

Postgraduate Student's Perspectives on Collaborative Feedback

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Abstract: This study explores the postgraduate student's perspectives on collaborative feedback. It is a part of the larger research that explores the learning processes involved in a reflective collaborative environment. 13 postgraduate students participated in an action research project which took place for 3 months. Data were collected using focus group interview and student's and researcher's reflections. The findings indicated that collaborative feedback provided a non-threatening learning environment for postgraduate students to improve their reflective writing skills and practices. However, despite the positive outcomes of collaborative feedback, students reported difficulties in giving constructive criticism and asking critical questions to help their peers to improve their reflections. Cultural influence such as respect for the elderly was found to be one of the barriers in giving constructive criticism.

Key words: Collaborative feedback, postgraduate students, English as a second language, explores, barriers

INTRODUCTION

Studies on feedback have received much interest among researchers in various disciplines. In language teaching researches and language teachers mainly examined feedback practices in L2 writing with the focus on accuracy (Lee, 2008; Bitchener *et al.*, 2005) rather than looking at how feedback processes influence student's learning. Studies revealed that feedback is necessary for student's improvement as Paulus (1999) indicated that the majority of revisions that students made were surface-level revisions and that the changes they made as a result of peer and teacher feedback were often meaning-level changes than their own revisions. Similarly, Lee (2008) found that students irrespective of proficiency level wanted more written feedback from their teachers and that the students of lower proficiency were less interested in error feedback than those of higher proficiency, though both groups preferred more explicit error feedback from their teachers. Studies also revealed that explicit error feedback helped students to self-edit their written work (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). They investigated 72 university ESL students to self-edit their texts and found that both groups who received feedback significantly outperformed the no-feedback group on the self-editing task. In addition they also found that less

explicit feedback also seemed to help students to self-edit. In a nutshell, feedback often resulted in overall essay improvement over time (Paulus, 1999; Ferris and Roberts, 2001).

Studies on feedback: Recently, the research on feedback is reinterpreted to show how feedback processes can help students take control of their own learning, i.e., becoming self-regulated learners (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Butler and Winne, 1995). They argue that students are already assessing their own work and generating their own feedback but the results were far from the acceptable standard required of higher education. With the new shift into self-regulation, students are seen as having a proactive rather than a reactive role in generating and using feedback. Thus provide more profound implications for the way in which feedback is used in teaching and learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) outline seven principles of good feedback practice which may facilitate self-regulation which are: helps clarify what good performance is; facilitates the development of self-assessment; delivers high quality information to students about their learning; encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning; encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem; provides

opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance and provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

Even though inadequacies regarding the ways in which feedback is formulated have been extensively researched, Sadler (2013) argues that these inadequacies were due to the failure to capitalize on the potential of learning from assessment events. He also reiterated that this is partly due to the lack of student's knowledge about the intellectual purpose of an essay itself and partly due to the "telling" mode of the teacher's teaching which lies in the transmission model. In addition, Hattie and Timperley (2007) claimed that "surprisingly few recent studies have systematically investigated the meaning of feedback in classrooms". They reported a synthesis of over 500 meta-analyses, involving 450,000 effect sizes from 180,000 studies on various influences on student achievement clearly claimed that feedback can be powerful for learning and that some types of feedback are more powerful than others. Hattie and Timperley (2007) stated that "feedback is what happens second is one of the most powerful influences on learning, too rarely occurs and needs to be more fully researched by qualitatively and quantitatively investigating how feedback works in the classroom and learning process".

In view of reflective critique in the context of teaching and learning, scholars have now shifted toward a view that "the scholarship of teaching is more than excellent teaching suggesting that it also entails practices that lead to new understandings on the part of the teacher, subject to peer review by colleagues" (Gibbs, 1988; Hutchings *et al.*, 2002). In addition, Hutchings (1996) also added the notion of teaching as a process of ongoing reflection and inquiry; the need for collegial exchange and public ness and faculty's professional responsibility for the quality of their work as teachers. Therefore, more research on collaborative feedback which involved collegial exchange in higher education teaching and learning is needed and this paper is an attempt to do that.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, an action research design was employed. Action research designs "are systematic procedures used by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting, their teaching and the learning of their students" (Creswell, 2012). Action research processes involve acting, observing, reflecting and revising plan of actions. The first phase of data collection began with gathering and documenting problems related to the issue under

study. In the second phase or the 'identifying' stage, more rigorous literature was gathered to identify a meeting point between previous research and the issues faced. This is followed by the planning of data collection methodology and procedure, identifying and finding suitable technique that may help the teacher to provide a systematic feedback to enhance student's critical reflection. In this action research, the researchers were the participants and were involved collaboratively with the students to improve the feedback processes.

