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PROMOTING STUDENTS' WRITING AUTONOMY BY USING SELF-DIRECTED FEEDBACK

Rosdiana* and Rusmiati

Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Bina Bangsa Getsempena, Banda Aceh, INDONESIA

*Corresponding author: rosectz@ymail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on a study about self-directed feedback in enhancing students' writing autonomy in a writing course conducted at STKIP Bina Bangsa Getsempena Banda Aceh. The study aims to investigate the effect of self-directed feedback on students' writing skill. To do so, there were 20 students from the English Department of STKIP BBG Banda Aceh taken as the participants in this study. This study was conducted across one semester, in the year 2016. It employs a case study which is using a document analysis as the data collection techniques. The findings show that having acquainted self-directed feedback in the third drafts, the students attempt to have an improvement in terms of content/ idea, organization, grammar, word choice and mechanics in the process of writing a narrative text. The performance of students' progress also signifies a characteristic of an autonomous learner. Most of the students assume self-directed feedback as a worthy technique that gives them a chance to build their critical reflection, decision-making and most importantly it provides a greater influence on students' writing development. To conclude, self-directed feedback is proven applicable in teaching writing for it functions as a step in making students an autonomous writer. For further research, it is suggested that self-directed feedback offer students clear and specific guidance of how to improve their performance rather than one exclusive technique.

Keywords: Writing, self-directed feedback, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Giving feedback to English as a foreign language (EFL) students became an important role in English writing classrooms. Indeed, feedback during and after a learning task is the key element in the error-correction process. Ozagac (2004) says "It is useful for helping to create a supportive teaching environment, for conveying and modeling ideas about good writing, for developing the ways of students in organizing their well written". That is, feedback that involves positive comments can help build student confidence and create good feeling for the next writing task. Similarly, the biggest factor that influences the effect of writing activities is the nature of the feedback students receive. At the extreme end of the spectrum, students may receive no feedback at all. Or perhaps only receive a grade with no comments about their specific performance. As a result, students get some writing practice but generally don't improve and don't learn the material better.

Too often, students are given just one shot at an assignment for a grade. But this doesn't give them the opportunity to take the advice given and improve. There is little room for risk taking, experimentation and practice. Instead, students need to be given opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. Feedback to students might be delayed, not relevant or informative. One study found that most students complained their writing feedback was too general

and vague with no suggestions for improvement. Students report that they are often left not knowing what they have done well, what they need to change and why they have achieved the grade they have.

Feedback is about guidance. Diagnosis of what is wrong can be part of the process, but it must be accompanied by clear suggestions for improvement: "Here's what's wrong and here's how to fix it." Indeed, the students who wish to compose well written texts need helping in understanding and avoiding mistakes in their writing. In consequence, the students need ways to know if they are on track. According to Paulus (1999, p. 89), it needs to tell students what they are doing well and to ask provocative questions to stimulate further learning since the students enhance their metacognitive skills (their ability to think about what they are doing). It means that the students need to give a chance to improve their writing through revisions guided by appropriate feedback.

Consequently, teachers need to develop more systemized and consistent forms of feedback that take advantage of the process approach and make it clear to students what the feedback means and what they are to do with it. Moreover, teachers need to familiarize and train students in how to effectively use the feedback in order to make gains in their proficiency and competence as English writers.

In an effort to help English department students learn more easily and improve their language skill in writing, self-directed feedback was introduced as a tool to promote autonomous language learning. It is an attempt to encourage their critical thinking and problem-solving. Self-directed feedback offers students clear and specific guidance on how to improve their performance. Indeed, Ferris (2002) stresses the need for such autonomy in writing by advising L2 learners to become more aware of their error patterns when they review their writing. Despite the recognition of the importance of learner autonomy in the area of L2 writing, the relationship between self-directed feedback and learner autonomy has not been fully explored. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), many questions related to feedback and L2 writing has not been fully addressed by the research literature. Instructors therefore often sense that they are not using feedback to its full potential. This would have been quite acceptable during the 1980s and early 1990s when there was relative doubt with regard to the role of written instructor feedback in the improvement of writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In the context of second language learning, Zamel (1985) had similarly questioned the effectiveness of instructor feedback on student writing. More recent research, however, maintains a more positive note regarding instructor feedback as being central to the development of second language writing skills. Indeed, it is more crucial for L2 writers than other forms of response such as peer feedback whose effect on improving writing may of ten times be only peripheral (Connor & Asenavage, 1994). Dheram (1995) similarly stresses the centrality of feedback to the teaching of writing.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between such a central aspect of L2 writing, feedback and learner autonomy. This paper specifically stresses the need for studies on the role which self-directed feedback plays in creating autonomous writers. By this, it is presumed that students can be better in improving their writing when they are participating in correcting and revising their own draft. Based on the discussion above, this study would be proposed relating to self-directed feedback in order to know its influence in writing class and to figure out the improvement of student writing proficiency through it.

