

L2 Writing, Motivation, and Culture

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ABSTRACT

Writing has proven to be one of the most challenging skills for many non-native speakers. Many English language learners experience difficulty in organizing their ideas, selecting correct vocabulary and applying grammar rules accurately. Additionally, in higher levels of proficiency and in more advanced writing tasks, style and tone add to the complexity. Writing instructors use different methods and ways to help their students improve and one of these ways is the use of corrective feedback. Various types of feedback including online, written, oral, explicit and implicit feedback are used. Holistic and specialized approaches (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum and Wolferberger, 2010) are also explored. In the UAE, many Emirati students in universities where English is the medium of instruction find composition courses difficult and writing essays a challenge despite long hours of instruction and practice. Instructors generally provide corrective feedback and students revise their papers. However, in many cases, the final drafts show less than desired improvement. This paper sets out to examine the effectiveness of different types of feedback in the areas of content, organization, and accuracy. Furthermore, different learning variables such as peer interaction (Sato and Lyster, 2012) and cultural factors are discussed and possible educational implications are mentioned.

Keywords: accuracy, learning variables, sociocultural factors, unified approach

Writing is considered one of the most challenging skills for many non-native speakers. Learners, even with relatively higher language ability, may experience difficulty in organizing their ideas, selecting correct vocabulary and applying grammar rules accurately. Additionally, in higher levels of proficiency and more advanced writing tasks, content, organization and style add to the complexity. To help students improve their writing skills, instructors use different methods and ways.

One of these methods is providing corrective feedback. Many educators are not year certain of the effectiveness of feedback, as some are skeptical of its positive impact. This paper sets out to examine the effectiveness of written and oral corrective (CF) as well as peer feedbacks. Additionally, this study explores learning variables and students' perceptions of the challenges they face while trying to become better writers.

The learners observed for this study are Emirati students in a higher education institution where English is the medium of instruction. Students are required to take three composition courses in the first three semesters of their college education.

The courses aim at enhancing students' proficiency in writing through practice from paragraph development to writing research papers. Students choose their topics and look for academic sources to read and write their essays using different rhetorical styles. Course instructors teach the format of each style and provide feedback on students' writing based on content, organization, style and accuracy. Despite long hours of instruction and practice, some students find the courses challenging.

This study examines how different types of feedback impact students' writing. The types of feedback used included corrective and peer feedbacks. Corrective feedback usually focuses on accuracy at lower and intermediate levels. Corrective feedback can be both written and oral. Written corrective feedback is either direct or indirect. Direct feedback refers to the feedback where the instructor provides the correct form for each error (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a). However, the indirect feedback is provided by pointing at the error using editing symbols or underlining. This type tries to elicit self-correction instead of providing the correct form (Ellis, 2009).

Written corrective feedback can also be targeted (focused) or unfocused which means that feedback can focus on particular linguistic features or examine all the linguistic features in writing without any specific focus or target (Bitchner, 2008).

Oral feedback is provided through one-on-one conferences and can be either explicit or implicit (Lantoff as cited in Earlam, Ellis and Bastone, 2006). Explicit feedback refers to the feedback whereby the instructor directly draws learners' attention to the errors and provides the correct forms. On the other hand, using implicit feedback, the instructor offers clues to the learners in order to identify the error and produce the correct form. The clues may be in the form of questions, incomplete sentences, repetition of the error and pause, etc. Oral feedback can also be graduated or adjusted to learner's language ability and therefore encourage self-correction (Ellis, et al, 2006 and Earlam, Ellis and Batstone, 2013).

Peer feedback, however, means that feedback is given by one student to another, through comments made on each other's work. Peer feedback can be based on a set of criteria (Liu & Carless, 2006), or as in this study, it is carried out based on the minimal comments and clues the instructor provided. The peer feedback is thought to lead to better results as it is given through a dialogue between students.

A three-fold study was designed to examine the effectiveness of the above types of feedback. In the first step, a survey was distributed among students to identify their perception of their writing challenges. In the second stage, a group of male and female students of varying language abilities was selected to revise their midterm exam essays and produce two revised drafts after receiving different types of corrective and peer feedbacks. All drafts were revised and submitted in the classroom environment.

In addition to feedback, learning variables impact the learning process. Learning variables include situational, instructional and learners (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum and Wolfersberger, 2010). These variables were kept constant for this study to eliminate differences and discrepancies.

