acceptance of the teachers' comments (Lee, 1997). Error correction codes, which are composed of a list of grammatical items such as verb, adjective, preposition, tense and so on are a common tool used to give indirect feedback in ESL classrooms (Lee, 1997). Lalande found in a study in 1982 that students who used an error correction code had greater improvement in their writing than those who did not. The error correction codes are helpful because the main reason why students fail to correct their errors is their inability to detect errors. The provision of the cues helps them identify the types of errors which in turn raise their scores (Lee, 1997).

In terms of one-on-one consultations, teacher-student conferencing is one effective way to "counter the impersonality and ineffectiveness of whole-class solutions" (Lerner, 2005, p.193) and one-way paper feedback. Teacher-student conferences help the teacher understand the student's way of thinking and facilitate "negotiations between the teacher's and the student's points of view, switching and comparing perspectives to find a creditable balance" (Melanie, 1992, p.68). Monette and Wolf (1999) claim that the power of the conference is the power of suggestion.

Another way to provide one-on-one consultation is done through writing clinics. Writing Clinics are set up in many universities in different parts of the world to help students improve their writing (Durrell, 2011; Mallam, 1943; Mellon 2002). Students are usually encouraged to bring their written work to the writing clinic and/or specific problems that they encounter in writing and which they cannot solve by themselves (Mallam, 1943). Instead of proof-reading the written work for the students, most writing clinics help them become independent learners who can revise and edit their own work (Mellon, 2002). Writing clinics usually benefit students in many ways. For example, the students who used the writing clinic at Iowa State College claimed that it provided them with one-on-one tutorial interaction through which independence was encouraged via collaborative talk; strategic knowledge was acquired; affective concerns were addressed and the meaning of academic language was clarified (Harris, 1995).

Though giving written corrective feedback to students is a common practice to help students improve their writing, many writing teachers feel that one-on-one student consultations on their written work may potentially be more effective than written corrective feedback because the students are provided with the opportunity to interact with the tutor for clarification, negotiation and instruction (Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Saito, 1994). However, no empirical research has been done to investigate the effect of these one-on-one consultations (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005) nor are there research studies to investigate the students' reactions to the combined use of indirect written feedback and one-on-one consultations. In view of this, an attempt was made to carry out a pilot study to fill this research gap.

In this pilot study, the course designer attempted to help the students improve their writing through one-on-one consultations and coded written feedback. The plan was to use a 3-step method to give feedback to the students' writing. The 3 steps were (1) to build compulsory writing clinic visits into the course, (2) to use an editing checklist, which is a list of correction codes, to help the students revise their writing and (3) provide the students with the chance to have follow-up teacher-student conferences with the course teacher after the students had corrected their errors with the help of an Editing Checklist. This 3-step method was piloted in the course and an attempt was also made to investigate whether this model of providing feedback for the students' writing was helpful or not.

To find out whether the model was helpful, this pilot study investigated the students' reactions to the compulsory visits to the writing clinic, the use of the Editing Checklist to help their correction of errors and the follow-up teacher-student conferences to find out the best way the students could improve their writing. The research questions of this study were:

(1) Was it helpful to pay compulsory visits to the writing clinic before they submitted their written assignments to their course teacher?

(2) Was it helpful to use an editing checklist to help the students revise their writing?

(3) Was it helpful to have a follow-up teacher-student conference?

(4) In the students' opinions, which was the best way to help them improve their writing?

Research method

How writing feedback was given to the students in this study

This pilot study was carried out in a final-year ESP course for Computer Science students in a university in Hong Kong. All students in this course, a total of 16, were required to do three things in relation to their major written assignments in this course.

(1) They had to seek help from the writing clinic in relation to the draft of their major written assignments before they submitted the final version of the assignments to their course teacher for assessment. In the writing clinic, each student was given about 15 minutes to work on their draft with a student tutor who usually read the draft in front of the student, pointing out the errors made by the student, discussing with him or her why the errors were made, suggesting how the errors could be corrected and explaining the reason for the corrections made. Sometimes the tutor only pointed out the problem and did not give any suggestions regarding how to make the corrections. This meant the student had to suggest how to correct his or her own errors.

(2) Before the end of the course, the teacher provided the students with an editing checklist which was explained in class to help them revise their final assignments based on the codes in the editing checklist (for example, art = article, T= tense, and so on). Examples were given under each code explaining what the error was and how it could be corrected. When the teacher marked the final assignment, codes

from the editing checklist were used to indicate any grammatical errors that the students had made. When the assignment was marked and returned to the students, the students were required to correct the grammatical mistakes with the help of the editing checklist.

