THE EFFECT OF THE INSTRUCTOR'S FEEDBACK STRATEGIES ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENTS' SHORT ESSAY WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The study interpreted in this article investigated the effect of the instructor's feedback strategies on the improvement of students' writing skills, especially their ability to eliminate irrelevant sentences and to avoid awkward structures. A review of the related literature including the role of teacher's feedback in the process writing approach; principles and conditions of good feedback practice; forms and types of feedback; and previous research evidence on the benefits of feedback provides the theoretical base for this study in which 48 English sophomores participated. The collected data consisted of 48 comparison and contrast compositions submitted in the 12th week of the 1st semester and 39 questionnaire surveys completed on the final day of the class meeting. After marking these compositions it was found that the number of the two typical errors (irrelevant sentences and awkward structures) was significantly reduced in comparison with the previous ones. This is also in line with the positive result of the survey on the students' evaluation of feedback strategies. However, some limitations are inevitable, so recommendations for further studies on this issue can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

In Ho Chi Minh City Open University, students have to study three compulsory academic writing courses. After finishing Writing Course One, students are expected to write well-developed paragraphs; and writing short essays including three or four paragraphs is the main objective of Writing Course Two. When attending the second writing course, students have some difficulties in writing short essays. After the first two chapters (how to write a descriptive composition and a narrative composition) of this course, the instructor found that students dealt with some difficulties in writing introduction with the hook, the relevant background information and a well-stated thesis statement; organizing ideas in the body paragraph; and using appropriate language in these two types of composition. In order to help students to overcome these problems to improve their short essay writing skills, the classroom instructor employed various feedback strategies as a tool to support their writing development. Therefore, this study examined the effect of the instructor's feedback strategies on the improvement of students' short essay writing skills; however, only two common problems: irrelevant sentences and awkward structures were taken into consideration. These problems can be researchable through the collecting and synthesizing of related empirical studies on similar topics, the analysis of students' performance of opinion and comparative-contrast compositions and the result of the survey to investigate students' reactions

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to the instructor's feedback strategies on their short compositions conducted at the end of the writing course.

For many years, most of the writing teachers of the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City Open University have applied the same marking scale to evaluate students' essays although they could have different ways to teach writing as well as to give feedback on students' writing performance. Some teachers often give direct corrective feedback whereas others have both direct and indirect feedback as well as reader-based feedback. There has never been any research on the influence of the types of the instructor's feedback on students' development of writing skills, so it is hoped that the findings of this action research will help the instructor as well as writing teachers in HCMCOU to raise their awareness of the great value of the instructor feedback on students' writing performance and what kinds of feedback should be given in order that students can develop their writing skills and they may nurture their confidence as writers. This article includes five main parts: (1) the introduction, (2) the review of the related literature, (3) methodology, (4) results and discussion; and (5) conclusion.

Review of Related Literature

Process Writing and Feedback

According to Heald–Taylor (1986), "Process writing is an approach which encourages ESL youngsters to communicate their own written messages while simultaneously developing their literacy skills in speaking and reading rather than delaying involvement in the writing process, as advocated in the past, until students have perfected their abilities in handwriting, reading, phonetics, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In Process Writing the communication of the message is paramount and therefore the developing, but inaccurate, attempts at handwriting, spelling, and grammar are accepted, know that within the process of regular writing opportunities students will gain control of these sub-skills. These skills are further developed in individual and small group conference interviews" (as cited by Jarvis, 2002).

