

LECTURERS’ STRATEGIES IN GIVING FEEDBACK TOWARDS STUDENTS’ THESIS WRITING: A CASE STUDY IN STATE ISLAMIC COLLEGE OF PONOROGO

Restu Mufanti

Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo

mufanti@yahoo.com

Abstract

The use of corrective feedback on students’ writing is one of never endless issues to discuss and received huge attention from lecturers, thesis advisors and researchers. Various studies related to feedback have been conducted whether to find out its effectiveness, strength, and weaknesses or to improve the quality of students’ writing. It cannot be denied that the way how advisors provide feedback plays an essential role to help students build their confidence to write and assist them to improve their writing. In accord to this, this research attempted to seek the light on how advisors make a use of feedback in writing and find out the factors the lecturers considered to provide feedback. To achieve these goals, this study employed qualitative case study as the research design involving three tenured lecturers in State Islamic College of Ponorogo as the research subjects. Data related to kinds of strategies used by the subjects in giving feedback and their underlying considerations were gotten by employing interview and document observation. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively to answer the research questions. This study revealed that the subjects’ strategies in giving feedback varied and these were closely related to the targeted aims. Some strategies were identified, such as the use of corrective feedback using minimal marking and comment, reflective feedback by discussing some samples of students’ errors and peer review. These strategies were occupied under certain condition regarding the students’ need and proficiency level, types and amount of errors. Since the findings were beneficial to suggest how feedback was effective to apply, it is recommended for lecturers to adapt or adopt these feedback practices in order to help students improve the quality of their writing.

Keywords: feedback, strategies, thesis writing

INTRODUCTION

Thesis writing is one of the scientific papers that should be composed by undergraduate students at the end of their studies as a compulsory requirement to complete their degree. Fundamentally, the thesis writing is aimed at serving students with the basic of knowledge, skills and experiences to solve the academic problem scientifically and communicate the process and results effectively to develop science. With their proficiency level of English and prior knowledge, it is expected that students are able to access information or ideas from various sources, make a use of the information, and articulate their ideas scientifically into cogent and coherence thesis.

In composing thesis writing, however, most students often have problems in expressing and developing ideas although they have passed the previous related courses, such as academic writing, grammar, and research methodology. It is often found that they make mistakes in terms of sentence structure, lexis, content, or coherence between the ideas in paragraphs developed. In response to these problems, it is widely recognized that the advisors provide feedback to assist them notice their errors and improve their writing. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of corrective feedback in writing is one of the controversial issues that never ceases discussed by educators as well as attracting the attention of researchers.

On the one hand, providing feedback is argued to be ineffective and hard to measure its effectiveness whether it significantly contributes to the quality of students' writing and improve the accuracy of their language. This is in line with the facts that many advisors still encounter problems when they help students write their thesis. For instance, students are weak to identify patterns of errors they made so that they are not able to revise their writing problems independently, lack of

ability to respond the feedback given by the advisor, lack of attention and efforts to solving the problems of writing, and other related negative behavior. This fact is also supported by several studies which indicate that feedback is empirically ineffective (e.g., Hayland & Hyland, 2006; Russell & Spada, 2006) and even destructive to the writing skills of learners (Truscott, 1996).

On the other hand, the feedback is believed to play an important role as negotiation efforts to help students produce better. Corrective feedback is generally occupied to improve the quality of students' writing from various aspects, such as content, lexis, grammar text organization, referencing, and other related components in writing thesis. Some studies have found that corrective feedback is effective to help students improve the quality of their written works (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008). It is said that the students who are given feedback have better skills in improving the subsequent errors compared with those who are not provided feedback (Ferris, 1999). Despite the controversy, it is widely believed that corrective feedback is necessarily used by the advisors in order that students know the mistakes they make and help them improve their written works. More importantly, if the feedback given is easily understood and fitted with their needs in writing, students might have greater motivation and awareness to develop their writing.

