



STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS ORAL FEEDBACK IN WRITING CONFERENCES

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Abstract

While the bulk of feedback research studies has been on written feedback, this paper aims to explore students' perspective towards oral feedback in individual tutor-student writing conferences. The paper is a part of an experimental pilot study and focuses on the main constructs of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding in socio-cultural theory as the crux of effective interactive feedback. Fifteen international students enrolled in an English language proficiency program in the EFL University, India_ Hyderabad, participated in the study. The students received tutor-student writing conferences on six different classroom writing assignments in a writing course. At the end of the course, they responded to a questionnaire about the efficacy of the oral feedback offered in the writing conferences to assist them improve their writing skills. The respondents unanimously stated that the feedback was very effective in improving their writing skills; in particular enhancing their employment of cohesive devices of referential markers and conjunctions, which was the linguistic focus of the conferences. Further, they pointed out that the feedback was engaging, encouraging, constructive, and illustrative; so they were able to apply the suggestions about cohesion enhancement in their future writing assignments. The paper concludes with some pedagogical implications for teachers of writing and future studies.

Key words: Oral feedback, Socio-cultural theory, Students' perspectives, Writing conferences.





Introduction:

Feedback provision to students' writing has been a source of interest to improve L2 writing. It has been widely perceived as crucial for writing development. Writing teachers consider it as an integral part of their job and students expect to be corrected. However, teachers are not supposed to assume that students can easily notice errors in their writing because they give them feedback. Studies reveal that many times students are unable to understand written commentary, revise their texts successfully or ignore feedback because they don't understand how to act on it (Goldstein, 2006).

Teachers of writing hold a belief that teacher-student conferences can be practical to offer feedback because they provide opportunity for clarification, interaction and meaning negotiation (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Students in collaborative feedback tasks construct, de-construct, re-construct and co-construct knowledge about writing because collaborative feedback tasks engage students in interactive negotiation and discussion about errors and how to correct them. As a result, collaborative feedback tasks enhance students' noticing (Barnawi, 2010; pp. 211-212). Teacher-student writing conferences are exemplary collaborative feedback tasks. Enhanced noticing in them scaffolds students' uptake and enables them to notice the difference between what they intend to say and what they had written. However, little attention has been paid to such contextual and socio-cultural dimensions of teacher's feedback (Lee, 2014).

Feedback from a socio-cultural perspective is perceived to be holistic (Ellis, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Feedback is provided through interactive collaborative process where both the teacher and the learner are engaged in dialogic interaction. The bi-directional communicative interaction creates ample environment to provide efficient feedback. Moreover, feedback from socio-cultural perspective is timely provided and it can draw students' attention to errors instantly and their learning is mediated through interaction with the teacher. Timely provided feedback maintains students' attention to errors for future writing, so it is effective. Thereby, writing conferences are considered to be learner centered and typically process-oriented to





writing (Brown, 2007). Advocacy to teacher-student conferences is derived from their inherent principles in the socio-cultural theory (Lee, 2014; Lantolf, 2005)

Theoretical underpinning

Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) views learning as interactionally and socially driven. It perceives that second language learning occurs through interaction as a joint task between a novice learner and an expert. It posits that it is the human interaction rather than a language acquisition device that controls and regulates humans' mental activities including language acquisition (Lantolf, 2005). SCT has gained impetus in the 1990s by increasing researchers' interest in applying it in second language teaching (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Since then, it has been widely used as a framework to investigate how knowledge is constructed collaboratively and how learners become self-regulated. The following brief review illustrates exclusively ZPD and scaffolding, two constructs of SCT, in relation to oral feedback.

The crux of individual oral feedback

The ultimate goal of feedback is to make learners self-dependent. Proposing a general developmental law, Vygotsky states that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the ZPD. He defines it as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)."