Jones (2011) cited that as its name suggests, the process writing approach is characterized by a shift in focus from the final product to the process of achieving the final product (Matsuda, 2003; Myers, 1997; Tribble, 1996). The process approach has many advantages, including developing student autonomy and evaluative skills by fostering students' sense of ownership and responsibility for revising their own work (Wakabayashi, 2008). Also, the emphasis of process over product has prompted a change in attitudes towards evaluation and assessment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-2005). Gibbs and Simpson (2004-2005) also states if feedback is to support learning, students must have the opportunity to act on it, while Wiggins (2004) maintains that feedback is more beneficial if given during rather than after performance. This supports the research into assessment for learning conducted by Black and William (1998), which further suggests that feedback is more effective when it gives guidance on strengths and weaknesses without a grade being assigned. Process writing lends itself to this approach since feedback on early drafts does not usually include a grade and students have the chance to act on feedback received to improve their essay and developed their writing skills (Carless, 2006; Ferris, 2003) (cited by Jones, 2011).

Teachers usually spend a great deal of time providing feedback to students, so it is important that the feedback have a greater influence on students' writing

development. Verbal or written feedback can be a powerful teaching tool if it is given while students are in the process of writing drafts. Comments on drafts of writing provide students with timely information about the clarity and impact of their writing. When students receive feedback while they are writing, they are more inclined to use it to revise and edit their drafts than they would be if they received suggestions on a graded and polished copy (Nicol & Marfarlane-Dick, 2006). They also have an immediate opportunity to try out suggestions in their writing, allowing for meaningful application of what they have learned from the feedback.

Seven Principles and Conditions of Good Feedback Practice

Nicol & Marfarlane-Dick (2006) synthesized the research literature on good feedback practice including seven principles:

"Good feedback practice:

1. *helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);*

2. *facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;*

3. *delivers high quality information to students about their learning;*

4. *encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;*

5. *encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;*

6. *provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;*

7. *provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching"*.

(Nicol & Marfarlane-Dick, 2006)

Nicol & Marfarlane-Dick (2006) also cited three conditions identified by Sadler (1989) that are necessary for students to benefit from the instructor's feedback in academic writing tasks. First of all, students must know what good performance is. That means they must possess a concept of the goal or standard being aimed for. Then, students must know how their current performance related to good performance. They must be able to compare current and good performance. Finally, students must know how to act to close the gap between current and good performance.

The Writing Instructor Feedback

Feedback plays a central role in developing writing proficiency among second language learners. Feedback as viewed by Furnborough and Truman (2009) entails the existence of gaps between what has been learned and the target competence of the learners, and the efforts undertaken to bridge these gaps. Ferris (1997) states that this feedback is provided to ask for further information, to give directions, suggestions, or requests for revision, to give students new information that will help them revise, and to give positive feedback about what the students have done well. Feedback also comes in various linguistic forms such as questions, statements, imperatives, or exclamations and comments can be softened through the use of a variety of hedging devices. Since teacher responses to student writing are expected to help students develop their ideas fully and present them effectively, feedback needs to cover all aspects of students' written texts, including issues of content, organization, style, grammar and mechanics (cited by Magno and Amarles, 2011).

Types of Feedback

According to Magno & Amarles (2011) three types of feedback on students' written output in their academic writing

classes such as focus on form, content and writing style need to be assessed. These researchers also cited that feedback on form consists of the marks used by the teacher to correct error on grammatical features, capitalizations, punctuations, tenses and other surface features (McNamara, Crossley, & McCarthy, 2010). As Barlett (2007) states feedback on content involves comments on the organization of the idea in the composition. It includes the sufficient thoughts contained in the composition such as providing main and supporting ideas, noting details, and length of the paper. Lastly, since academic writing has its own genre, it is deemed necessary to include writing style as one of the criteria in providing feedback. Feedback on writing style involves assessment of the use of language, persuasion, originality, and creativity (Thais & Zawacki, 2006- cited by Magno & Amarles, 2011).