Problems related to the use of corrective feedback in writing have been also faced by the advisor lecturers in the State Islamic College of Ponorogo (STAIN Ponorogo). Based on the preliminary study conducted through informal interview with the lecturers, it revealed that this college has established a new regulation of thesis guidance in 2014 in which it has applied a single supervisor for one student. A single advisor supervises eight to twelve students who has main jobs to improve, enhance or change the editorial title and formulation of research problems, and improve research methods, language and writing techniques. The application of a single advisor that has been recently applied certainly has its advantages and disadvantages or challenges whether in the supervision process and the quality of the written works composed by students.

Accordingly, the single advisor policy has encouraged the advisors to be more effective in supervising students because they have to guide, direct, and correct students' writing in all aspects of thesis writing, such as content, language and research methodology. More specifically, the way in which they make use of corrective feedback should be optimized. The advisors should improve the effectiveness of supervision granted to facilitate and help students prepare the research instruments, conduct research, analyze data obtained and write the research results.

This study was not focused on evaluating the process and results of students' thesis writing, whereas it was aimed to see the efforts of the advisors in providing feedback to assist students compose their thesis writing. In particular, this study was to describe the strategy used by the advisors in providing corrective feedback on students' writing and find out the factors they considered to provide feedback.

METHOD

To achieve the objectives, this study used a qualitative approach by occupying a case study design in the process of data collection. The design was chosen under the following considerations: a) allow researchers in the natural environment in which the behavior of subjects can be studied because of the observed phenomenon occurs naturally, b) provide ample opportunities to depict and describe the behavior of the subjects in detail, c) investigate the object phenomena being observed in depth, and d) accommodate a subject's perspective to complement the data obtained (McMillan, 2008).

The subjects in this study were three tenured English lecturers and advisors (US, PR, and WK) in the State Islamic Institute (STAIN) Ponorogo. This research was conducted in the second semester of 2015/2016 academic year. The data in this study was a word, phrase or sentence related to the strategy or tactics used by the advisors in providing feedback on the students' draft of thesis and factors to be considered to apply the feedback.

To obtain the required data, this study used two methods of data collection, such as interviews and documentation observation. Interview was conducted by employing semi-structured face-to-face format. This technique was believed to ensure that the interview activities could run more flexibly, create interest and involvement of the subject, and obtain the data in greater depth (Robson, 2000: 90). Interview was conducted with three subjects in this study based on the interview guide. Each subject was interviewed separately by the researcher, and any information given by the subject was noted in detail by the co-researcher. In the interview process, the researchers did not use a tape recorder because in our view it could put pressure on the subject, affect their openness in providing information, and reduce the validity and consistency of the data obtained. When needed, the researcher conducted further interviews to complement, clarify and specify the data.

Furthermore, this study also used the document observation technique to supporting the data. The technique was conducted by carefully reading and analyzing the feedback given by the advisors and the correction draft made by students. Data generated through this technique was to complement the main data from the interviews. The technique was focused to explain how students processed the feedback given by subjects in this study and the instrument used was adopted from Mufanti's noticing table (2012).

After the data related to the research subjects' feedback strategies and consideration factors were collected, the data were analyzed qualitatively. The data analysis included a series of activities, such as identifying data patterns, finding the relationships among the data, making a detailed explanation and interpretation as well as generalizing the findings based on the theoretical basis used in this study. In this study, the data obtained were analyzed in depth to explain the research problems through three stages of interactive analysis process adopted from Miles & Huberman (1994), namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing.

Data reduction was a process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, summarizing and transforming data from the field notes or transcripts of conversations. In this study, the data collected from interviews with the subjects were sorted and classified by gathering the similar information with the data from the document observation. As a result, it was obtained the detailed and focused data to ease the researchers to conduct further analysis. After the reduction process of the data was done, the next step was data display. In this phase, the reduced data was then compiled, integrated, and systematically collected and presented in narrative form. Furthermore, the data were then collated and interpreted based on the theoretical basis and the formulation of the problems to make conclusion of the study. Once the data was presented and interpretation was done, the final stage of the analytical work was drawing conclusion. Researchers verified the research findings with theories and drew conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the efforts made to improve the quality of supervision of thesis was through the optimization of providing feedback on the students' draft. Data from interviews and observation documents showed that advisors employed various strategies in giving feedback. Each subject was typically employing similar ways in providing feedback as they frequently had met each other to discuss the

supervision processes and results. They attempted to optimize the intensity of communication and counseling strategies, especially in giving feedback on students' thesis writing in accordance to the needs and their language proficiency.