The concept of ZPD has proliferated and its application has emancipated to encompass pedagogical innovations in a myriad of fields. A common interpretation of the term presumes an interaction between a competent and a less competent individual on a joint task with a sheer purpose that the less competent individual becomes independently competent at the task. Beyond Vygotsky's formulation of ZPD, the concept has been extended. Firstly, ZPD is applicable to all areas of learning concerning not only competence in task, but also content knowledge; on which Vygotsky was not interested. Secondly, while Vygotsky was interested in understanding how assistance was related to child development, researchers have extended





this relation to state that learning depends on assistance from a more capable individual. Thirdly, researchers assume that not only children, but all learners are potential to have certain individual features that make assistance from a competent individual more effective. In other words, potential maturing functions are not restricted to children (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.270). The relationship between ZPD and scaffolding can be perceived as the ZPD is the goal and scaffolding is the means for achieving it.

The second essential function of feedback is scaffolding. Scaffolding is defined as graduated assistance from a more competent individual and at the same time assigning an active role to the less competent individual during interaction. It emphasizes that while the focus is on the less competent individual, the more competent individual controls interaction until the less competent individual becomes capable of accepting responsibilities.

The decisive factor on the less competent individual development is the qualitative assistance throughout scaffolding process. It should be contingent, graduated, and dialogic. Contingent scaffolding is coherent conversation in which utterance initiation is connected and motivation of an utterance is clearly understood by interlocutors. Contingent scaffolding is provided when needed and removed as soon as learners can function independently. Graduated scaffolding means that the teacher has an estimate of the learners' capability limits and provides assistance according to their changing needs. Dialogic interaction entails interactive engagement and meaning negotiation to enable learners reconstructs knowledge (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Weissberg, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, Ellis, 2008).

Researchers have identified and described seven recurring functions of scaffolding. The first one is recruitment and refers to drawing learner's attention to the task. Second, reduction of the degree of freedom of the learner so that the teacher has the opportunity to simplify the task and the learner has the opportunity to focus on the task within her/his competence. Third, direction maintenance and it refers to the teacher directing the learner to maintain focusing on the task. Fourth, marking critical features where the teacher draws the learner's attention to certain aspects of the task and help her/him to solve them. Fifth, controlling frustration of the

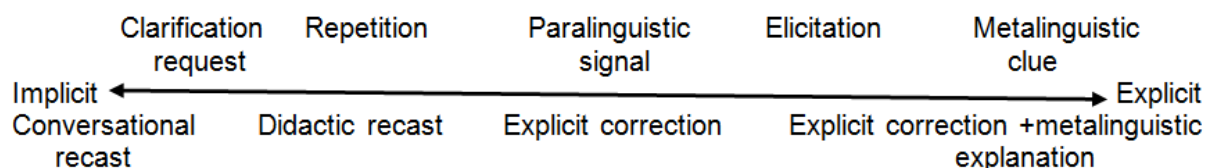




learner where the teacher encourages the learner that s/he can solve the problems under consideration. Sixth, demonstration and it refers to the teacher modelling a possible solution to the problems in the task. Seventh, extension refers to the teacher providing the learner with alternative similar problems to ensure that s/he can solve the problems independently without regression to earlier levels of proficiency (Weissberg, 2006; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Moreover, various scaffolding mechanisms have been identified and they range from responding to advice to meaning negotiation. Mechanism of scaffolding include marking errors to be negotiated, drawing learners' attention or interest to the writing task, providing learners with a strategy to correct errors contingently based on their ability, explaining the nature of errors, and showing affective involvement with learners in order to encourage them for future writing tasks (Weissberg, 2006).

Feedback techniques in writing conferences

Different types of oral feedback immensely impact how students intake feedback and revise their texts. Oral feedback ranges in a spectrum of different degrees of explicitness and implicitness; and it is classified into two broad categories: reformulations and prompts. The former includes a range of techniques that provide learners with the correct form while the latter includes a range of guiding techniques that direct the learner to self-correct errors. The following double arrow line shows that there is no clear cut demarcation between feedback techniques, rather they are a continuum.



Adopted from (Lyster, Saito and Sato, 2013).