(3) Then the students had to meet with the teacher for a follow-up teacher-student conference to go over their assignments and discuss the errors that they had corrected with the help of the editing checklist. The teacher usually discussed each error with the student and made sure that all errors were properly corrected with the student's full understanding about why such corrections were made. The teacher also told the students what their major language problems were so that they could avoid making the same errors when they wrote in the future.

How data was collected and analyzed to find out the students' reactions to the three-step method

Data was collected through a questionnaire and interviews to find out the students' reactions to the three-step method.

A questionnaire was given out to all students (16) in class after the teacher-student conferences to find out their answers to the above 4 research questions. The questionnaire consisted of 5 questions asking the students whether it was helpful to pay compulsory visits to the writing clinic, to have a teacher-student conference, to use an editing checklist to help them revise their work and their opinions on the best feedback-giving method to help them improve their written assignment. Because this was a pilot study, the questions were designed to be simple, general and exploratory. In the questionnaire, students were only required to make "yes" or "no" choices and provide reasons for their choices. The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix A. The questionnaires were completed anonymously and collected in class and the return rate was 100%. Frequency counts were made for the quantitative part of the questionnaires. Open-ended questions were analysed

using the content analysis method through which "fairly simple classifications or tabulations of specific information" were made (Borg and Gall 1989:520)

All students were asked to attend follow-up interviews which were built into a session in which they came to collect their marked assignments. These sessions were held after the final grades had been released so that the answers they gave in the interviews had no effect on their final grades. The interviews were carried out in the form of informal chats at the beginning of the session before the teacher returned the assignments to them. In the interviews, they were initially asked the same questions as in the questionnaire, and based on their answers to each question, they were probed to provide more detailed information about the rationale for their answers and to follow up on issues derived from the information they provided. All interview data were tape-recorded with the students' consent, transcribed, tabulated and categorized.

The results from the two research instruments were then triangulated to provide answers to the four research questions.

Results

Answers to the four research questions are presented below based on the results of the questionnaires and the interviews.

(1) how helpful it was to pay compulsory visits to the writing clinic before they submitted their written assignments to their course teacher

The students' responses can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Students' responses to the helpfulness of the compulsory writing Clinic visits

No. and % of students who thought it was helpful	No. and % of students who thought it was not helpful
12 (75%)	4 (25%)

Among the 16 students, 12 (75%) thought that it was helpful to pay compulsory visits to the writing clinic before they submitted their written assignments to their course teacher. Only 4 (25%) did not think so.

The reasons why the students found the compulsory writing clinic visits helpful are presented below:

Most of them (7) thought that the tutor in the writing clinic could help them discover their problems with language and correct their mistakes by explaining what was wrong and suggesting how the mistakes could be reported. One student said, "Because the tutor helped me see my problems, when I corrected my work later, I made fewer mistakes. I will remember the kinds of mistakes that I often make and will not make them again when I write in future." One of these students reported that the tutor not only helped him with the language, but also with his argument.

Four students thought that this requirement would definitely be helpful to the students who had serious problems with their language. At the same time, it would not be a waste of time for the students who were good in English. One student who was very proficient in English said that it was good to have someone double-check her work, allowing her to know whether her work was comprehensible or not. Another student with high English proficiency thought that it was good to visit the clinic at least to obtain some advice. She

reported on her experience, "At first, I thought it would not be helpful, but later when I went there, I found the tutor helped me see what I could not see myself".

One student particularly liked this activity because it was one-on-one tutoring. The tutor was able to give her individual help and thoroughly discussed her problems.

Three students were excited about being informed about such a service in the university and two claimed that they would send their work involving another course to the writing clinic for help later.

All of them recommended that when the teacher teaches the course in the coming round, she should continue to require the students to seek help from the writing clinic before they submit their major written assignment.

Regarding the reasons why the four students thought that the compulsory writing clinic visit was not helpful, two students reported that because they needed to make major revisions to the content of their assignments after their visits to the writing clinic, most parts of the assignments ended up being rewritten. Thus, all the efforts made in the writing clinic were wasted. One student commented that she was very busy at the time when she needed to visit the writing clinic and she only managed to send one page of her work to the tutor in the writing clinic for comments. No help could be given for the other 14 pages of her work because she had no time to visit the writing clinic again. Another student complained that the 15 minute session was too short and she suggested that the tutor should read her draft before the meeting and spend the 15 minutes giving her comments only.

