

Metacognitive awareness-raising activity in accordance with students' perceptions of teacher's written feedback

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メタ認知意識を高める効用—英語ライティング指導における
学習スタイルと指導スタイルの適合をめざして

INTRODUCTION

Writing ability has been an essential component of cross-cultural communication and real-life language use (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Reid, 1993). Writing also has attracted attention for its potential role(s) of promoting second language acquisition since Swain advocated the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1993, 1995) for its noticing function, hypothesis-testing function, and metalinguistic function. However, teaching writing has long been marginalized in second language acquisition research for its explicit nature of linguistic knowledge for producing written texts. Few attempts have explored pedagogical strategies to promote L2 acquisition through writing from second language acquisition perspective (Carson, 2001; Ferris, 2010; Harklau, 2002; Sano, 2005, 2013). Little research has explored the integration of input (reading and listening), output (writing in this case) and interaction (teacher feedback and learner revision). No agreement has met on how best teacher feedback can be implemented in writing pedagogy (Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Goldstein, 2006; Zamel, 1985).

Among the feedback types in the context of L2 writing instruction, written corrective feedback on grammar has been a key topic of research since Brooks (1960) rebuked errors in learner language as follows:

The principal method of *avoiding* error in language learning is to observe and practice the right model a sufficient number of times; the principal way of *overcoming* it is to shorten the time lapse between the incorrect response and the presentation once more of the correct model. (Brooks, 1960, p.56)

In the 1950s and 1960s, errors in Audiolingualism were something that had to be excluded from language learning. A plethora of research has explored to clarify the linkage between error correction and learner uptake. Hendrickson (1978), for example,

reviews a number of error correction research and disputes effectiveness of error correction, which played a central role in the classroom where Audio-lingual approach to second/foreign language learning prevailed. Hendrickson proposes five key questions to explore features of error correction:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which learner errors should be corrected?
4. How should learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?

Hendrickson (1978, pp.389-395)

Hendrickson concludes his review article by providing pedagogical implications, which include 1) efficiency of error correction, 2) needs to a supportive classroom environment, 3) prioritization of error types for correction, 4) ineffectiveness of direct corrective procedure, and 5) probable efficiency of self-correction with teacher guidance. Hendrickson, however, admits that he did not find solid amount of research findings to support his concluding hypotheses. Over the past four decades, an enormous number of studies have investigated to seek convincing corrective procedures.

In the vein of corrective feedback investigation, empirical studies have found that direct correction is not successful to reduce grammatical errors (Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross and Shortreed, 1986; Zamel, 1985). Lalande (1982), downplaying the role of direct error correction, suggests that learners should become aware of their errors and that they should be taught error-correcting techniques. Zamel (1985) downplays the effectiveness of language-specific responses to student writing. Zamel stresses the importance of taking an alternative method to promote subsequent revisions by the learner. Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) have also found that extensive direct correction on surface error is time-consuming and not recommendable. Alternatively they imply that directing learners' attention to erroneous forms is a more time-saving teaching technique. Furthermore, Truscott (1996) severely criticizes the practice of correcting learner errors. Montgomery and Baker (2007) summarize the error correction issue that it takes long for learners to process grammatical rules automatically, and that correcting local errors takes time away from focusing on communicative aspects of writing, such as message conveyance, clarity, and writing strategies.

Recent research has suggested that there may be a mismatch between teachers' practice of providing feedback and students' perception (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990;

Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Leki, 1991). In many cases, teacher feedback mainly focuses on grammar, vocabulary, mechanics and organization, and tends to pick only negative sides of student writing. This might demotivate students' motivation to write continuously, depending on proficiency. Furthermore, discrepancies may exist between students' and teachers' preferences in terms of evaluation gravity (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). Issues still remain on how best teachers can provide feedback to elicit comprehensible output from learners, and what are effective ways to respond to student writing without taking too much time away from teaching efforts (Leki, 1990).