Research Problems

The present study formulates such an attempt to foster autonomy among L2 learners in relation to feedback on writing tasks. The research questions addressed in this paper include:

- Are students able to develop autonomous writing strategies through self-directed feedback?
- What is the effect of self-directed feedback on students' writing?

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive approach which aims to get the information about the effect of self-directed feedback on encouraging students' autonomy in writing. The study was conducted across one semester, in the year 2016. The subjects of this study were 20 students who attended writing course in the English Department. They ranged in age from 18-19 years old and constituted

of 70% females and 30% male. In this case, the students were assigned to write a narrative paragraph of 200 words in length with a given topic taken from a handbook. The next phase, the students were taught how to participate in self-directed feedback practice. In this case, the students were introduced to the basic criteria to evaluate a piece of writing that consists of contents, organizations, grammar, word choices and mechanics. Moreover, the students were familiarized with correction code symbols in writing with which they could give comments, corrections, suggestions and criticisms of the mistake on the writing. For this purpose, some samples of paragraphs from their first drafts were used as teaching instruments with the assumption that the students could easily learn from their errors. In all cases, the self-directed feedback activity was practiced in class. These checklists were also the evaluation grids by which the teacher grades the final drafts of students' paragraphs. Prior to analysis, the data will be analyzed using a simple frequency count; the result will be tabulated into diagram and bar graph in order to assure the accuracy of the result. Students' writing analysis was pointed to find out the students' improvement in their writing and the students' progress in learning writing through self-directed feedback technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The former discussion will be started by explaining about the first research problem related to students' ability to develop autonomous writing strategies through self-directed feedback. Based on the completed analysis, all results will be presented by using bar graph. Additionally, the analysis of students' improvement in writing paragraph would be described specifically by focusing on the aspects which was previously mentioned, namely contents/ ideas, organization, grammar, and mechanics in writing.

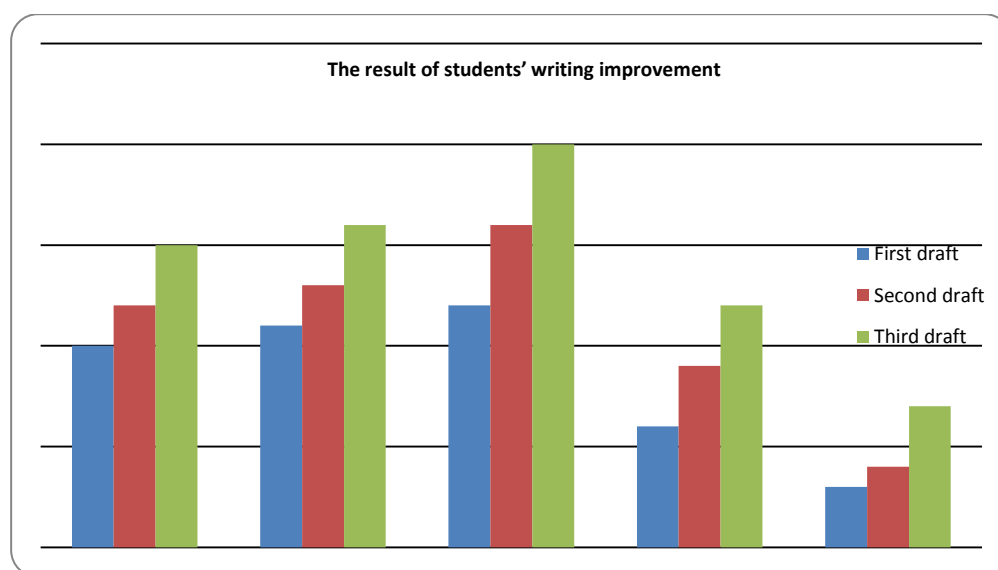


Figure 1.The result of students' writing improvement.