(2)How helpful the teacher-student conference was to the students

The students' responses can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Students' responses to the helpfulness of the teacher-student conference

No. and % of students who thought it was helpful	No. and % of students who thought it was not helpful
14 (87.5%)	2 (12.5%)

Among the 16 students, 14 (87.5%) thought that the teacher student conference was helpful. Only 2 (12.5%) thought that it was not helpful.

The reasons why the students found the teacher-student conference helpful are given below:

Nine of the 14 students commented that the teacher was able to inform them of their problem areas of which they were not aware and 4 promised that they would remember these areas of weaknesses and would pay special attention to them to make sure these mistakes would not appear again in their work later. Two students remarked that the teacher explained the problems so clearly to them and discussed the problems in so great detail that they were very clear about their problems and knew how to address them.

One student thought that it was good for the teacher to let him know whether his error corrections based on the Editing Checklist were correct or not. Another said that it was necessary for him to meet with the teacher because there were some errors that he could not correct even with the help of the editing checklist. Thus, the teacher could help him with these corrections in the teacher-student conference.

Another student remarked that the teacher could point out all his mistakes whereas the tutor in the writing clinic only had time to deal with part of his work. One student who was good in English commented that it was good to come to see the teacher though the she had no grammatical mistakes to deal with at all because the teacher praised her and this boosted her confidence.

Regarding the reasons why two students, who had high English proficiency, thought that the teacher-student conference was not helpful, one student reported that the teacher could not help him with the technical content of his work because it was too discipline specific. Another student said that he performed very well in his work and there was not much to talk about in the teacher-student conference.

(3) *How helpful it was to use an editing checklist to help the students revise their writing*

The students' responses can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Students' responses to the helpfulness of the Editing Checklist

No. and % of students who thought it was helpful	No. and % of students who did not use the Editing Checklist
10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5.5%)

Among the 16 students, 10 (62.5%) thought that the Editing Checklist was helpful. Six students (12.5%) did not use the editing checklist and therefore could not comment on it.

The reasons why the students found the editing checklist helpful are given below:

Six students commented that the Editing Checklist enabled them to find out their common errors and why they were wrong. Four students reported that they needed the Editing Checklist because they had to refer to it to find out what some codes represented.

Among the six students who did not use the editing checklist, three reported that they had forgotten to use the editing checklist to help them do the corrections. One student explicitly said that he understood all the codes which were taught and used in his secondary school, so it was not necessary for him to refer to the Editing Checklist at all.

(4) The best way to help the students with their writing

The students' responses can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Students' responses to the best way to help them with their writing

No and % of students who chose a combination of the two options	The students' choice between the two kinds of one-on-one consultations		
	No. and % of students who chose either one	No. and % of students who chose the teacher-student conference	No.and % of students who chose the writing clinic
16 (100%)	4 (25%)	9 (56.3%)	2 (12.5%)

All 16 students (100%) said that the best arrangement was for them to seek help from the writing clinic before submitting their assignments and then to have a teacher-student conference with the teacher after they had corrected their errors using the editing checklist.

When the students were asked in the interviews to choose between visiting the writing clinic and having a teacher-student conference if they only had time to do one, among the 16 students, 9 (56.3%) thought that the teacher student conference was more helpful. Four students (25%) thought that either option was fine and only 2

students (12.5%) chose to go to the writing clinic.

The reasons why all students thought that the current arrangement was the best was that they could get more help from two different sources.

Four students thought that either option was fine with them so long as the tutor or the teacher was available and they read the whole piece of work before meeting with them.

Nine students chose the teacher-student conference because they thought that the teacher was more experienced and knew more about the course than the tutors in the writing clinic. The teacher read the whole piece of their work before meeting with them and her explanation was more detailed because the session was much longer than that in the writing clinic. The help given was more thorough. The teacher categorized their errors and told them the categories in which improvement needed to be made but the tutors in the writing clinic only dealt with whatever errors occurred on the one or two pages that they read together with the student during the 15 minute meeting time.

Two students thought it would be better for them to go to the writing clinic because they could visit the writing clinic for as many times as they wished whereas the teacher was too busy to be able to meet with the students as frequently as they wished. It was more convenient to go to the writing clinic than to meet with the teacher.

Discussions

The results will be discussed in terms of the acceptability of the 3-step writing feedback methods, the needs of the students as uncovered in the findings as well as the caveats of implementing these methods.