About 13 students who were taking a Master's degree in English language teaching at one of the public universities in the northern region of Malaysia took part in this study. They consisted of 12 female and 1 male students from different ethnic background with teaching experience ranged between 1 and 20 year. As part of the course requirement they had to write reflections based on the ELT issues discussed in the classroom. In Malaysia, evidences collected from student's reflections indicated that students have not achieved a critical level of reflection and most of them were not self-regulated learners (Yaacob *et al.*, 2014). In fact, only a few studies of the reflective writing process as used by teachers (Yaacob *et al.*, 2014) were recorded (Fig. 1).

The data collection involved three phases. In the first phase, a focus group interview was conducted with the participants to explore issues regarding writing reflection. This was carried out for the duration of 2 week. They were asked to write weekly reflection on the issues discussed in class. Then they posted it online for the researchers and peers to review. In the second phase they were provided with some guidance in using Gibb's reflective model and critical questioning techniques. In this stage the transfer of learning took place between the researcher and the students vice versa. Here, the students and the researchers worked collaboratively to give feedback to their peers and improve their reflections. Data from the participant's reflections and researcher's reflections were also collected in this phase. Finally, in the third phase, another focus group interview with the participants was conducted to gather information about the overall process and to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and to identify challenges faced by them. However, this study presented the results of the first phase of the study which aims to identify the issues faced by the postgraduate students while engaging in collaborative feedback to improve their reflections. The data in this study were derived from the participant's focus group interview. They were analyzed using thematic coding based on concept-driven thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that also served as the outline of the findings.

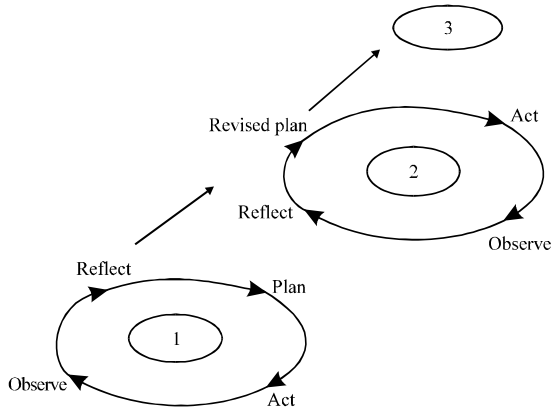


Fig. 1: Action research spiral Zuber-Skerritt

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As indicated in Fig. 2 and 3 the participants indicated that collaborative feedback helped them to identify their strengths and weaknesses not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of their writing skills and their teaching practices. Collaborative feedback provided them with a non-threatening environment that enabled them to be more open to criticism. Below are some of their responses.

“Peer feedback helps me to improve myself. We will be able to learn our strength and weaknesses. To improve both writing reflections and feedback we have to read a lot so that we have the knowledge to share and generate our ideas (Nur)”.

“Yes I also think that it benefits me a lot when peer feedback it concerned. I think peer feedback helps me in analysing my strengths and weakness. Sometimes we tend to think that we are on the right track in everything that we are involved in. thus peer review will be beneficial at this point. We can correct our mistake or bad habits or maybe we can start a new chapter having told the weakness (Hani)”.

“Peer feedbacks helped me a lot in improving my reflection writing from first time to second time. Continuous peer feedback will help me to improve. I guess so I think we need some good samples to get to know how to write critical reflection writing. From the example we may develop our skills. Apart from that we need additional notes that teach techniques of writing critical reflection. Students need to read more so that they would now how to write based on the exposure. I think giving feedbacks is a good thing to do in order to now people’s opinions. It is a way to improve the negative into positive (Jan)”.

