

Examining the Effects of Conferencing and Reflection Paper in an

EFL Writing Class

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Abstract: *L2 writing debate regarding the value of students' feedback on their writing has been prominent in recent years. This study explores whether the types of feedbacks (student-teacher conferences; students' reflection paper) given to college sophomore, English-major students on their writing organization (e.g., thesis and topic sentences generating) and linguistic errors (e.g., subject and verb argument, verb tenses) resulted in improved their writing works over a 18 week period. Thirty EFL Chinese students were asked to compose two writings, a narrative essay and an expository essay. After that, participants had opportunities to discuss their works during student-teacher 15-minutes individual conferences. Analyses of their completed essays and reflection paper revealed that these students had positive attitude toward student-teacher conferences and facilitated them generate and organize their ideas in their drafts. Additionally, students were more likely to pay attention to their organization instead of their grammar errors after having writing conferences with a teacher. Finally, the students' reflection papers showed that students were more aware of self-correction about their linguistic errors in their revised subsequent drafts after having conferences with a teacher. Their self-correction concerning organization and grammar errors had a significant effect for the teacher's written feedback and conferences. Some pedagogical suggestions are provided for effectively using student-teacher conferences and students' reflection paper in second- and foreign language writing classrooms.*

Key Words: *EFL writing; writing conferences; reflection paper*

Introduction

Research on the second language (L2) writing with regard to feedback has thrived in recent years. There is a notable trend among second language writing classrooms which relies on increasingly L2 writing instructors to help them solve problems in terms of rhetorical, unfamiliar cultural, and linguistic writing context (Harris & Silva, 1993). Providing feedback on L2 writers plays an essential role in their written tasks. Since the process approach predominates in L2 writing currently, it is vital for second party to provide any feedback. Even though there is a growing body of research on written feedback strategies, no research has investigated the effect of other feedback strategies, such as teacher-student conferences, peer-editing sessions, and the keeping of error logs (Ferris, 2002). Many writing instructors regard one-to-one teacher-student conferences as being more effective than written corrective feedback

since they offer an opportunity for instruction, clarification, and negotiation (Ferris, 2002; Ferris& Hedgcock, 1998). In addition, the goal of feedback is to teach skills that help students improve their writing proficiency and are able produce with clarity and unity. However, there is limited empirical research concerning the effects of teacher-student conferences in second language writing.

The other issue that needs further investigation is learners' teacher-student conference and their revision tasks. Reflective journal can help L2 writers raise their awareness and increase autonomy, as Nunan (1988) depicted that learners should develop "a critical self-consciousness of their role as active agents in the language learning process. "Through the learning process, learners can cultivate their language skills; therefore, learners' self-consciousness and language skills are two important goals of reflective journal when they compare their writing tasks. Many students have difficulties writing their reflective journal; it is necessary for instructors to provide clearer guidelines for reflective journal (Matsumoto, 1996). As mentioned before, a teacher-student conference has proven to be beneficial for both teacher and students; however, very few studies have conducted how organized reflective journal on the conferencing experience helps writers improve their writing process. This study therefore, focused on the use of teacher-students conferences and their reflection journal.

Review of Literature

An increasing number of studies on L1 and L2 composition have emphasized the importance of the role of writing instructors in providing feedback on student writing. Leki (1990) pointed out that when presented written feedback on the content, students may not read the annotations, may read them but not understand, or may understand them. Sometime students didn't know how to respond to them. Despite these negative comments, there are some effective methods of teacher feedback. For example, Fathman and Walley (1990) noted that when students received grammar feedback that revealed the places but not type of errors, the students revised their grammar errors greatly on their subsequent revised paper. They found that students in two feedback groups who received error feedback had significantly fewer grammatical errors on a revision than groups who received only content feedback or no feedback. Frodesen (2001) also discovered that the indirect teacher's feedback helped students' writing more than direct correction feedback. Direct feedback is given when the instructor provided the correct form for students if students need to make the correction for their final version. However, indirect feedback is given when the teacher shows the errors in students' writing task, but it doesn't provide the correction. Many researchers claimed that indirect feedback is preferable for most students since it leads to students reflect about linguistic forms that may make a huge impact on their long-term acquisition (Reid, 1998).

One-to-one, student-teacher conferencing was considered the effective written feedback (Brender,1998; Fregeau,1999). Students may not understand what the teacher writes about the

feedback; therefore, conferencing allows both students and the teachers explore the errors arising from students' writing and feedback and then develop strategies for the subsequent revised writing. One study (Bitchener et al, 2005) investigated the effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing, including direct, explicit written feedback and student-teacher five minute individual conferences; direct, explicit written feedback only; no corrective feedback. The researchers conducted 53 adult migrant students on three types of errors (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) and indicated that the combination of full, explicit written feedback and one-to-one conference feedback enable L2 writers to use the past simple tense and the definite article with significantly greater accuracy in their new pieces of writing than was the use of prepositions. This finding demonstrated that indirect feedback is more effective than direct feedback in terms of their improvement of accuracy of their writing. The results echoed earlier studies (Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Williams, 2003) that one-to-one teacher-student conference is more effective than clearly in their writing tasks and get clarification from teachers' comments. Besides, teachers can use face-to-face conferencing to help students with their specific writing problems during the conferencing sessions. Due to the absence of published empirical research, the further study has to examine the effects of student-teacher conferencing on their improved writing tasks.

