

OPTIMIZING STUDENTS WRITING PROFICIENCY USING METALINGUISTIC CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the effect of metalinguistic corrective feedback on the writing proficiency of the 30 second year Bachelor in Secondary Education major in English students at the College of Teacher Education, University of Northern Philippines, Vigan City during the Second Semester, School Year 2015-2016. It likewise looked into the students' level of writing proficiency before and after the use of the corrective feedback.

Data gathered using the writing outputs of students and a writing rubric were treated using mean and t-test.

Based on the results, it is concluded that the overall writing proficiency of the students improved from "Good" to "Very Good" after the use of metalinguistic corrective feedback. Likewise, their proficiency along the specific writing indicators improved from "Good" to "Very Good" after their exposure to the treatment. Thus, metalinguistic corrective feedback is effective in enhancing the writing proficiency of the students.

Since the use metalinguistic corrective feedback resulted in significant writing improvement among students, it is recommended that writing teachers use it in their classes. This will enable the students to monitor and become more responsible of their errors and be able to do self-repair. Also, teachers may want to try other written corrective feedback types to be able to vary their strategies in helping the students improve their writing proficiency.

Keywords: Error analysis, error correction, language proficiency, communicative competence

INTRODUCTION

The importance of being able to communicate cannot be overemphasized. Exchanging thoughts and insights about things from trivial to sublime and crucial has become a typical day for every human being in whatever place and situation. Writing is one possible way man can perform said function. Writing is a craft in which every educated person should be killed. It is a

universal skill that everyone should master to a certain extent. Great ideas should be put forward in the best possible way, and great writing is needed to do so.

Effective writing skills are integral in both college education and in the real world of work thereafter. Unfortunately, empirical evidences point to a dismal writing proficiency of many college students. Faculty in the tertiary level have been alarmed over

the inability of many students, English majors included, to write competently.

Pison (2000) concurs with the preceding statement by saying that tertiary institutions are teeming with students who have wealth of ideas but lack the capacity to express them in writing. The situation is further exacerbated by students' aversion to writing.

Language teachers agree about the importance of writing and the imperative for college students to seriously learn the skill, especially since they are expected to be able to present themselves well, and presentation in this technological age, is increasingly coming in the form of writing. As they graduate from college and attempt to get a job, it is mandatory for them to submit a resume or curriculum vitae and even an application letter. Poor writing could muddle the meaning of words, sentences, and even texts and is certainly a big turn off for prospective employers.

Every time teachers of English give students writing tasks, they always complain about the poor quality of outputs the latter turn in. Student outputs contain the whole range of grammar issues, and the way teachers correct them has become a field of interest among researchers this past decade. The most popular and convenient way of doing such is recast whereby the teachers reformulate parts of the student's writing, minus the error, and all the student needs to do is to rewrite the recast version of the paper. Ellis (2009) says such strategy requires minimal processing on the part of the learners and thus, although it helps to produce the correct form when they revise their writing, it does not contribute to long-term learning as this does not trigger their internal monitor to work.

Since the goal of education is long-term that leads to independent learning, this research focused on the use of metalinguistic corrective feedback, a correction strategy that

enables learners to correct their own errors in order to get the new language right (Ellis, 2010). This strategy uses codes or labels to identify the errors, and thus forces the learners to formulate rules about a particular grammatical feature. Formulating grammatical rules based on the feedback can lead to longer term effects on learners' ability to avoid errors and contributes to their holistic language development.

Thus, this study will provide language teachers insights on how to design instructional and assessment strategies aimed at comprehensively developing learners' communicative competencies.

This study is guided by the theories and models of writing by Hedge (1998) Hyland (2003), Trupe (2001) error and error analysis by Brown (2000), Doff (1998), Abott & Wingard (2007), Lott (2005), Allright & Bailey (1991) and Beretta (1999), error correction by Ferris (2002), Knoblauch & Bannon (1982), Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinte (1997), Ellis (2010) & Van Beuningen (2010), Long (1996), Schmidt (2001), & Corpuz (2011), and metalinguistic corrective feedback by Ellis (2010) and Hyland (2010).