Clarification request refers to the tutor's request to repeat an erroneous utterance immediately after the student's utterance in order to indirectly signal the error. Repetition refers to the tutor's verbatim repetition of the student utterance, often with adjusted intonation to highlight the error. Paralinguistic signal is an attempt to non-verbally indicate an error such as tapping on the table. Elicitation refers to directly eliciting self-correction from the student, often in the form of a wh-question. Metalinguistic clue refers to the use of brief examples aimed at eliciting a self-correction from the student. Conversational recast refers to a reformulation of the student utterance in an attempt to resolve a communication breakdown to resume interaction during the conferences. Didactic recast refers to reformulation of the student erroneous utterance though it does not cause communication breakdown. The error here can be an unnecessary addition/omission/substitution of an inflectional or derivational morpheme that does not hamper message intelligibility. Explicit correction refers to reformulation of the student utterance along with a clear indication of the error. Explicit correction plus metalinguistic explanation refers to the fact that in addition to signaling the error and providing the correct form, the tutor illustrates the rule with a brief example (Lyster, Saito and Sato, 2013; Tavakoli, 2012; Sheen & Ellis, 2011)

Findings about the efficacy of oral feedback:

Oral feedback has been studied in two different contexts: laboratory setting and classroom setting. Laboratory studies involve one researcher interacting in writing conferences in one-to-one basis or with a small group of learners to examine the effect of oral feedback. Classroom studies investigate the effect of feedback during instruction. In both settings, research findings have been consistently positive in favor of providing feedback to learners because it improves their inter-language (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). Further, research studies show that laboratory studies have larger effect size on learners' inter-language than classroom studies do. Supremacy of laboratory feedback studies is attributable to the quality and quantity of oral feedback individual learners often receive in laboratory studies in contrast to distraction and





the infeasibility of directing feedback to individuals and catering it into every learner's needs in classroom setting (Lyster, Saito and Sato, 2013).

When it comes to the effectiveness of which feedback technique yields better results as a dichotomy between explicit and implicit, the jury is off the fence since the findings have been inconclusive. While some studies show that learners are more likely to notice explicit feedback (Ammar & Spada, 2006), other studies show that implicit feedback has long lasting effect than explicit feedback (Ellis, Loewen, & Earlam, 2006). For instance Ellis, et all (2006) study revealed that learners benefited from implicit feedback in the form of recast as it provided them with the correct form as well as it created the opportunity to infer their errors and compare it with the teachers' reformulations. However, other studies show that more explicit feedback yeilds better results when compared with implicit feedback. For example, Ammar and Spada's (2006) study illustrated that explicit feedback in the form of different pormpts yielded better results because learners could easily compared their pushed modified output due to the teachers directive demands with their errors. Also, Ortega (2009) states that "when two or more implementations of negative feedback are compared, the more explicit one leads to larger gains p.75". Still other studies show that one feedback type may not fit all learners and both types of feedback are effective depending on a complex arry of variables (Lyster & Saito, 2010). On this basis, research findings seem to suggest that it is difficult to interpret one feedback type (i.e. implicit versus explicit) or a particular feedback technique (recast versus meta-linguistic cues) results in more gains than the other since there is no sharp demarkation between the techniques. Therefore, teachers may need to consider judiciously using the whole range of techniques in accordance with learners' proficiency level, age, linguistic target and interactional context, bearing in mid that some techniques may not at all be applicable in certain situations (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013).





The study

In light of the previous discussion, this paper highlights practical strategies to offer oral feedback in writing conferences based on the principles of socio-cultural theory. The paper also reports the participating students' perspectives about their experience in writing conferences.

Sample profile

Fifteen international students participated in the study for over one semester in 2015. They were enrolled in the International Training Program (ITP) and took a writing class as part of the program at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. The ITP is an exchange program to improve the participants' English language proficiency. The students came from different corners of the globe such as Bhutan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Ghana, Indonesia, Ecuador, and Brazil just to mention a few. The participants were assigned to intermediate language proficiency and their ages ranged between 31-35. They were in-service personnel in their respective countries; including teachers of English in primary schools, medical doctors, and other officials.

Data collection

After writing instructional classes, and throughout the entire course the students' were assigned to write essays of different genres inside the classroom and were allowed to complete them at home. Then, they had to submit them to a tutor, the researcher, for review to get individual oral feedback.