Regarding the research evidence on the effect of reflection paper on student writings, many teachers and practitioners have found that keeping a journal helps them reflect on their experience that deepen their understanding of the teaching process (Holten & Brinton, 1995; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In addition, Freeman (1992) also pointed out that the key to successful teaching is to help teachers and learners grow their awareness and understanding of the language teaching and learning process. Therefore, some researchers and teachers have implemented this method to have their students reflect in writing using "reflective journal" (Carroll, 1994), and "learning logs" (Gottlieb, 1995) to increase students' awareness and autonomy. In Bray and Harsch's (1996) study, ESL Japanese students were asked to write reflection paper in their classroom. The format of journals contained specific questions for students to answer, review and reflect what they learned. By the end of each classroom, students worked on their reflection journals. They discovered that the feedback from students' reflection journals were beneficial for teachers to aware their teaching process, adjust their teaching strategies and another criterion for evaluation of students' process. For students, reflection journals increase their awareness and autonomy, review and enhance their use of content, and opportunities for teachers and students to communicate. However, this study only examined that Japanese students learned English in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes in Japanese university. This current study investigated the use of reflective journals from students' feedback in their English composition process after holding conferences with teachers. Moreover, the research examined the effects of student-teacher conferences and reflection journals on students' composition process.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were 28 Applied English majors from I-Shou University in Taiwan. They were 23 female and 5 male students from age 20 to age 23. Before entering university, these students had already had 8 years of learning English as a foreign language with an average of 3 hours of class per week. By the time they enrolled the university, they had learned about 3000 words, and they could read intermediate English texts and write short composition; however, they did not receive any systematic training in English writing.

Participants took English essay writing courses consisting three hours per week for a semester (18 weeks). Their writing performances were assessed based on their weekly reflection journals and assignments, a mid-term exam, final exam and class participation. In this writing course, they were also expected to develop academic writing skills through the process of pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing, and conferencing and self –reflection on a variety of topics. Moreover, the students were exposed to a series of organizational and grammatical structures related to academic discourse through authentic readings and pre-writing or post-writing activities.

Writing Tasks

There were two writing tasks: a narrative and an expository essay. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), narration is the least cognitively demanding writing task, whereas argument is considered to be the most demanding. Therefore, the researcher inferred that these student writers may perform better in writing a narrative essay than writing an argumentative essay. Regarding an expository essay, student writers made up a story using a picture from English newspaper. Participants had different pictures and described the details in the picture. Participants were required to complete the writing more than 400 words during each session.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in one sophomore writing class. Since the researcher taught this class, the think-aloud method was implemented to collect data from student-teacher conferences and their reflection journals. In the first session, participants completed the narrative essay. In the second session (8 weeks later), students were asked to write the narrative essay. During each writing session, all participants met the researcher individually every week. Besides, the researcher was instructed to engage the participants in a conversation about their writing and to encourage them input during conferences (Goldstein and Conrad, 1990). As Ferris (1995) and Leki (1990) mentioned, the effectiveness of different types of written teacher feedback on producing subsequent students' revisions was also reviewed. Therefore, the researcher instructed students to discuss major errors and help them clarify the content, organization, and grammar in

their writing tasks during the conferences. The researcher wrote what the participants talked about their writing tasks in terms of their problems, difficulties and successes.

After conferencing with the researcher, participants were asked to write their reflection journals based on teacher-student conference conversation. The reflection journal included questions targeting specific problems, for example, “what do you encounter any problems when you write this essay?” or “what do you think the most important part that you should consider the most unimportant part during your writing process?” In their reflection journals, student writers had to develop strategies for improvement in their subsequent revised writing after the teacher gave the feedback.

Data Analysis

Student-teacher conferencing dialogues and students reflective journals were transcribed into think-aloud protocols based on their think-aloud records and reflection papers. Then the data were coded into several categories. The researcher considered that student writers may have different concerns as they composed their writing tasks. They are five categories: organization, contents, generation of ideas, grammar, and mechanics. In order to check the intercoder reliability, the researcher coded two think-aloud protocols randomly and reached an agreement of 85%.