Writing

In the Philippines where English is an L2, learners are expected to do their writing using the language. According to Hedge (1998), effective writing requires a number of things including a high degree of development in the organization of ideas, a high degree of grammatical accuracy to avoid ambiguity of meaning, the use of complex grammatical devices for emphasis, and careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the readers and intended readers.

Literatures in language teaching according to Hyland (2003) indicate that most writing teachers influenced by structural linguistics and behaviorists usually treated writing as a product and often put strong focus on linguistic knowledge, vocabulary choices, and syntactic patterns that are essential to the formation of written texts as products.

Conversely, language teachers subscribing to the process approach would intervene in the students' writing process at any stage they are involved in while students pay more attention to their topic, maintain more information, and their insights become more effective when they are asked to spend more time in their writing. Trupe (2001) believes that such intervention results in better products.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1999) assert that knowing how to write is among the most important skills that academically oriented L2 learners need to develop. At advanced level of writing in the tertiary level, L2 learners cannot evade the writing of research papers, reports, abstracts, and proposals in the English language. They even have to write memos, professional letters, and project analyses.

Having the ability to write well is a must for students in the tertiary level as this will enable them to cope with the demands of their college course and in order to come up with quality writing outputs, they need to hone their writing abilities. In the same vein, Hughey, J. (1983) averred that for tertiary students to produce excellent writing, they need not only be proficient in the medium language but also with its demands as spelled out by the following criteria, namely: vocabulary, language use, mechanics and organization. She further underscored that as a lifetime skill, writing serves four crucial, enduring purposes for the learner: communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and control of personal environment.

Communicating these functions and benefits of writing is incumbent upon teachers, and helping L2 learners actualize the aforementioned purposes is their most critical responsibility.

A significant amount of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) demonstrates writing as one of the strongest factors that engages students with the learning process and that writing is a major component of students' professional careers. Though writing has been given importance from the start of children's education, written outputs of L2 learners contain a wide array of grammatical and rhetorical errors.

Error analysis

Teachers have contrasting reactions to student error. While there are those who welcome it, there are more who frown and get piqued every time their students commit it.

Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves mistakes. While observation shows that teachers are disgusted by their students errors, Doff (1998) claims that errors are useful in showing what students have not learned and need to further master. Abott & Wingard (2007) concur that mistakes are an inevitable component of learning, and that they occur and recur, sometimes at a frequency one finds alarming.

While Lott (2005) considers L1 interference, overgeneralization of rules, responding to the demands of complex communication, and carelessness as causes of errors and mistakes, Brown (2000) presents a number of error categories which have been identified in researches on language learning.

The first comprises errors of additives, omission, substitution, and ordering. For instance, L2 learners might add a "do" auxiliary unnecessarily (Does he can sing?), omit obligatory article (I went to movies), substitute lexical categories (I lost

my road), or confuse word order (I to the store went).

The second category involves errors committed along the levels of language, namely: phonology; morphology, lexicon, and orthography; grammar; and discourse. Classifying errors either as global or local constitutes the third category. He defines global as errors that hinder communication as they prevent the hearer/reader from comprehending the message and local, on the other hand, as minor violation of rules in one part of the utterance.

Still on errors by L2 learners, Allright & Bailey (1991) make a clear distinction between error and mistake. Errors, according to them, are regular patterns in the learner's speech. This means the errors have become habitual, and since no one has ever attempted to make necessary corrections, these became fossilized or permanent. Mistakes, on the other hand, are mere memory lapses.

Meanwhile, Beretta (1999) categorized errors as either linguistic or content. The former is morph syntactic/phonological in nature while the latter entails responses by a student to a teacher's question that lacks propositional content. The real issue that confronts the teacher, however, is the task of error correction.

Error correction

Error correction, whether oral or written, is the process of providing clear, comprehensive, and consistent corrective feedback on students' grammatical errors for the purpose of improving their ability to write accurately (Ferris, 2002). In addition, Knoblauch & Brannon (1982) argued that providing written error correction is indispensable because it plays an important role in guiding, motivating, and encouraging learners to improve their accuracy in L2 writing. Thus, even if the process of

providing corrective feedback is difficult and time-consuming, teachers still prefer to do it because doing so allows for individualized teacher-to-student communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of an L2 writing class (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinte, 1997).