Before the conference, the tutor reviewed the students' essays and annotated them as what cohesive device needs to be improved. The tutor put a small stroke on the margin when there was an error in cohesive devices to discuss it in the conference. After that, the students were assigned a fifteen to twenty minutes slot to discuss their writing assignments. The tutor conducted six writing conferences for each of the fifteen students resulting in a total of ninety





conferences. The conferences were held in the regular classroom during or after the writing class. During the writing class, while the main writing teacher was demonstrating the lessons, the tutor was sitting individually with a student in one of the corners to give feedback. The remaining students were scheduled to show up for conferences after the class time in the same classroom. The feedback was facilitative, graded from implicit to explicit and aimed to assist the students to self-correct their errors in cohesion. The feedback was focused to target the use of referential markers and conjunctions to enhance cohesion in the participants' writing.

At the end of the course, the participants responded to a questionnaire about their experience. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one was close-ended statements graded in a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements comprised of students' perceptions on two main themes: (A) the nature of feedback and how they felt during and after the conference (eight items) ; (B) the usefulness of the feedback (six items). Section two was open-ended and collected biographic information on the participants and asked them about their suggestion to improve conferences.

Findings and discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the students highly appreciated the oral feedback provided in the writing conferences. The respondents stated that the feedback was clear and understandable and it was offered gradually. They showed that the writing conferences were encouraging and engaging. Although all of the participants stated that they liked discussing their writing assignments with the tutor, only (66.7%) respondents stated that they were relaxed and were not intimidated during the conferences. This finding suggests that students' willingness to participate actively in writing conferences must be explored before utilizing writing conferences. When asked about the usefulness of the feedback, the participants unanimously stated that it was helpful and it assisted them develop using linkers and references, the targeted textual feature in the students essays. Participants stated that they





acted on suggestions from conferences when they wrote new assignments. Also, (86.7%) said they did not forget the feedback after the writing conferences.

The students' responses revealed a point of note worthy in respect with the writing conference environment. One student pointed out that the conferences should be scheduled in an appropriate time for the students. A second student suggested that the conferences should be held in a quiet room rather than being conducted during the writing class while the teacher was demonstrating the lesson.

Conclusion and implications

Teachers of writing may need to explore alternative methods to conventional written commentary to provide feedback. Writing conferences can be propitious because it tailors feedback to students' needs and to their proficiency level to become self-dependent. In so doing, teachers should take careful measures to ensure following the feedback principles and strategies discussed in the literature above.

As a pilot study, the findings of the current study showed that oral feedback in writing conferences could be taken for further investigation. Thus as a follow-up procedure, the researcher have taken writing conferences into a full-fledged doctoral research project. On the basis of SCT principles, the researcher devised a regulatory scale to offer oral feedback on cohesive devices in the main study.

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Appendix (A): The participants' responses to the questionnaire:

Items	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Students' perspectives towards the nature of feedback offered in the writing conference & how they feel during the conference					
1. The feedback was clear and easy to understand.	64.3	35.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
2. The feedback was offered gradually in a step by step process.	35.7	64.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
3. The language used by the tutor was easy and understandable.	73.3	20.0	6.7	0.0	0.0
4. Errors were explained clearly.	57.1	35.7	7.1	0.0	0.0
5. The feedback was encouraging.	46.7	53.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
6. The feedback gradually engaged the student in the error corrections.	35.7	64.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
7. I was relaxed during the feedback sessions.	26.7	40.0	6.7	20.0	6.7
8. I liked discussing my writing with the tutor.	73.3	26.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Students' perspectives towards the usefulness of the feedback the writing conferences					
9. The feedback was useful in general.	66.7	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0





10. The feedback helped me improve my writing using linkers.	46.7	53.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
11. The feedback helped me improve my writing using referential markers.	46.7	53.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
12. I applied the feedback suggestions in new assignments.	20.0	66.7	13.3	0.0	0.0
13. The feedback helped me reflect on what I have learned in the writing course	53.3	46.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
14. I used to forget the feedback after the sessions.	0.0	6.7	6.7	60.0	26.7