Situational variables refer to the teaching environment, including teachers, physical environment and socio-economic conditions of the facility. As a result, the instructor, classroom and appropriate teaching tools remained the same throughout this study.

Instructional variables refer to the amount of practice, pacing and sequencing of lessons, and the amount of feedback provided. This variable remained the same for all instructions in this study as the instructor offered the same practice and discussion on common errors after ^{first and second} drafts. Additionally, all questions regarding the feedback on drafts were answered and repeated if necessary. While writing drafts 2 and 3, students were able to use dictionaries, notes and the internet.

Learners' variable refers to the learners' motivation, attitude, aptitude, first language, and their sense of identity. Learners' variable includes cognitive factors (Kormos, 2012) cultural identity, values, L1 and future goals (Evans, Hrshorn, McCollum and Wolfersberger, 2010). Students' perception of their writing ability can also be included in this category as it may point to individual motivation, attitude or aptitude. This

variable, for the most part, appears to be particular to learners and is independent of instruction and institution's reach.

First Stage-Students' Perception

One hundred students taking second and third writing courses were asked to respond to survey questions in order to investigate their views about their level of language ability. The first question asked students to assess their language ability as very good, good or struggling. Most students perceived their level of English to be “good” and a few considered their language level to be “very good”. Also, in this survey, almost all students agreed that learning to write in English well was very important to their future studies and careers.

Students also identified grammar and vocabulary, organization as well as idea and content development to be the biggest challenges for them. About ten percent of the respondents acknowledged that weak reading skills contributed to the problems.

Respondents also appreciated the freedom to choose topics for their main course essays.

Second Stage

Corrective feedback on draft 1. For this part, 39 female and male students were selected to participate in a study to examine the effectiveness of feedback. Students' midterm exam provided the first draft. In this exam, students were tasked to write a 300-word essay to argue whether the use of plastic bottled water should be banned. Students were provided with two reading passages to use.

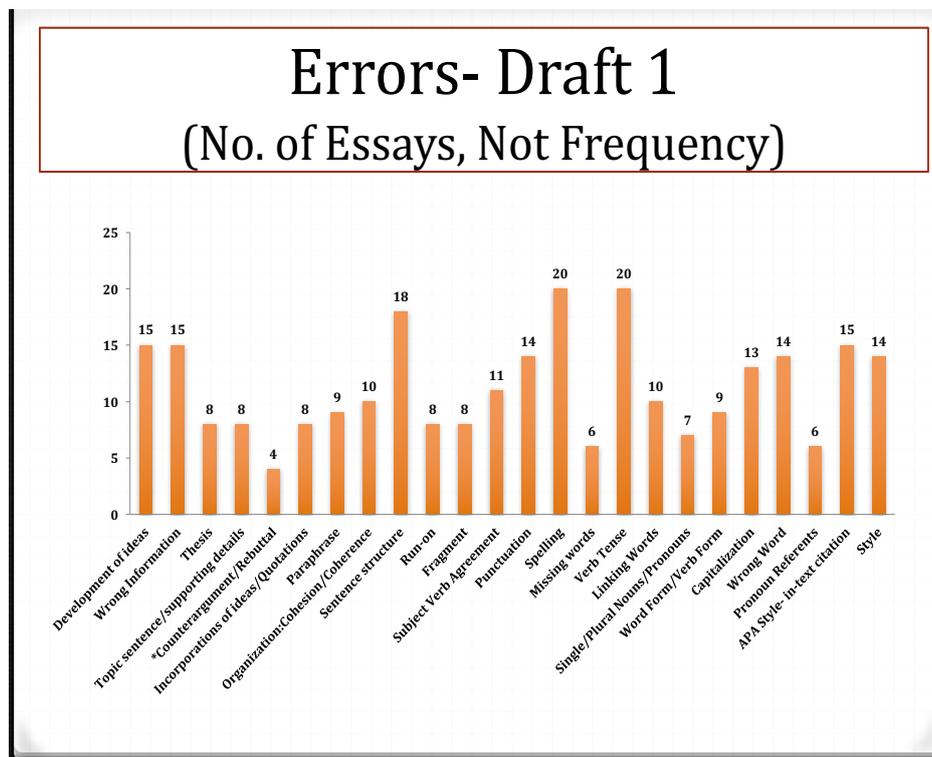


Chart A. Nature of errors.

The exam essays were examined using a rubric with four categories of content, organization, style and mechanics. The errors made on the first draft were mostly mechanical and sentence structure. However, some students also had problems

developing ideas, using accurate information, forming a thesis statement and organizing their ideas. The table next page illustrates the type of errors found in the first draft.