Many SLA authorities identified a number of roles error correction serves in L2 instruction. Ellis (2010) and Van Beuningen (2010) both believe that as one of the pedagogical tools, error correction can be an effective form-on-focus instrument. According to Long (1996), the focus-on-form approach explicitly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lesson, thereby helping students to produce grammatically correct L2 structures applicable for communication purposes.

Another role of error correction is it facilitates "noticing." The noticing theory or "selective attention" claims that "noticing" or "selective attention" triggers the processing of utterances during L2 learning. In order for students to learn any aspect of the L2, they need to "notice" their language deficits and be directed to specific forms and in so doing, they will recognize the correct features of the L2 (Schmidt, 2001). This indicates that error correction functions as "noticing facilitator" that directs the attention of the L2 students not only towards errors but also towards the correct grammatical form of the TL (Curpoz, 2011).

Metalinguistic corrective feedback

Corrective feedback is defined by Lightbrown & Spada (1990) as any indication to the learners that their use of the TL is incorrect and includes various responses that the learners receive. Reformulation or providing correct forms of grammatical errors has been the most popular and convenient technique employed by many

language teachers (Hendrickson, 1984). However, the use of various types of corrective feedback has been recommended as it is more effective than simply using a single technique.

Ellis (2009) and Van Beuningen (2010) proposed two general contrasting approaches to providing written error correction as follows: comprehensive or unfocused and selective or focused. The former involves the teachers correcting all errors in students' written outputs, while the latter targets specific linguistic features only. In comparing the two approaches, Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) argue that the use of the comprehensive approach is weakened by the L2 students' limited processing capacity as they are required to cope with written error correction that covers a wide range of linguistic features, resulting in cognitive overload. Conversely, Ellis (2009) claims the selective approach to be more effective as L2 students would only examine multiple corrections of a single error.

Meanwhile, Ferris (2002) identifies two specific error correction approaches, namely: explicit and implicit. He defines explicit error correction also referred to as "direct" or "overt" as the type of feedback where the L2 teachers directly provide the correct forms or structures to explicitly show the error in the students' written text and all the students have to do is to rewrite their corrected outputs. He defines implicit error correction, on the other hand, as a type of feedback where L2 teachers simply show that an error has been committed by simply encircling or providing marginal descriptions or correction codes.

This type of corrective feedback is usually referred to as metalinguistic feedback. Lyster and Ranta (1997) defined it as a task that "contains either comments, information or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct

form". It aims at pointing out "the nature of the error but attempts to elicit the information from the student."

Lyster and Ranta (1997) found in their study of students of French in immersion courses that this type of feedback led to learner uptake in 86% of the cases studied and this along with elicitation and clarification of requests led to student-generated repair. Hyland (2010) favors this approach because it allows language teachers to provide implicit feedback, reducing the negative and disheartening effects of indicating errors done explicitly using red markings.

METHODOLOGY

The study determined the effect of metalinguistic corrective feedback on the writing proficiency of the BSE II English students of the College of Teacher Education, University of Northern Philippine, Vigan City, First Semester, School Year 2016-2017. Specifically, it looked into the difference in the students' writing proficiency before and after exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback and their progressive writing proficiency during the use of MCF.

The data were gathered during the First Semester of School Year 2016-2017. A pretest was administered in the first week of classes in August. The results were evaluated using a rubric to determine their pretest writing proficiency. The treatment followed and the study group were provided explicit instruction on the target form which they subsequently practiced in a free writing task. Each written output of the students were treated with metalinguistic corrective feedback. The experiment lasted from August to December 2016. The students were given formative assessment every second week each month.

After the end of the experiment, the students were given a posttest equivalent to the pretest, the results of which were

evaluated using the same rubric used in the pretest. The pretest and posttest results were compared to determine the effect of

metalinguistic corrective feedback on the students writing proficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1

Students' writing proficiency before exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback

Criteria	Mean	DR
Content	2.50	Good
Organization	2.57	Good
Vocabulary	3.17	Good
Language Use	2.61	Good
Mechanics	2.53	Good
Overall	2.68	Good

Norms:

Range of Scores

3.26 – 4.0
2.51 – 3.25
1.76 – 2.50
1.00 – 1.75

Descriptive Rating

Very Good (VG)
Good (G)
Poor (P)
Very Poor (VP)

The overall writing proficiency level of the students before their exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback is “Good” as backed up by the mean rating of 2.68. Taking their proficiency per writing criterion, the students are “Good” in content (2.5), organization (2.57), vocabulary (3.17), language use (2.61), and mechanics (2.53).