Among feedback strategies, indicating locations of errors and providing commentary are viable choices for writing teachers to deal with weekly writing tasks. Underlining erroneous words can attract students' focus on form, which promotes second language acquisition (Hyland, 2010, Sheen, 2010; Williams, 2012). However, learner uptake depends on their needs and proficiency levels (Hyland, 1998). Another alternative technique is correcting only the focused/target feature errors, such as articles, and prepositions. This technique is less time-consuming than correcting every error/making unfocused correction. However, comparison of focused correction and unfocused correction has only scarcely examined (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008), and research findings are not abundant. Still another strategy is providing a metacognitive-awareness raising activity before learners engage in a writing task. Although this is not a feedback technique in its nature, but a research-based procedure. Through completing a pre-task that raises metacognitive awareness, learners learn to pay attention to clarity, logical sequence of ideas and language functions to convey messages to the reader.s

Research on corrective feedback has reported that students' control over goal orientation may produce better results than receiving corrections on local errors (Schunk and Swartz, 1993; Hedgcok and Lefkowitz, 1994). Victori (1999) supports the effectiveness of metacognitive strategy use in writing, such as planning, goal setting, and awareness of the reader. Strategy use requires strategic knowledge. Victory decomposes metacognitive knowledge into three levels of person knowledge, task knowledge and strategy knowledge. Based on her case study results, Victori demonstrates the importance of including not only writing strategies but also metacognitive knowledge in writing instruction. Task-specific strategy use, such as reader-specific and argumentation-specific strategy use is vital. Brown and Larson-Hall (2012) also suggest providing commentary on logical argumentation rather than correcting grammatical errors. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the impact of metacognitive strategy instruction which include task-specific strategies,

awareness-raising to the reader, focus on logical structure. Research to date has not demonstrated what is the best timing to provide commentary. With this aim in mind, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. Do Japanese university learners prefer teacher commentary to corrective feedback on their writings?
2. If positive, what are the effects of pre-task commentary (metacognitive awareness-raising activity)?

METHOD

Design

To seek answers to these questions, this study investigated the impact of metacognitive awareness-raising activities over a semester by means of a pre-, immediate post- and delayed post-test design. This current study was a classroom-based study, and an intact class took part in the study. There was no control group because of this study's exploratory nature. The impact of awareness-raising activities was on linguistic accuracy, fluency and the overall quality of L2 writing measured over a semester.

Participants

Thirty-one first-year university students enrolled in a writing class participated in this study. They are non-English major. The age range was from 18 to 20. No students have spent abroad more than a month. All students have received formal classroom instruction of English as a foreign language for at least 6 years in Japan. The results of a shortened version TOEFL test show that their English proficiencies are on the intermediate level. Although the initial participant pool consisted of 31 students enrolled in a writing class, absences during the eight-week classroom intervention were excluded from the data, which made the number of participants 26 for data analysis.

Questionnaire

To compare the participants' reactions to teacher feedback with the Hong King students', this study deployed Lee (2008) questionnaire with the directions translated into Japanese [See Appendix A]. All participants in this study completed the questionnaire regarding their preference of feedback type for their writing. The data from the questionnaire served to decide instruction type for this study.

Metacognitive awareness-raising task

In this study, pre-task awareness-raising activity included three levels of metacognitive knowledge instruction: (1) awareness of the reader, (2) awareness of the English paragraph structure, (3) awareness of logical sequence of ideas. The original ideas came from Victori (1999) who provides a comprehensive survey items and follow-up interview questions for writing strategies [See Appendix B]. To raise awareness of the reader, the diagnostic profile included content and function. The organization and clarity in the diagnostic profile explains awareness of the English paragraph structure. The participants read metacognitive knowledge about a given writing task in each class hour, discussed the knowledge and wrote a draft individually. Then, the participants exchanged their comments, and wrote their second drafts.