The acceptability of the 3-step writing feedback methods

The students' responses to the above questions suggest that they were very positive about the 3-step writing feedback methods used in this study to help them improve their writing. Most students found all three steps helpful, namely the visits to the writing clinic before submitting their assignments and meeting with the teacher in teacher-student conferences after revision of their work with the help of the editing checklist. All of them recommended using the same methods to give the students feedback when the course is to be run again in the next round.

The findings of this study support the views of Ferris (2003), Frantzen (1995), Lalande (1982) and Lee (2004) that indirect feedback help students in their long-term writing development as some students reported that what they learned help them not to make similar mistakes in the future. The one-on-one consultations were valuable experiences for the students and they could benefit from both consultation modes in different ways. The comments of some students who valued such experiences supported the views of Ferris (2002), Ferris & Hedgcock (1998) and Saitos (1994) that one-on-one consultations were potentially effective ways to help students improve their writing.

The needs of the students uncovered from the findings

The findings of this study uncovered some needs or desires of the students long unresolved.

(1) Students' responses show that they valued the opportunity of having a reader to read their work and gave them feedback as regards the comprehensibility of the content as well as giving them some advice and helping them see what they could not see themselves. Even just giving them praise was a kind of feedback that they appreciated.

(2) One of their major needs was to be able to identify their main problem areas so that they could pay particular attention to those areas when they wrote in the future.

(3) They wished to obtain as much help from the tutor or the teacher as possible and given as much time as possible in the consultation meeting. They hoped that the tutor or the teacher could read the whole piece of their work before meeting with them so that the meeting could be entirely devoted to giving comments or discussions. They treasured the longer meeting time with the teachers and the opportunities to have multiple visits to the writing clinic if necessary. They were also grateful for detailed explanations of their problems and thorough discussions of how to address those problems.

Caveats in implementing the 3-step methods

A combination of writing clinic visits and teacher-student conferences seem to be the best way to meet their needs as what lacks in one mode of one-on-one consultation can be supplemented by what can be done in the other mode. For example, the writing clinic helped the students solve the major problems with their writing and the teacher followed up in the teacher-student conferences with what was unable to be dealt with by the tutors in the writing clinic.

To address the problems raised by the students regarding visits to the writing clinic in this study, the tutors and the teacher should pay attention to the following two points:

(1) Since the writing clinic serves the students in the whole university, it is impossible to give more time than 15 minutes to each student and it does not seem feasible to read every draft before meeting with each student. However, the tutors of the writing clinic have to be reminded that even though they might not be able to comment on every page of work submitted to them, at least, they need to point out to the students their

major weaknesses in language so that they can pay particular attention to those areas when they revise the pages that have not been read by the tutors.

(2) In the next round when the course is taught again, the course teacher should make clear to the students that they have to learn to have better time management and get their entire draft finished before they visit the writing clinic so that there is better chance for them to have the whole draft read by the tutor in the clinic. In case there is not enough time to go over the whole draft during the first visit, they might still have enough time to pay another visit to the writing clinic before submitting their final assignments.

Conclusion

The students in this study found the 3-step methods of providing feedback writing helpful. These methods were compulsory visits to the writing clinic, error correction based on an editing checklist and having teacher-student conferences on the corrections made.

However, as this is only a pilot study, the sample of subjects is small. The results can by no means be generalized. Nevertheless, the insightful findings seem to suggest a need to conduct a research project on a much larger scale with a much larger sample in many different ESP courses in the Computer Science programmes in order to identify whether this model of providing written feedback to the students is helpful and workable. Further research in this area can also be carried out in more ESP courses not only in this university but in similar learning contexts in universities in different parts of the world. In this way, it is hoped that more students' writing can be benefitted from such a proven-effective model of providing students with writing feedback.

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Questionnaire   Appendix A

To inform future design of the course, I would like to seek your opinions on how helpful the feedback-giving methods that we used in this course are. Please complete the following questions by ticking (\/) your choice and providing answers to the questions.

1. Is it helpful to pay compulsory visits to the writing clinic before you submit your written assignment to your course teacher?

   Yes _____

   No _____

   Reasons for your choice: _____

2. Is it helpful to have a teacher-student conference to help you with your written assignment?

   Yes _____

   No _____

   Reasons for your choice: _____

3. Is it helpful to use an editing checklist to help you revise your writing?

   Yes _____

   No _____

   Reasons for your choice: _____

4. Which is the best feedback giving method to help you with your writing? Why?

_____