This means the students had some knowledge of the subject as their written outputs reflected good amount of relevant information, personal knowledge and experience, examples, and opinions; only that their written outputs lacked details which resulted in the limited development of their

thesis. Also, their ideas are logical but somewhat choppy, loosely organized, and with limited support. In addition, they have adequate vocabulary range, occasional errors along word/idiom form, choice, and usage although their meaning is not obscured. In the same vein, they have effective simple constructions, minor problems in complex constructions, several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured. Finally, the students have occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing.

Table 2

Students' writing proficiency after exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback

Criteria	Mean	DR
Content	3.44	Very Good
Organization	3.53	Very Good
Vocabulary	3.30	Very Good
Language Use	3.57	Very Good
Mechanics	3.41	Very Good
Overall	3.45	Very Good

Norms:

Range of Scores

3.26 – 4.0

2.51 – 3.25

1.76 – 2.50

1.00 – 1.75

Descriptive Rating

Very Good (VG)

Good (G)

Poor (P)

Very Poor (VP)

As indicated in the table, the overall writing proficiency of the students improved to “Very Good” after their exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback. This is evidenced by the computed overall mean rating of 3.45. It is worthy to note that students’ mean ratings per writing proficiency indicator also improved as follows: content (3.44), organization (3.53), vocabulary (3.30), language use (3.57), and mechanics (3.41), all described as “Very Good.”

This means that metalinguistic corrective feedback improved the writing proficiency of the students. It implies, too, that the corrective strategy is effective as it led to significantly fewer writing errors. It also implies that through the use of the treatment, the students were able to provide substantive facts, ideas, opinions and information relevant to the assigned topic; fluently and clearly expressed these ideas

logically and cohesively; used a sophisticated range of vocabulary and idiom and appropriate register; employed effective complex constructions with few grammar issues; and demonstrated mastery of conventions as manifested by their few errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing.

Ellis (2009) stated that since the strategy is grounded on metacognition, it then provides a condition in which learners could test their grammatical knowledge in the light of the feedback provided, thus leading to significant gains in their writing proficiency. This result affirms the findings of Ferris (2010) stating that metalinguistic corrective feedback improves grammatical accuracy over time and that of Rassaei & Moinzadeh (2011) which indicated that MCF is more effective than the other types of corrective feedback.

Table 3
The progressive writing proficiency of the students

Criteria	August		September		October		November		December	
	Mean	DR	Mean	DR	Mean	DR	Mean	DR	Mean	DR
Content	2.51	G	2.55	G	3.27	VG	3.52	VG	3.67	VG
Organization	2.53	G	2.57	G	3.45	VG	3.62	VG	3.72	VG
Vocabulary	3.12	G	3.14	G	3.55	VG	3.71	VG	3.76	VG
Language Use	2.54	G	2.56	G	3.61	VG	3.75	VG	3.80	VG
Mechanics	2.55	G	2.58	G	3.40	VG	3.56	VG	3.77	VG
Overall	2.65	G	2.68	G	3.46	VG	3.63	VG	3.74	VG

Norms:

Range of Scores

3.26 – 4.0

2.51 – 3.25

1.76 – 2.50

1.00 – 1.75

Descriptive Rating

Very Good (VG)

Good (G)

Poor (P)

Very Poor (VP)

The table shows the level of writing proficiency of the students from August to December 2016. The data were taken from the formative assessment given to the students in each month.

As the table indicates, the students' writing proficiency level in their first output given in August is "Good" with a mean rating of 2.65. In the same vein, they are "Good" in content (2.51), organization (2.53), vocabulary (3.12), language use (2.54), and mechanics (2.55).

In addition, they are "Good" in their second output given in September as evidenced by the overall mean rating of 2.68. Their proficiency level in terms of content (2.55), organization (2.57), vocabulary (3.14), language use (2.56), and mechanics (2.58) remained "Good."