Procedure

The participants were taught by the author once a week for 90 minutes. During the eight weeks of awareness-raising intervention, an average of 20 minutes was devoted to awareness-raising, and 70 minutes to writing the first and the second drafts. Awareness-raising activities consist of metacognitive strategy instruction together with peer review to exchange comments and suggestions for their essays. To support the participants' goal-orientation, the author taught significant features to write well, using a diagnostic profile (See Appendix C).

Week 1: English proficiency test

4 weeks after

Week 5: Pretest (writing task 1), Questionnaire

Week 6-13: Awareness-raising activities and essay writing (8 weeks)

Week 14: Post-test (writing task 2)

2 weeks after

Week 16: final examination

Test materials

The pretest material was an expository writing task. The participants wrote one-paragraph-long texts to explain the best restaurant in his/her town. After 8 weeks of instruction and learning, the participants wrote one-paragraph-long texts as a post-test. The task was to explain his/her way of analyzing a concept that he/she would like to explain.

Measures

The overall quality of writing was assessed to determine the effectiveness of metacognitive instruction over the eight-week period. Fluency and accuracy were measured to investigate side-effects of metacognitive awareness-raising activities. To measure fluency, total number of words of each expository text was counted. To measure accuracy, total number of errors was divided by the number of sentences. To assess the quality of writing, the diagnostic profile was used.

RESULTS

Students' preference of feedback type

The first research question concerned students' preference of teacher feedback types: error corrections or commentary. The answers to question 3 displayed a strong tendency. Table 1 shows that a majority of students (88.9%) chose the combination of mark/grade, error feedback and written comments. The result resembles that of the high proficiency group of Hong Kong (HK HP) students and does not with that of the low proficiency group (HK LP) surveyed by Lee (2008). The answers to question 4 indicated a greater interest in teacher commentary in all the contexts for the improvement of the participants' writing skills. Table 2 displays Japanese students' greater needs in receiving written commentary from the teacher (55.56%) than error corrections (40.74%). This tendency does not resemble each other. The answers to question 5 show general tendency of students' interest in teacher comments. Altogether, Tables 1, 2 and 3, indicate students' preference of comments/commentary to error corrections.

Table 1

Question 3: In the next few compositions, which of the following do you prefer to get from the teacher?

Student feedback preferences	Japanese students	HK HP	HK LP (%)
A. Only grades/marks	0.0	2.8	4.5
B: Only response to errors	0.0	0.0	4.5
C: Only written comments	0.0	2.8	9.1
D. Mark/grade + error feedback	3.7	5.5	18.3
E: Mark/grade + written comments	0.0	16.7	4.5
F: Error feedback + written comments	7.4	0.0	9.1
G: Mark/grade + error feedback + written comments	88.9	72.2	40.9
H: None of the above	0.0	0.0	9.1
Total	100	100	100

Table 2

Question 4: Which of the following type of feedback would you like your teacher to give *more* in future?

Student feedback preferences	Japanese students	HK HP	HK LP (%)
A. Written comments	55.56	72.2	45.4
B. Error feedback	40.74	19.4	27.3
C. None of the above	3.70	8.4	27.3
Total	100	100	100

Table 3

Question 5: In the future compositions, which of the following would you be most interested in finding out?

Student feedback preferences	Japanese students	HK HP	HK LP (%)
A: The mark/grade	14.81	38.9	36.4
B: Teacher's comments on my writing	59.26	47.2	36.4
C: The errors I have made	25.93	11.1	27.2
D: Others (please specify)	0	2.8	0.0
Total	100	100	100

Effects of metacognitive awareness-raising activity

Quality

The scores of the pretest and the post-test show an increase in the overall quality of the students' writing abilities, i.e. the total scores measured with the criteria described in the diagnostic profile, which the participants received on the first day of the writing course [See Appendix B]. The content, organization, function and language use scores add to 100 at the fullest. Table 4 shows the scores of pre- and post-tests. In the pretest, the average score was under pass level of 44.61, but the gain score was 14.24. The growth was greater in the lower level students in that the low moved from 20 to 40, and the range shrunk from 40 to 30. Although there is no control group, the improvement was not small. Peer comments included their impressions that their writing abilities are developing week after week, and becoming more and more communicative.