As seen above, different errors had been made in the areas of content, organization, sentence structure, word choice, accuracy and mechanics, the formation of argument, counterarguments and APA style.

The content errors were related to the comprehension of the reading passages. However, other errors included the formation of a thesis, the inclusion of supporting ideas, integration of ideas as well as correct use of sources. Organizational errors were mostly related to cohesion and coherence, the inclusion of topic sentences, the use of linkers, and the development of introduction and conclusion paragraphs.

The most common sentence structure problems included run-ons, fragments, complex and compound sentence structures and stylistics. Accuracy issues such as verb tense and mechanics like spelling were most common and were seen in as many as twenty essays.

Students were divided into groups to receive written, oral or a combination of both written and oral feedback. The group to receive WCF consisted of 18 students, and the group receiving oral feedback had 16 students. Each of these groups consisted of a similar number of students who were considered strong, intermediate or struggling. A third group of five students was also formed to receive both written and oral feedback. The last group consisted only of intermediate and struggling students. Prior to the second draft, the students' questions were answered, and instructor provided practice and discussed the common errors.

Written feedback. The eighteen students to receive written feedback were divided into sub-groups. Among stronger students, two received direct and two indirect written corrective feedbacks. Among students with intermediate ability, 4 received direct and four indirect WCF. Also, six struggling students were divided into two groups to receive direct and indirect WCF. The indirect feedback was facilitated by the use of editing symbols and/or underlining (Bitchner, Young and Cameron, 2004).

Oral feedback. The remaining 16 students were also divided into sub-groups. The strong group included four students, two of which received explicit and two received implicit oral feedbacks. In the intermediate sub-group, three students received explicit, and 4 received implicit feedbacks. Finally, out of 5 students in the struggling group, three were given explicit and two were provided implicit feedbacks.

Each oral one-on-one conference between the teacher and individual students lasted between 15 to 25 minutes, depending on the complexity of the errors and student's level.

Combination. This group of 5 intermediate and struggling learners were selected in random to receive a combination of both written and oral corrective feedback (Earlam, Ellis and Batstone, 2013). Students then used the feedback hand-wrote their ^{second} draft during class time. As previously mentioned, students were able to use dictionaries, notes and the internet while working on their revision.

Peer Feedback. An examination of the second drafts demonstrated that yet fewer number of students made similar errors. However, errors in all areas of content, organization, structure, word choice, mechanics, counterarguments and APA style could be found. Chart B on the next page shows the number of papers with these errors.

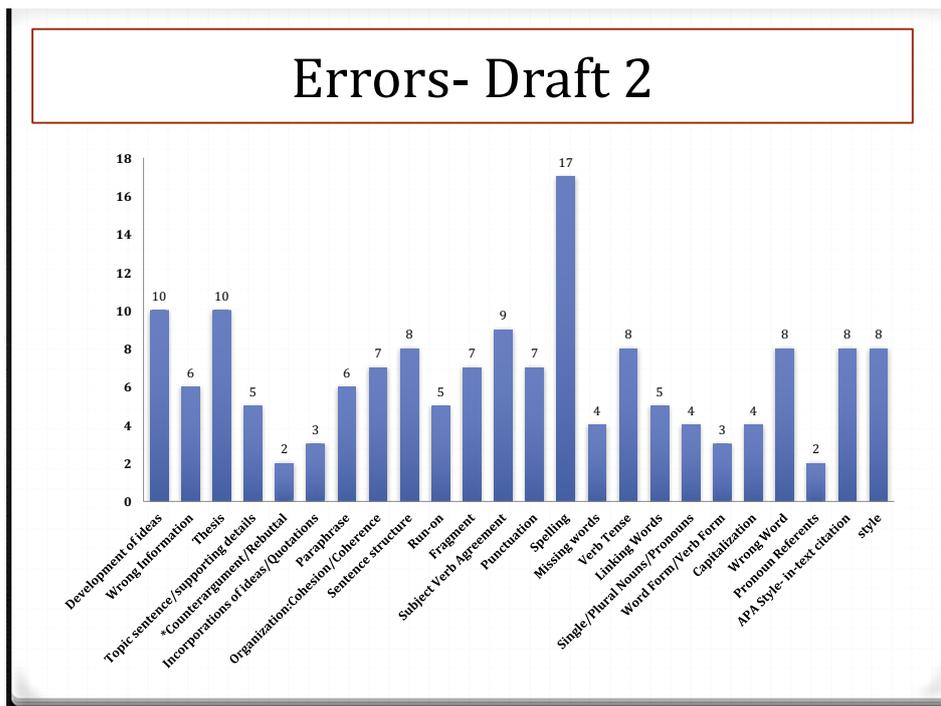


Chart B. Draft 2 errors.