Notably, for their third output in October, the students posted a "Very Good" level of writing proficiency as backed up by the mean rating of 3.46. They registered same proficiency level per criterion: content (3.27), organization (3.45), vocabulary (3.55), language use (3.61), and mechanics (3.4).

They likewise maintained a "Very Good" level of writing proficiency in their fourth writing exercise based on the overall mean score of 3.63 and are "Very Good" in content (3.52), organization (3.62), vocabulary (3.71), language use (3.75), and mechanics (3.56).

The students remained "Very Good" in their last writing output as indicated by their overall mean rating of 3.74 and maintained the same level in each writing indicator: content (3.67), organization (3.72), vocabulary (3.76), language use (3.8), and mechanics (3.77).

It is noticeable that the students improved in their numerical scores in every writing exercise, and this could be attributed to the fact that MCF is focused on syntax (Ellis, 2009). In the same vein, the improvement of the students in all writing indicators could be due to the fact that students become more confident in expressing their ideas when they are given feedbacks. Glover & Law (2002) claim that students are more likely to learn effectively if feedback is used.

Furthermore, the positive results over the experiment's duration point to the effectiveness of the MCF. Their continued exposure to the strategy obviously equipped them with the skills to do self-repair. Lyster (2007) argued that self-repair following a metalinguistic corrective feedback requires a deeper level of processing, which is likely to destabilize interlanguage forms as learners are pushed to reanalyze interlanguage presentations and to attend to retrieval of alternative forms, thus leading to decreased frequency of errors over time as observed in this study.

In other words, as Rovegno (2015) pointed out, a systematic written corrective feedback helps learners focus on specific aspects of language and provides them tools to edit and self-correct their work. It helps in developing their internal monitor. By engaging in such metalinguistic tasks, they need to draw on their pre-existing language knowledge (given-to-new principle) and compare their internal monitor, find discrepancies and be able to adjust the form to match the intended meaning. This type of activity tries to reflect on what Batstone and Ellis (2009) defined as the awareness principle. The study effectuated this in the experiment, thus the very good results.

Table 4
Significant difference in the writing proficiency of students before and after exposure to metalinguistic corrective feedback

Components	t-value	t-prob
Content	3.651**	.001
Organization	3.850**	.000
Vocabulary	0.915	.364
Language Use	3.791**	.000
Mechanics	3.337**	.001
Overall	5.959**	.000

** α . at .01 probability level

As a whole, the students' posttest mean scores are significantly higher than their pretest mean scores based on the overall obtained t-value of 5.959 which is significant at .01 probability level.

A closer inspection of the results shows that except for vocabulary (.915), the students scored significantly higher in the posttest as indicated by the obtained t-values of 3.651 for content, 3.850 for organization, 3.791 for language use, and 3.337 for mechanics.

This further proves the positive impact of metalinguistic corrective feedback on student writing proficiency. As Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima (2008) claimed, metalinguistic corrective feedback aids the process of language acquisition by the increase in control of linguistic form that has already been partially internalized. Therefore, increased exposure to this strategy decreases errors and increases proficiency, thus the considerable amount of improvement from the students pretest to the posttest.

Meanwhile, the non-significant difference in their score along vocabulary, at least numerically, could be explained by the fact that the students already posted a high score along this component in the pretest (3.17/Good) which slightly increased in the

posttest (3.30/Very Good). Descriptively, however, they still improved from "Good" to "Very Good." Besides, available studies in second language acquisition (SLA) could only point to the effectiveness of metalinguistic corrective feedback along the acquisition and mastery of linguistic forms. Its effectiveness in vocabulary building is still to be established.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, it is concluded that the overall writing proficiency of the students improved from "Good" to "Very Good" after the use of metalinguistic corrective feedback. Likewise, their proficiency along the specific writing indicators improved from "Good" to "Very Good" after their exposure to the treatment. Thus, metalinguistic corrective feedback is effective in enhancing the writing proficiency of the students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the use metalinguistic corrective feedback resulted in significant writing improvement among students, it is recommended that writing teachers use it in their classes. This will enable the students to monitor and become more responsible of their errors and be able to do self-repair. Also,

teachers may want to try other written corrective feedback types to be able to vary their strategies in helping the students improve their language proficiency in general and writing proficiency in particular.

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