Table 4

Development in the quality of students' writings (n=26)

	Pretest	Post-test
Average	44.61	58.85
Median	50	60
Mode	50	60
Standard deviation	11.40	8.64
Variance	129.85	74.62
Range	40	30
Low	20	40
High	60	70
Reliability (99.0%)	6.22	4.72

Fluency

Statistical analysis was conducted to examine the effects of pedagogical intervention across the 8-week period. With the small sample size of 26 and the SDs of 21.99 (pretest) and 38.25 (post-test), the two normal distributions were unknown. Thus, a t-test was used to determine whether the two samples were different. The t-test analysis yielded statistically significant score of $t(40) = -13.43, p < .01$. The two samples were determined as different. Table 5 shows the group means and standard deviations of the three measurements of production rate (number of words), percentage of errors per text (accuracy) and scores from diagnostic profile (quality) [See Appendix B].

Table 5**Comparison of fluency in pretest and post-test**

	pretest	post-test
Mean	61.5	121.35
Median	54.5	109.5
Mode	49	105
SD	21.99	38.25
Low	32	73
High	104	205
total number of words	1599	3155
reliability (99.0%)	12.02	20.91

(n=26)

The course evaluation showed that a majority of students realized that they have

developed their writing skills. Twenty three out of twenty eight students who answered the course evaluation gave positive comments to the course effectiveness. This impression is supported by the gain scores of fluency.

Accuracy

Accuracy was measured by subdividing the total number of words with the number of errors. Pre-task commentary did not focus on accuracy and accuracy did not improve. The results shown in Table 6 indicate that metacognitive awareness-raising activities did not affect students' writing accuracy.

Table 6

Comparison of Fluency, accuracy and quality scores in the pre, post-tests

Group means and standard deviations for fluency scores (production rate)

	Pretest		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Number of words (fluency)	61.5	21.99	121.35	38.25
% of errors (accuracy)	9.14	4.84	14.41	6.45
Quality	44.62	1.34	58.85	1.18

DISCUSSION

Throughout the eight-week intervention, the students actively participated in the metacognitive awareness-raising activity, peer evaluation, and making two drafts on each topic. They developed the impression that they have gained writing abilities by committing the metacognitive awareness-raising activities, peer review session and making multiple drafts. Observation found that the participants were involved to each task throughout the intervention period because of their sense of success, sense of development, and sense of self-efficacy in writing. Students' reactions, such as responses to the teacher's advice and oral messages after class, support this observation. The motive of this study was to seek a way to develop L2 learners' writing abilities without correcting their grammatical errors, which might demotivate learners to write more, and consume the teacher's time and energy. In terms of time-efficiency, metacognitive awareness-raising activity was a useful method of providing teacher commentary, although there might be a terminological issue.

CONCLUSION

Writing in EFL is not an easy task, and not many non-English-major students dare to challenge to write. However, we have a number of good reasons to foster writing skills. First, international communicative competence is indispensable for university graduates regardless of their majors and occupations. We have many opportunities to communicate through the mediation of computer. Second, act of writing requires retrieval of explicit knowledge to describe the content and the writer's intention accurately. In this way, writing has potential role(s) to automatize learned knowledge, and thus promote second language acquisition.

To foster university students' writing abilities, general agreement might be reached where to place teaching focuses on and in which order. This pilot study might suggest the gravity order of 1) matching of teaching and learning style preferences, 2) arranging commentary provision method, and 3) ordering linguistic phases of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. For Japanese learners, complexity in content, syntax, and vocabulary is something that is difficult to process in communicative occasions. Further research is indispensable to solve this issue. The limitation of this study is that there was no control group.