Elbow (1998) stated that teacher feedback should be both criterion - based and reader-based. Criterion-based feedback indicates how well the writing meets the criteria on scoring guides or rubrics. This feedback refers to features such as the appropriateness of the ideas and information, the level of detail and the chosen point of view. Criterion- based feedback also addresses the clarity of communication through the organization of ideas and the use of writing conventions and effective language. This type of feedback is most useful when students have previously been given the assessment criteria and have a clear understanding of the expectation. However, reader-based feedback reflects the reader's experience of writing. Such feedback identifies images visualized, emotion evoked and words or phrases that had the greatest impact on the reader. It also describes the reader's feeling and summarizes what the writing says to the reader. Because writing is a form of communication, student writers benefit from reader-based feedback as they get a sense of how well their writing achieves the intended communicative purpose (e.g. to inform, to entertain or persuade) (cited by Peterson, 2010).

Previous Research Evidence on Benefits of the Instructor Feedback

Bitchener, Young, and Cameron's (2005) investigation reveals that direct oral feedback in combination with direct written feedback had a greater effect than direct written feedback alone on improved accuracy over time. They also found that the combined feedback option facilitated improvement in the more "treatable" rule-governed features such as the simple past tense and definite article than in the less "treatable" feature like prepositions.

Bitchener and Knoch's study (2008) on the effect of feedback on students' accuracy in the use of two functional uses of the English article system indicated that (1) students who received all three corrective feedback options (direct corrective feedback, written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback, written meta-linguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only; no correct feedback) outperformed those who did not receive written feedback, and (2) students' level of accuracy was retained over seven weeks (cited by Magno and Amarles, 2011).

Jones's action research study (2011) undertaken at a Japanese university introduced an additional stage in the feedback process with a ''feed-forward' form - the term defined by Ducan (2007) applying old feedback to a new task (cited by Jones 2011). The result of this study shows that by applying the feedback dialogue approach which emphasizes feedback as an ongoing process focusing on text, learning context, and the needs of individual students rather than simply

a response to each text in isolation, the instructor can (1) encourage students to make use of final draft feedback and to see as the next step in the process of developing their writing; (2) help students to increase their autonomy; and (3) improve the effectiveness of feedback by finding out what feedback students want and responding to it.

In summary, a review of the related literature on the process writing approach as well as the role of feedback in this writing teaching approach has just been discussed. In fact, to help students to develop their writing skills and nurture their confidence as writers, the instructor's feedback, a powerful teaching tool, should be given during the process of students' draft writing and students should have an opportunity to act on it to close the gap between what has been written by students and what is expected as good performance. Students are also supposed to know the standards and criteria used to evaluate good writing performance as well as the goal of their writing course. The teacher's feedback can come from different linguistic forms and should cover all aspects of students' written texts. The instructor feedback is also expected to be both criteria-based and reader-based.

Implications of the Reviewed Literature

As presented, two problems in students' short compositions: irrelevant sentences and awkward structures were examined in the study interpreted in this article. The instructor employed different feedback strategies a treatment for these problems. For irrelevant sentences, the instructor used four feedback strategies including: (1) indirect feedback or using a code "irre."; (2) indirect feedback with suggestions- using a code and questions or imperatives; (3) direct corrective feedback; that is, the instructor highlighted irrelevant

sentences and asked students to eliminate or revise them; and (4) reader's based feedback- usually positive comments. For awkward structures, only direct corrective feedback strategy was employed as it was thought that students could not revise awkward sentences resulting from translating their ideas from Vietnamese into English. Other feedback strategies such as indirect feedback and reader's based and indirect feedback were also employed for other problems like run-on sentences and faulty of subject and verb agreement. To know the effect of this treatment, the instructor conducted the study which aims at answering two questions below:

1. How do the instructor's four feedback strategies affect the students' ability to develop ideas especially to eliminate irrelevant details to make their compositions unified?

2. Does the instructor's direct corrective feedback strategy help students to avoid awkward structures in their short compositions?

Methodology

Participants, Instructional Context and Treatment

The participants in this study were 48 students of AV10A2 class. These sophomores finished Writing Course One and they were attending Writing Course Two in which they were requested to write short compositions including three or four paragraphs. After fulfilling this writing course, they would be able to write five different kinds of short compositions such as description, narration, opinion, comparative-contrast and cause-effect.