A comparison of the first and second drafts clearly reveals the change. Chart C shows the difference.

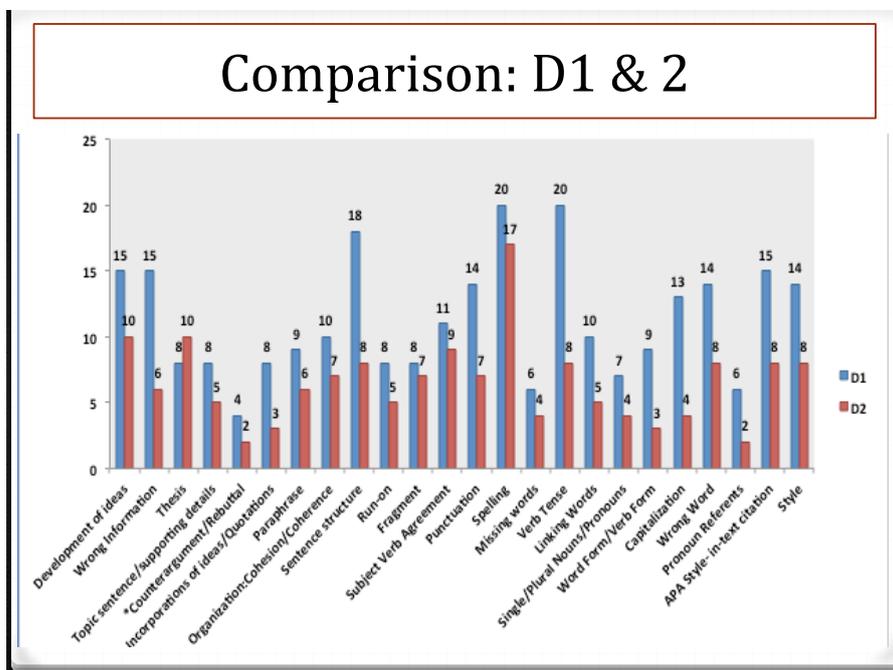


Chart C. Comparison of errors on drafts 1 and 2.

Before students were asked to produce their final drafts, the instructor again provided some practice on some of the errors, answered all question and discussed common errors. Students revised their second drafts during class time. As with the previous draft, students could use their notes, dictionaries and the internet while revising.

Third stage -Peer Feedback

For this stage, the instructor facilitated peer feedback on the second draft by providing minimal written feedback indirectly, using editing symbols, underlining and making reference to the first draft (e.g., see the previous draft).

After returning the second drafts, the teacher paired the students based on their strengths and language ability and/or their choice. Some students preferred to be paired with their friends regardless of the language level. Students were then asked to read each other's essays and provide feedback based on the instructor's comments (Strijbos, Narciss and Dunnerbier, 2010). The peer feedback lasted 45 minutes.

The students then revised and submitted their third and final drafts. They had 45 minutes to complete this task. The third draft was also hand-written. The examination of the last draft showed that students had made fewer errors than on the two previous drafts. Chart D compares the errors on three drafts and clearly illustrates an overall improvement in the students' writing.

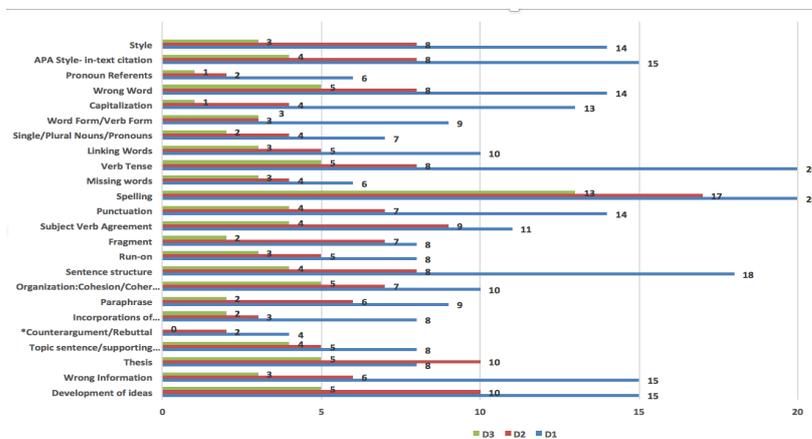


Chart D. Comparison of errors on three drafts.