Findings

Overwhelmingly, twenty-eight participants showed that student-teacher conferences did help them improve second outline when they composed the first essay-the narration. Since all participants needed to write the two outlines, the first one and second (revised) one, most participants found that the first outline gave them a big picture or direction to get their ideas. On average, eighteen student writers considered that they should divide their ideas into different parts and 8 student writers pointed out the content of the first outline lacked the sufficient information. Some student writers discussed with the researcher that they had difficulties organizing their thoughts and didn't know how to put their thoughts into the paper and they stressed that having conferences with the teachers was really helpful them to revise their outline. For example, one student writer wrote in her reflective journal:

“After discussed with the teacher about my outline of my favorite movie, I learned more how to do an outline and how to divide my ideas into different parts which I considered very important. My first draft had some mistakes because I didn't type one of the important parts in the movie and did not provide enough information of the main character of the movie but after the short meeting with the teacher I realized that I forgot this part and provide not enough information. Then when I was in my dormitory looking through my outline and thinking about what the teacher explained me about it and tried to correct my mistakes; focus on those mistakes and do my outline better and make those important parts into short

sentences.” (Tina)

After having twice conferences with the instructor, fifteen student writers (54%) reported that they fixed the organization and content problems; while 8 student writers (29%) presented that they add more information or eliminate unimportant ideas. Student writers concluded that conferencing really facilitates their second outlining drafting. For example, two student writers wrote in the reflection paper:

“I think that my outline improve my abilities of organization. From first outline to second outline, I learn how to organize the plots and how to put the right order to let my readers know the content.” (Pauline)

“After talking with the teachers, I can improve the essay form my outline, and basically my outline is the core of my whole essay. Without outline, the ideas will be quite messy and no following goal. Outline is a powerful supporting tool in writing for me.” (Jazz)

Pauline and Jazz both agreed that organization played an essential role when they wrote an outline. In addition, they consider the student-teacher conference helped them guide their direction of writing process and they can follow the main points of the outline to write their subsequent drafts.

Table 1 showed that the participants describe their most difficulty when composing their writing tasks.

Table 1

Most difficulty part when participants composed their writing ($N=28$)

Most Difficulty	Frequency	Percent
Organization	11	39%
Vocabulary	6	21%
Grammar	4	14%
Generate Thesis/Topic	1	4%
Content	5	18%
Coherence	1	4%

Organization (39%) was the most difficult part when student writer composed their writing, followed by vocabulary (21%), content (18%), and grammar (14%). Only one student (4%) each presented that they have problems with generating the thesis and topic sentences and coherence (e.g., how to write sentence clearly and smoothly).

Table 2 indicated that student writers reflected what the most important part when composing an essay.

Table 2

The most important part participants consider their writing

Most Important	Frequency	Percent
Organization	10	36%
Content	10	36%
Content & Organization/	4	14%
Spelling & Grammar	3	11%
Spelling	1	3%

Twenty-four student writers (72%) pointed out the organization and content were the important parts that they would each take into account (36%), followed by content and organization (14%), spelling and grammar (11%), and spelling (3%). It was noted that organization and content were the two essential elements as the student writers considered. One student writers wrote in her reflective paper:

“I think organization is very important part. It is because English composition is quite different form Chinese composition. English composition requires describing clearly and directly. I think this is also most Taiwanese students’ problem.” (Maggie)

Surprisingly, Maggie could identify her organization problem and compare the difference between Chinese and English writing. In other words, she clarified that the most difficulty was the organization in English composition that required directly and clearly. Moreover, quite a few student writer expressed that content was their important consideration during the writing process. Two student writers expressed:

“I think the most important part my writing process is the content. If my essay writing lacks content, readers will think it is a very boring task. Thus, when I was writing my essay I care the content of my essay most.” (Vivien)

and

“I think the most important part is content. Only good content cannot be replaced. We can improve our spelling and grammar, but it is difficult to change the content.” (Joyce)

Indeed, student writers were aware of the importance of content rather than mechanism. They were willing to spend more time generating their ideas during their composing process. Five student writers indicated that organization, content, grammar, and spelling were all important. They reflected that each part play an essential part and cannot be ignorant each one. One student writer expressed:

“I will consider that each part is very important. If I neglect any of them, I will feel me essay incomplete, and maybe will not be a good essay. I try to have a good organization and content, and when I wrote my essay, I was careful about the spelling and the grammar. In my opinion, I think each one is necessary essence in one item. If the item lacks one of them, the item will become broken. So they are all vital components in one essay. When I judge if an essay is good or not, these are the basic parts that I will check out.” (Jazz)

Still, a few students asserted that organization, content, grammar and spelling were indispensable when it mentioned to defining the components of a good essay. These student writers were concerned about each component when they compose their essay.

Conclusion

To contribute to the need for further studies on the value of providing correcting feedback (e.g., student-teacher conferences and students' reflective paper) to ESL/EFL writers (Ferris,1999), this study presented a case for making individually conferencing and reflection through journal writing an integral part of L2 writing feedback. The conferences during the outlining and composing processes actively engaged both the students and the writing instructor, each continuously evaluating himself or herself as a learner and a writer. For L2 student writers, conferences and the reflection paper provide useful opportunities to become aware of their writing process, especially participants were motivated by the conferencing and reflection paper. By reflecting on their conferencing experiences, a teacher can observe their students' progress and difficulties and notice how one student develop their outline into an essay. Most importantly, student writers were aware of themselves as writers, and they were concerned about their organization, content, grammar, and spelling. As a result, L2 student writers develop their writing skills not only as learners, but also as writers and creators. Teachers can use conferences and reflection paper to understand students' progress and explain their comments to the students. Conferencing and reflective paper are really useful vehicles that provide both teachers and students to explore writing in English.

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