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Appendix A

Student questionnaire (Lee, 2008)

1. Was your teacher's feedback legible? (Please circle only ONE answer)

5	4	3	2	1
Totally legible		some		not legible at all

2. TO what extent were you able to correct the errors accurately according to the teacher's feedback?

5	4	3	2	1
Totally		some		not at all

3. In the next few compositions, which of the following do you prefer to get from the teacher?
(Please tick only ONE answer)

Only grads/marks	Only response to errors
Only written comments	Mark/grade + error feedback
Mark/grade + written comments	Error feedback + written comments
Mark/grade + error feedback + written comments	None of the above

4. Which of the following type of feedback would you like your teacher to give more in future?
(Please tick only ONE answer)

Written comment	error feedback	none of the above
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5. Which of the above type of feedback would you like your teacher to give less in future? (Please tick only ONE answer)

Written comment	error feedback	none of the above
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6. In the future compositions, which of the following would you be most interested in finding out?
(Please tick only ONE answer)

The mark/grade	Teacher's comments on my writing
The errors I have made	Others (Please specify)

7. Which of the following area would you like your teacher to emphasize more in future? You can tick only ONE answer.

Content	Organization	Language
None of the above	Others (Please specify)	

8. Which of the following area would you like your teacher to emphasize less in future? You can tick only ONE answer.

Content	Organization	Language
None of the above	Others (Please specify)	

9. Tick ONE box below to indicate the amount of errors you want your teacher to response to.

None	All	Some only
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10. Which of the following method would you like your English teacher to use more in future when responding to errors? (Please tick only ONE answer)

- A. Underline/circle my errors
- B. Underline/circle my errors and provide corrections for me
- C. Underline/circle my errors, categorize them
- D. Underline/circle my errors, categorize them, and provide corrections for me
- E. Give me a hint about my errors e.g. by putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line
- F. Give me a hint about my errors and categorize the errors for me e.g. by writing “T” in the margin to indicate a “Tense” error on a specific line
- G. None of the above methods

Appendix B

Interview questions: Specific questions (Victori, 1999, p. 553)

Have you done any kind of planning before starting to write?

Do you usually plan?

Do you always know ahead what you are going to write about?

Do you think planning ahead is a useful strategy?

Do you ever write outlines before writing?

Do you plan each paragraph and the entire essay?

After having written your essay, do you think you have followed your initial plan?

Apart from planning some ideas, is there anything else you plan?

Do you ever bear in mind who is going to read your essay, that is, your reader?

Have you had any kind of problem while writing? What was the main one?

In this particular point (to be pointed) you stopped writing. Do you remember why?

Do you often stop writing while composing? And what do you do then?

Do you think in Catalan or Spanish or English while writing? Is it good to do so?

How do you think an essay should be organized?

What should each paragraph have? and the introduction? and the conclusion ?

Have you revised your essay? Do you always do so?

How do you usually revise your essays?

Do you think this is what you should do?

When did you decide your essay was finished?

Appendix C

diagnostic profile

	content (×6)	organization (×6)	function (×6)	language use (×2)
excellent to very good (5 points)	impressive; knowledgeable; thorough development of the topic;	ideas clearly supported or stated; logically structured; well-organized; cohesive	persuasive; easy to follow; main idea effectively conveyed	fluent; few grammatical errors; sophisticated range of vocabulary
good to average (4 points)	mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail; adequate range	main idea stands out, but loosely organized; logical but limited support	moderately understandable	minor local errors only;
fair (3 points)	limited knowledge of subject	lacks logical sequencing; choppy	barely understandable, but not very clear	only a few global errors
poor (2 points)	little substance	ideas disconnected;	confusing	nonfluent; contains some global errors
very poor (1 point)	does not show knowledge of subject ; not enough to evaluate	no organization;	does not communicate	unintelligible

full mark: 100

commentary:	
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