To write these compositions, students were instructed to follow five steps. First of all, they were asked to brainstorm ideas on the topic given by the instructor.

The instructor encouraged them to apply different strategies to brainstorm ideas such as listing ideas, drawing idea maps, group discussion …ect. In the second step, students were helped to make an outline for their composition. They were asked to submit their outlines to get the instructor's feedback. However, because of a large class (48 students), it was impossible for the instructor to give feedback orally to each student in class. Only half of the students in class could get the instructor feedback on their outlines; and the others could have it in two days later (usually several days before the next class meeting). After getting the instructor feedback on their outlines (always feedback on their thesis statement, development of the composition, and language use), students were asked to write their first draft, which is the third step of their composition writing process. After finishing writing the first draft, students exchanged their composition with a partner for peer correction. Later, students were asked to edit their composition and this was the time they used their peer feedback to revise the composition. Finally, they wrote the final draft and submitted their work.

During this course, these students were requested to submit five compositions, two of which were written individually and the others were done in a group of four or five students. Two group assignments are descriptive and narrative compositions. After students submitted two compositions (description and narration) written by a group of students and one done by individual students (an opinion composition), the instructor collected common errors (e.g. language forms, composition forms, and composition development) students made in these compositions. Incorrect language forms analyzed and corrected in class were: (1) awkward structures, (2) run-on sentences,

(3) unparalleled structures, and (4) dangling - misplaced modifiers. Students' problems related to composition forms included: (a) uninteresting/inappropriate hook, lack of background information and unwell-stated thesis statement in the introduction; (b) unbalanced body paragraphs; and (c) the conclusion including one statement that may lead to a new topic. Students' errors on composition development consist of: (i) irrelevant details in the body paragraphs, (ii) not well-organized ideas in the body paragraphs, and (iii) lack of supporting details.

Before instructing students how to write the third type of composition (comparative-contrast compositions), the instructor helped them to correct all of the problems about language forms in three periods. First, the instructor showed students the cause of the problem. For example, most of the awkward sentences made in the opinion composition result from the transferring from Vietnamese into English. Then, the instructor suggested the solution to overcome this problem in the next composition. That means the instructors allowed students to translate their ideas from Vietnamese into English; however, after translating process, students were advised to reexamine the structure if it was grammatically correct. If it was incorrect, they were asked to revise it and this was the time they had to apply what they already studied in the "Basic Grammar Course" and "Translation Practice Course One". The instructor also instructed students how to revise run-on sentences, unparalleled structures and dangling or misplaced modifiers. They were also provided an extra lesson on different ways to overcome dangling or misplaced modifiers for self-studying at home.

Instruments

To obtain the aims formulated in the

previous part of this article, the author used two types of instrument: (1) students' compositions marked by the instructor and (2) the questionnaire to collect students' evaluation of the instructor's feedback strategies.

i) The instructor's evaluation of students' composition

The second individual writing assignment each student submitted was a comparative-contrast composition. In this composition, the instructor examined whether or not an awkward structure could be found in order to get the answer to the research question how the instructor direct corrective feedback as well as treatment of this problem affected students' sentence writing skills. Also, in students' comparative compositions, irrelevant sentences were counted to know if the instructor indirect feedback was still positive when students wrote their second individual composition.

ii) Description of the questionnaire

Based on the criteria used by writing teachers in the faculty of foreign languages to assess students' compositions and the literature on different forms and types of feedback on students' writing performance in the previous part of this article, the instructor conducted the questionnaire in order to know how students evaluate the instructor's feedback strategies. Students were asked to evaluate each feedback strategy from 5 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest).The questionnaire includes three main parts: (1) students' difficulties in writing short compositions; (2) students' evaluation of the instructor's feedback; and (3) students' evaluation of the instructor's supports during the writing course. However, only the second part of the questionnaire was used and interpreted in this article. The other parts would be used for the instructor's own purpose. There are two main parts in the

students' evaluation of feedback strategies employed by the instructor:

a. composition development (especially the unity of the composition) consisting of four feedback strategies such as indirect feedback (using codes); indirect feedback with correction suggestions (e.g. imperatives, questions); direct corrective feedback; and reader-based feedback.