As the above chart shows, the third drafts were not completely error-free. Some students repeated the same errors and some made new errors.

After examining the nature of errors on drafts 2 and 3, it becomes evident that most of the corrections were made to mechanical errors, including spelling and capitalization. Interestingly, spelling remained the most problematic feature. However, most treatable errors, which are rule-governed errors such as verb tense and subject-verb agreement (Ferris, 1999) showed significant improvement. In addition, untreatable errors such as word choice, the formation of complex and compound sentences and the use of linkers improved, but problems still existed. Naturally, treatable errors were easier to understand and revise.

Also, the formation of the thesis, introduction and organization of ideas improved. The third drafts also showed a better ability in following AP style and correcting content-related problems. Most errors were corrected on the third draft. Problems in content pointed at a lack of full understanding of the passages which resulted in either inaccurate statements or heavy dependence on the original text, which in turn resulted in citation issues.

In some instances, the use of the internet and personal notes may have helped to lead students to copy parts of the texts or use parts with inadequate paraphrasing.

Students' Reaction

The results of the study show that different types of feedbacks helped students improve their writing. However, students expressed different opinions about the feedbacks. All the students were satisfied with the written feedback. They mostly favored the direct written feedback, followed by explicit oral feedback. To explain the reason, some stated that they preferred the direct and explicit feedback as they were "easier" and faster. However, some research suggests that direct written and explicit oral feedbacks are not as constructive as the implicit and implicit feedbacks which encourage students' engagement and help to elicit the correct form. CITE In this regard, implicit and indirect feedbacks seem to be more effective in the long term. Additionally, oral conferences were also popular among students, but they took too much time for the instructor and it may not be practical for large classes. Moreover, the combination of written and oral feedback was very successful and well-liked by intermediate and especially struggling students. Last, although students appreciated the feedback their peer provided, and found the interactions helpful, especially when both Arabic and English were used, some students expressed reservation and argued that they preferred teacher's feedback as "the teacher knows best" and "students may make mistakes but not the teacher. "

Conclusion

Overall results show that students benefitted from all types of feedback and their errors reduced. However, comparing the students' perception of their language ability and their actual performance did not completely match. Most students assessed their language skills to "good" or "very good". In reality, the writings painted a different picture. It may be that survey respondents might not have referred to writing skills, but writing cannot be taught or learned separately from other skills. There is a deep connection between all language skills.

Also it was observed that the combination of oral and written feedbacks benefitted the struggling students in particular. These students seemed to need more frequent feedback and clarification of the issues.

It should also be remembered that learners do not learn the same way; neither do they benefit from feedback in the same manner. The review of the drafts demonstrated that some students with advanced ability in syntax showed little improvement in organization and paragraph development while struggling students exhibited more improvement in these areas, although learning and correction of grammar points took longer.

It can be argued that as the situational and instructional variables remained constant, the learner variable has significant importance in the students' learning process. Some students, irrespective of their level, were more enthusiastic, asked more questions, sought clarification and tried harder, but some showed little interest. Moreover, most students seemed very attached to their culture and identity and had an instrumental approach to learning (extrinsic motivation) (Ryan, 2000). This did not hinder those who were motivated and worked hard to learn and improve. In fact, learners with an instrumental approach can become successful language learners (Asdjodi, 2016). However, lack of favorable learner variables such as interest or motivation can greatly hinder the learning process, resulting in low performance and may perhaps lead to plagiarism, as was observed in ^{second and third} drafts.

In this study, it also became evident that situational variable including physical environment, teacher and socio-economic conditions have little impact on highly motivated students, as noted by Evans, McCollum and Wolfersberger (2010),

However, in terms of instructional variable, too much feedback could be overwhelming to students. Learners, in general, have a different pace, different levels and

aspects of writing should be approached differently. Also, McMartin-Miller (2014) noted that the feedback many learners receive is subjective and more consistency is needed. Additionally, the length of texts, frequency of writing and feedback could also be beneficial to struggling students in the long run. In other words, writing skills should be practiced enough to ensure that linguistic features are internalized and there are no relapses. Also, it should be mentioned that although the internet and technology significantly contribute to the learning process, they also cause problems such as frequent spelling mistakes and provide an environment where ready-made papers can be easily obtained.

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