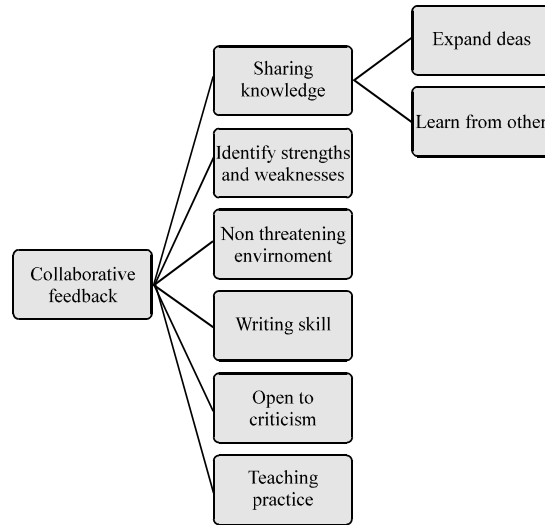


Fig. 2: Strengths of collaborative feedback

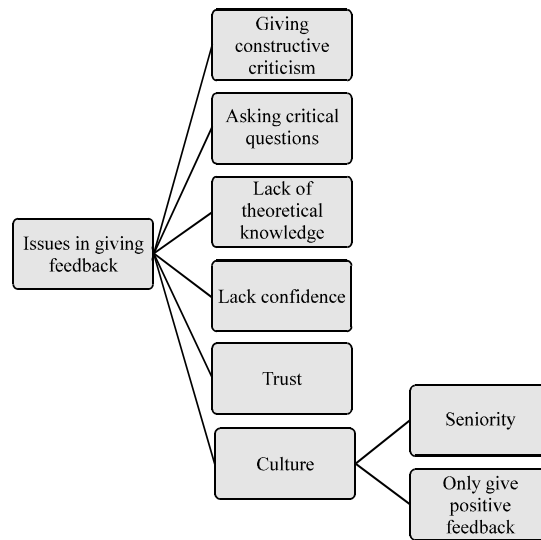


Fig. 3: Issues in collaborative feedback

“Yes of course, definitely peer feedback helps a lot. Getting insights from my friend especially J and Z where they always give me both positive and negative comments where it is essential for me to look and improve when it is both sides. Improve writing reflection can be done when it is put into practice. Peer feedback is much better when both positive and negative comments are available (Zatul)”.

“Peer feedback also creates the non-threatening environments because sometimes I feel insecure and I doubt myself too much (HF)”. “Giving and feedback is actually an alternative that is so beneficial in improving

our own self. It allows us to reflect on our own practices, routines and simultaneously to me that as a turning point for personal improvement (Hani)”.

Figure 3 shows some issues raised by the participants. They reported that they had difficulties to give feedback to their peers based on a few reasons: they did not know how to give constructive criticism, could not ask critical questions, lacked theoretical knowledge, lacked confidence, lacked of trust and cultural influence. These are the responses provided by the participants.

“Another problem that I face in giving feedback is the questioning techniques. Sometimes, I found it hard for me to construct questions. Perhaps there are too many rules and regulations regarding to grammar spinning in my brain which make me doubt with my questioning sentences. To overcome this, I seek help from my group members in term of giving corrective feedback (Linee)”.

“My problem in giving feedback is that I am very weak in asking questions. I struggle on how to ask questions, what questions should i ask and i am also concerned about the sentence structure. At first i struggled to apply the Socrates questioning techniques in giving feedback because this techniques is very new. It is not in my habit to ask that kind of questions so i need more time and practice to adapt the questions when giving feedback (HF)”.

“I believe culture has strong impact towards how we give feedback to others. We have the tendency to beat around the bush instead of giving feedback on critical aspect straight away (Haz)”.

“Problems in the culture especially among teachers in the school. Example between the senior teachers and junior teachers. Senior teachers seem to have certain believe or rules that they hold on to so they don’t even bother to ask or accept the junior teachers approach (Sha)”.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to examine the issues faced by post graduate students who are engaged in collaborative feedback to improve their reflections. As this is part of a larger project, it highlighted only the results of the first phase of the study. The results indicated that collaborative feedback provided a non-threatening learning environment for post graduate students to improve their writing skills and practices. It became the platform for them to share their knowledge and skills in improving their reflections.

Despite the positive outcomes of collaborative feedback, students reported difficulties in giving constructive criticism and asking critical questions to help their peers to improve their reflection. This study provided evidence on the way feedback is used in teaching and learning. These postgraduate students needed support in giving constructive criticism and asking critical questions during the feedback processes even though they are experienced teachers. In addition, cultural influence such as respect the elders created a barrier in giving constructive criticism. It is recommended that future research should examine further on how culture influences collaborative feedback practices.

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