Feedback forms and Strategies

The supervision strategies in providing feedback varied. The results of interview and document observation showed that feedback was generally given in the direct and indirect ways. Direct feedback was done in the form of immediate correction of the mistakes made by students in such field, such as grammatical, lexical, mechanic, or content. In providing corrective feedback, the advisors used some tactics, such as by using symbols or signs to mark the location and the type of errors and give comments prior to the mistakes.

Correction Using Symbols

Providing direct corrective feedback was occasionally done by using symbols or signs of the mistakes made by students. The symbols were usually written using different colors, blue or green, to ease the students seeing the type and the location of mistakes. For example, the symbol ‘Ag’ to indicate an agreement error, ‘Ar’ misuse of article, ‘F’ wrong form of the word, ‘W’ error in using word choices, ‘L’ to show problem with linking words, (C) collocation error, (S) spelling error, (P) punctuation error, and (R) wrong register, i.e., too informal.

Besides, some signs were also used to mark the problems in writing. For instances, the sign [^] was to indicate that there was missing word or expression, [(...)] unnecessary – could be omitted and also used to show the words referred to in a footnote, [?] to show that the phrase or clause were confusing, could not be understood or was not logical, [Underlined Phrases] Syntax was out of control, [/] to delete the unnecessary word or phrase, and other related marks.

The symbols were placed within the words or phrases, between the margins or on the right or left of the margins as exemplified as follows.

Excerpt 1

Therefore it needs a new technique to ^Wteach vocabulary and make students interested in vocabulary and make them can memorize ^{Ar} the vocabulary easily, so the resercher ^{P L}interested ^A in ^Fconducted the research [?]

Excerpt 2

Speaking is a skill which deserves attention every bit as much as literary skill, in foreign languages. Our learners often need to be able to speak ^Wwith ^Wconfidence ^Fin order to carry out many of their most basic transactions. [?]

Excerpt 3

It means that students must understand well about the text. If we master reading skill, we can ~~easy to~~ ^Fget information and tell something to other. ^W

Three excerpts above were taken from students’ draft (IS, RI and WI) respectively. It showed that the advisors gave corrective feedback by using symbols or markers. In the first excerpt, for instance, the advisor marked [W] to assign students replace the word 'new'. The choice of the word ‘new’ was assumed inappropriate to explain the term 'technique' used by teachers in teaching. This was because the techniques the writer recommended was logically not new in the field of education. It was more appropriate to use the word 'alternative'. In addition, some of the markers used, such as Ar was to show the wrong use of articles; symbol P was to mark punctuation errors; the symbol L was meant that the use of linking word was wrong; marker ^ was to show that there was missing word (to be) and should be added; and the symbol F was as a marker of errors form the word 'conducted' that should be present participle 'conducting'. In addition, the underline marker of the phrase 'teach vocabulary and the make students interested in vocabulary and make them can memorize' was to indicate that the clause was difficult to understand as a syntax error.

Similarly, in the second or third excerpt, the advisors gave corrective feedback using symbols or markers. The use mark (/) was to indicate that the sentence did not require the preposition 'with' and the use of the noun 'confidence' was not appropriate because the sentence required the adverb 'confidently'. While in the third excerpt, can easy to get information this phrase had inverted wording and did not require a preposition for its auxiliary 'can'.

Correction With Comments

In subsequent of writing, students were also given corrective feedback in the form of comment. The advisors commented on the students’ writing to clarify or give suggestion towards their errors. The comments were sometimes written in the left/ right margins or even in the backside of the paper.

