

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS BY INTEGRATING FEEDBACK INTO THE PROCESS OF TASK-BASED TEACHING

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Abstract: *The article illustrates a method of including feedback into the language learning process by rendering a series of class activities leading to the enhancement of writing skill proficiency. The case study focusses on a qualitative analysis of the typical discourse-level mistakes of intermediate students, specifically focussing on discourse content and organisation. Providing feedback on these aspects is identified in the study as representing a way of raising learners’ awareness of the specific aspects of written text production, more specifically, opinion statements, and helping them acquire efficient ways to apply self-correction, an absolute necessity in language learning.*

Keywords: *writing skills, text coherence, task-based teaching, feedback*

1. INTRODUCTION

Developing writing skills is probably the most challenging undertaking in language learning both for students and teachers, especially when working towards higher level proficiency. In the standard classroom, writing is often used as a tool for assessment (in which case the accuracy and coherence of the text is only indirectly evaluated) or as a support activity for other skills, such as notetaking during listening or even speaking.

The emergence of the communicative method, favouring student interaction, may have contributed to writing getting less attention; however, the emergence of communicating through the internet and social media has reintroduced activities that designate writing skills as the main objective [8]. Concomitantly, the emphasis on the practical aspects of writing has brought forward the need for more realistic contexts to be used in the classroom, focussing on the dialogic nature of this activity.

Task-based learning is a subcategory of the communicative method focussing on the accomplishment of various realistic and genuine tasks. Writing is undertaken within various realistic scenarios, usually with an addressee in mind. This complexity entails students’ drawing on their schematic knowledge (as they employ their background knowledge on genres and situations required by the task) and their social awareness when they decide on the style (e.g. formality/informality) they should use in their text [9, 3].

The process involves preparation for the task, its performance and, finally, a consistent activity of language focus which provides meaningful feedback on the language used by the learners. This stage of the learning process has a predominantly reflective aspect during which students become aware of their weaknesses and the efficient ways in which they can continue learning.

The present study focusses on this post-task phase of the activity discussing feedback as an activity that provides an efficient modality for students to appropriate certain writing practices but also offers the teacher a ground for experimenting in order to adequately adjust activities and material to learners' needs and profile. In this respect, the relevant factors include the students' professional background as future military personnel, their specific level as (upper)intermediate learners and as young adults who use writing mainly to communicate through texting and may encounter difficulties when producing a longer essay.

In order to address the first two aspects, the guidelines of two frameworks for assessment have been used, the Common European Framework and the requirements formulated in the Standard Nato Agreement (STANAG) for military personnel. Their provisions for the level of writing proficiency corresponding to an intermediate learner (B1 and level 2, respectively) stipulate a user able to produce a personal point of view on a relatively familiar subject, while higher proficiency levels (B2, level 2+) describe a the ability to discuss a wider range of topics, adding more elaborate details and demonstrating higher language accuracy.

The aim of the feedback activity described in this case study has been to achieve an increased awareness among students regarding the characteristics of higher complexity writing by relying on their existing schematic knowledge (paragraph structure, marking transition between ideas) and their social awareness (topics of general interest). The general expectation is that students developing awareness of the general and more specific principles of text production may be able to successfully render an elaborate opinion on a variety of (even less familiar) general topics.

2. FEEDBACK IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

With the emergence of learner-centred approaches, feedback and error correction have been acknowledged as essential in the learning process due to their role of raising students' awareness of their deficiencies and helping them overcome them. Nevertheless, the idea that not enough and not adequate feedback is given to students still persists [6].

Providing feedback is to a great extent determined by the students' needs, the general or specific objectives underlying the teaching process and various contextual factors. The various types of feedback are classified around focus, scope and strategy [4]. Focus represents local or global perspectives, ranging from the sentence- or word-level error correction to that which examines a text in its larger, discursive dimension. While the first one aims to develop language accuracy and is more frequently present with lower level learners, global feedback benefits higher proficiency learners as it targets text coherence on a discursive level where relevant content and adequate organisation are foregrounded.

In terms of content, the overall clarity of the message is examined, including the adequacy of the details, such as providing a clearly worded message and rendering sufficient and not redundant or repeated details. Organisation of the discursive elements pertains to the logical and formal connection of the ideas worded in the text, such as the existence of a topic sentence, that is followed by relevant supporting details which consistently elaborate on the main idea of the paragraph. These categories, together with the local-level language of a text jointly convey the global meaning of a text.

The scope of feedback can vary depending on the specific aims of the writing task, whether the accuracy of specific linguistic elements is targeted or a general assessment of a text is pursued.

Classroom practice demonstrates that teachers prefer making assessments of the overall quality of students' writing performance, since it may be more beneficial for individual students' progress [4].

Strategy of feedback pertains to the way in which the teacher chooses to indicate a particular mistake, directly providing an alternative or a suggestion to the student, or simply marking it, indirectly pointing out the error or inadequacy.