b. language use also including four feedback strategies like direct corrective feedback (used for awkward structures), indirect feedback (for run-ons, faulty subject-verb agreement, plural nouns, verb tenses, spelling and punctuation because these errors are supposed to be treatable by the students); indirect and reader-based feedback (major structures as before writing the final draft, the instructors gave some structure aids and practice in class); and reader-based feedback only (for the whole composition & positive feedback).

Data Collection Procedure

Students' opinion compositions (46 compositions) were collected in week 9. It took the instructor one week to collect all of the errors about the development of ideas and language use in these compositions. Two typical types of errors critically examined were irrelevant sentences (content) which result from students' limited ability to use appropriate connectives and awkward structures which are thought to be caused by students' transferring from Vietnamese into English. The instructor collected all of these errors and helped students to correct them in class in week 10. Then, students studied

how to write comparative and contrast composition in week 11-12. After getting the instructor's feedback on their outlines and their peer feedback on their first draft, students edited their compositions to submit after week 12. After collecting 46 comparative-contrast compositions, the instructor marked these and investigated two typical problems (irrelevant sentences and awkward structures), which would be seen in the next part of this article.

The questionnaires were passed to the students in week 15 when students attended their final class meeting. On this day, students could know the final score for the instructor's ongoing assessment on their writing performance in Writing Course Two. Although the class consisted of 48 students, only 39 students went to school in their final class meeting. Therefore, 39 questionnaires were passed and collected in the morning (25-11-2011). Then the instructor synthesized and interpreted them after this writing course ended. The interpretation of the students' errors in their comparative compositions and of their reactions to the instructor's feedback will be found in the next part of this study.

Results and Discussion

### *Students' performance on two compositions*

Types of composition	Total number of irrelevant sentences	Total number of awkward structures
Opinion	108 *(average: 2.25)*	115 *(average: 2.39)*
Comparative - contrast (46 students)	58 *(average: 1.26)*	13 *(average: 0.28)*

The numbers in the table above reveal that in comparison with students' opinion compositions, their comparative - contrast compositions include less irrelevant sentences and awkward structures (58 - 13 < 108-115). In other words, students' two typical types of errors were reduced; therefore, it can be concluded that the instructor's direct corrective feedback and indirect feedback with suggestions and treatments to these problems have positive effects on students ability to eliminate irrelevant sentences and avoid awkward structures when writing comparative and contrast compositions.

Students' evaluation of the instructor's feedback strategies

**Chart 1**: Teacher's content feedback strategies
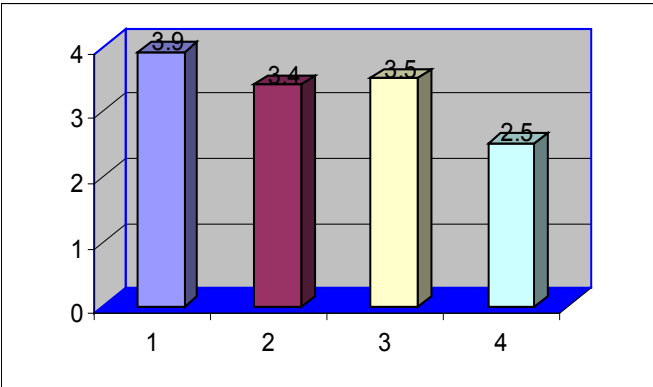
1. Indirect feedback (using codes e.g. irre: irrelevant).