Excerpt 4.

C. Statements of the Problem

②

1. What kind of language learning problems that occur in joining speaking class at eleventh grade students of Al-Mawaddah?
 2. What is the causes of language learning problems that occur in joining speaking class at eleventh grade students of Al-Mawaddah?
- ② Write paragraphs that problematize this study. They can include theory or empirical findings that can drive your ideas to the problems of this study.

The excerpt above was taken from the student’s draft (DH) in which she got feedback in the form of comment from her advisor. It showed that the advisor wanted her to write the introductory of paragraph headings that could well explained the background of statements of the problem. This type of comment was beneficial for them to guide what to write and how she should write to improve the draft. The advisor’s comment gave detail information about the mistakes the student made. This type of feedback was sometime used in response to sophisticated problems or difficulties that the students encountered, for instance writing a complex or compound sentences or expressing technical ideas. Therefore, the commentary given by the advisor helped the students to identify the errors themselves and develop their writing. This is in line with Hyland’s suggestion (1990: 283) that the writer can see how someone actually responds to their writing as it develops, where the ideas get across, where confusion a rises, where logic or structure breaks down.

Reflective Feedback and Peer Review

Meanwhile, they also varied their feedback practices by applying the indirect one, such as by using reflective feedback and strengthening peer review. Reflective feedback was given in the beginning of the supervision activity after students got feedback. The advisors invited the students whom they supervised, and provided reflection prior to specific errors or problems by overviews and clarifying common mistakes made by students. They took examples from students' draft, explained the errors or writing problems, and negotiated with students how to overcome the problems. Afterwards, the advisors assigned the supervised students worked in several groups whose similar topic or research methodologies and asked them to peer-review. They asked them to discuss the feedback in turn, and gave suggestion to fix it up. After working in small group, the advisor then assigned them to present and ask questions (selected problems) towards the unresolved feedback. After that, they showed the writing sheet through projector in order that all students could see. While one presents, others were required to pay attention and gave suggestion. If it was needed, the lecturer would clarify it.

Some Factors in Giving Feedback

To make the feedback was comprehensible and meaningful for students, there were some factors that were considered by the advisors. The interview result revealed that the subjects paid much attention to students' individual needs in writing the thesis and their level of proficiency. They confirmed that feedback would only be comprehensible and students could access the feedback if it met with their knowledge and abilities both in term of language or methodology.

With regard to the provision of corrective feedback, the advisors were expected to take into account the individual differences of students. As Mufanti (2014) asserts that every student uses different noticing strategies in response to feedback given, and their ability to process the feedback is influenced by several factors, such as their prior knowledge or schemata, the level of language skills and writing experience. It is reasonable to say that each student was varying to function noticing in processing the indirect corrective feedback they received. Each student has encountered different writing problems and processed the corrective feedback differently as well.

Moreover, the subjects also confirmed that the feedback given was very specific to diagnose students' problems. It meant that they regarded and selected the types and the forms of errors that the students made. For example, in the first draft, the subjects only focused on the content and rhetorical organization of paragraph. Here, they gave corrective feedback in the form of comment followed with peer review. They then did reflective feedback prior to students' mistakes or problems before they gave further feedback related to linguistics errors.

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed the case of how feedback has been occupied by the advisors to help students develop their thesis writing in the state Islamic college of Ponorogo where it uses a single supervisor. To optimize the supervision, feedback was varied and some strategies were done. Some practices on corrective feedback were identified, such as by using minimal marking and comment followed with reflective feedback and peer review. These strategies were occupied under certain condition regarding the students' need and proficiency level, types and amount of errors. Although the subjects got difficulties with the policy of a single supervisor, it can be said that those techniques and consideration can cope with students' needs in writing the thesis. Since the findings are beneficial to suggest how feedback is effective to apply, it is recommended for other lecturers and advisors to adapt or adopt these feedback practices in order to help students compose their thesis.

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