It can be noticed from the graph that each category has different score, for instance the aspect of content/ideas was given score 25 for the writing which has excellent support and has unified paragraph. Then the aspect of organization was given score 25 for the writing which has a topic sentence with clear controlling idea, supporting sentences, concluding sentences and coherence. Meanwhile, the aspect of grammar was given score 25 when the writing demonstrates control of basic grammar (e.g., tenses, verb forms, noun forms, prepositions and articles) and shows sophistication of sentence structure with complex and compound sentences. Furthermore, the aspect of word choice was given score 15 for the writing which has correct idiomatic use of vocabulary and has correct word forms. And the last aspect was mechanics which was given score 10 when the writing has good essay format and demonstrates good use of capital letters, comma and spelling. Thus, the total score for those categories was 100.

The bar graph showed the percentage on the aspect of content, organization, and grammar for the first, second and third drafts of the students' writing. As can be seen from the graph, the early practice of self-directed feedback, the students' first draft was at the level 10, 11, 12 of 25 in the aspect of content, organization, and grammar respectively. Meanwhile, the students' second draft reached 13, 14, and 16 of 25 for those categories. And for the third draft of students' writing improvement grew at the level 12, 16, and 19 of 25. It means that self-directed feedback supports students writing development and nurtures their confidence as writers. Students' awareness of drafts of writing provides them 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. They also have an immediate opportunity to try out the suggestions in their writing, allowing for meaningful application of what they have learned from the feedback.

Furthermore, the fourth aspect displayed students' writing percentage of word mechanic. It shows that there is an increase in this item, namely it reached 12, 16, and 12 of 15 for the first, second, and third draft respectively. Finally, the last aspect demonstrated students' percentage on mechanic aspect. It can be known from the graph that the first draft of the students' ability nurtured at the level 3 of 10. Then, the students' second draft illustrates that their writing ability increase to the level 4 of 10. And the final draft also indicates that there is an improvement of the students in organizing writing after self-directed feedback was practiced, i.e. 6 of the total 10. It can be assumed that there is a progression of the students' paragraph through self-directed feedback. Self-directed feedback helps develop student writers' sense of audience – their recognition of the perspectives, language, sentence structure, voice and other elements of writing that provoke, entertain or satisfy their draft. Indeed, students gain a deeper understanding of the expectations when they have an opportunity to participate in determining the elements of their writing that are strong or that need more work.

The second discussion would describe the effect of self-directed feedback on students' writing. The result indicates that self-directed feedback practice promotes students' writing autonomy. The significance is that it can help the students gain confidence in their writing skills. It encourages them to write more and learn to improve their writing. The students can also gain more knowledge to improve their own writing such as different writing styles, different points of view, or new vocabulary. Accordingly, self-directed feedback provides a higher level of accountability in that the students are motivated to write more carefully and clearly. They can gain the sense of audience which can help them see more clearly what audiences need to know when reading someone's draft. Therefore, it can develop their capacity for self-assessment and contribute to autonomous learning. To sum up, the students' progress was quite positive toward the practicing of self-directed feedback in writing class. Most of students felt that self-directed feedback was helpful because they could avoid mistakes and they would know what their mistakes were. It is one of effective ways in helping them revise the writing more effectively since they find the opportunity to correct and avoid mistakes next time when they create a piece of writing.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the findings, there is a significant difference in students' progression for the first, second and third writing. The findings reveal the students' positive attitudes and high attention to the self-directed feedback they have received. Nevertheless, some students still devalue the importance of self-directed feedback. A high percentage of students proved that self-directed feedback can generally improve their writing ability and help them strengthen their writing greatly, reinforce their writing ability and give the students a chance to edit their paper so that the final product submitted to the teacher represents a stronger piece of writing. Therefore, after getting the perception of the students towards self-directed feedback, it can be concluded that this practice has a great role in improving the revised writing made by the students.

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