2. Indirect feedback with suggestions (using codes and questions or imperatives).

3. Direct corrective feedback (highlighting irrelevant detail & correcting it).

4. Reader's based feedback (positive comments).

From Chart 1, it can be seen that the instructor's indirect feedback (using correction code- "irre" to indicate irrelevant sentences) was highly evaluated by the students (3.9/5) whereas reader-based feedback (although the instructor's comments are always positive) was not appreciated by the students (2.5/5). This result is in line with the numbers presented in the table above (the number of irrelevant sentences is significantly reduced). As a result, it can be said that the instructor's feedback and treatment for irrelevant sentences really worked. The result proves that the first formulated research question in this study can be answered.

Chart 2: Instructor's language feedback strategies
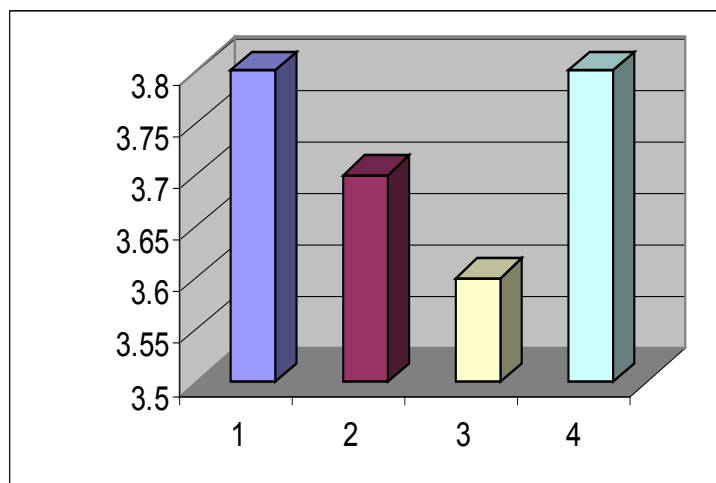
1. Direct corrective feedback (awkward structures).

2. Indirect feedback (using codes for run-ons, faulty subject-verb agreement).

3. Reader-based feedback (positive comments).

4. Reader-based feedback and indirect feedback.

The numbers in Chart 2 indicate that both direct corrective feedback and reader-based feedback and indirect feedback are appreciated by the students. They scored these strategies 3.8 out of 5. Again, although the instructor's reader-based feedback includes positive comments, students did not believe that this feedback strategy helped them to overcome problems in their writing performance. However, in this study, the author only investigated whether or not the direct corrective feedback on awkward structures was positive. It is true that students believed that direct corrective feedback was effective in helping them to avoid awkward structures. This result is similar to the fact that was interpreted from students' comparative compositions. That means the number of awkward structures was significantly reduced. This conclusion can help to answer the second research question formulated at the end of the literature review section.

Conclusion

The study conducted to investigate the effects of the instructor's feedback

strategies on the improvement of students' short composition writing skills reveals very positive results which satisfy two main aims of the researcher. That means feedback strategies employed by the instructor helped students to overcome two typical problems when writing short compositions: (1) to eliminate irrelevant sentences; and (2) to decrease the number of awkward structures. However, there are some inevitable limitations in this classroom research. The first limitation can be found in the content of the study. Only one aspect of the composition (irrelevance) and one language feature (the awkward structure) were examined in students' compositions and only one type of composition (comparative and contrast) was looked into because it was thought that the type of the composition and the topics for writing could affect students' language use as well as their ability to develop ideas when writing. The second limitation comes from the research methodology. Only one group of students participated in this study, so it is impossible for the author to compare the results of the two groups in order to increase the reliability of the results. Also, the analysis of the students' errors in their compositions and of the questionnaires was manually carried out. Therefore, some more investigations on this issue are strongly recommended. Further studies should focus on different aspects of different types of compositions and many language features should be examined. Moreover, all of the collected data should be processed by the SPSS to have persuasive results.

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