Standard feedback is usually provided through written corrective feedback (WCF), that is, the local, direct, sentence-level signalling of grammar mistakes. Indeed, students' perception of the adequately written text is influenced by this general practice, as they tend to ignore discourse level rules when producing a written text [7]. However, what is commonly acknowledged is that corrective observations provided by the teacher are valued by students if they are addressed to students individually, focussing on the individual profile of the language learner and their delivery in a constructive way elicits positive engagement on the students' part [6].

A further aspect relevant for the present study is the issue of peer feedback which has had a mixed acceptance among the teaching community [6]. While they may represent a lower rate of positive engagement on the students' part, in situations when group cohesion is higher it may generate an environment of camaraderie and mutual support. During the activities illustrated in the present case study samples used in the feedback session were anonymous.

3. WRITING SKILL DEVELOPMENT AMONG THE AVIATION CADETS

As pointed out earlier, the best choice of feedback, or indeed, the details of the entire teaching process, pertains to the students' particular needs and profile. With the present case study, this profile revolves around the language proficiency requirements that military personnel has to fulfil in their professional capacity.

In the specific context of language teaching for aviation cadets, developing higher level writing skills can be operationalised by targeting the concrete linguistic functions which involve transitioning from an intermediate level (B1) to an upper intermediate (B2) one [1]. These values mainly correspond to levels 2 and 2+ in the STANAG 6001 description of proficiency levels, used in NATO countries [2]. Concerning the content and the nature of the tasks formulated at this level, this challenge is materialised in addressing topics which require a more analytical approach rather than merely rendering factual data on personal experience. The transition from familiar, concrete details to more complex and general content is described similarly by the two frameworks which underlie language proficiency assessment in the European Union (Common European Framework) and NATO (STANAG 6001).

Level B2 in the CEF description is named *Vantage level* due to the learner's uplift above the '*intermediate plateau*', *acquiring 'a new perspective'* and *breaking 'with the content so far'*. This new perspective is marked both by an increased amount of discourse the learner can produce through more details and a wider range of topics, even less familiar ones, that he/she can tackle. While an intermediate B1 communicator typically '*expresses main points*' and '*personal views*' in more abstract topics, a B2 '*can provide relevant explanations, arguments and comments*'. With a specific reference to overall written production, the B1 level is described as producing '*straightforward connected texts*' on familiar subjects, whereas a B2 writes '*clear, detailed texts*' on a variety of subjects.

In the case of the B2 level, the CEF emphasizes the emergence of *'a new degree of language awareness'*, through which this learner can occasionally correct themselves and consciously monitor the language they produce, a feature which is absent from lower levels.

Although the description in the NATO document is less detailed, a correspondence with the B1/B2 transition is traceable. The level 2 characteristics of a written text are described as *'roughly organized according to major points or straightforward sequencing of events'*, a user being able to produce *'connected prose'*, with paragraphs that connect or contrast, with transitions that are described as occasionally *'awkward'*. The level 2+ is also described as *'less effective'* when supporting opinion and *'inconsistent'* in *'abstract linguistic formulations'*; however, what distinguishes the 2+ user from lower levels is the *'relative coherence'* of his/her text which contains *'considerable detail'*.

As students work themselves towards developing more elaborate written texts, focus from the accuracy of grammar patterns and lexis or adequate sentence structure (typical of lower-level writing activities) shifts towards text coherence [5, 6]. Indeed, their main challenge at this level is to find the appropriate wording to express abstract or general ideas they are less used to tackle in the target language. Given that the conceptual frames the language user can tackle at this level are more varied, it is equally important for learners to activate their knowledge on the general conventions of writing and become aware of their specific aspects.

In the case of writing skill development, opinion statement may be the most relevant indicator of a transition to a higher level of proficiency as it allows progress to be traced in terms of quantity (sufficient amount of detail) and quality (adequate phrasing in terms of coherence, clarity and language accuracy).

4. METHODOLOGY

The series of activities pertaining to the task took place among five groups of 80 students altogether, grouped in smaller groups of 15 or larger ones 20 or 25 students. As in most classes the students' level is not homogenous, their average language level ranging from B1 to even B2, in some cases. It was expected, therefore, that students with a higher proficiency level would perform better and produce texts with a high degree of accuracy, with adequately developed and logically linked ideas. However, this did not exclude the possibility of inconsistencies occurring in the use of coherence devices or arrangement of the information.

The specific aim of the task pertained to the linguistic function of stating an opinion, meant to elicit the use of conceptual and linguistic elements that illustrate the transition from a B1 level to a B2. This implied the use of the paragraph as an organisational frame and topics adequate for the production of a higher complexity text. This entailed a selection of general topics that require detachment from personal experience but common enough for students to approach and express opinion on. Throughout the procedure it was expected that students would formulate extended arguments on the issues that were presented in the form of statements which students reacted to, first in spoken form, then, in the realization phase, solving the main task in writing. For example:

'Working from home is preferable to working in an office.'

'Graduating from college may be the best choice you get to make in your life.'

'Smart phones can be efficient tools in education.'

'Physical training should be compulsory for all students and employees.'

The process revolving around the writing activity included the stages according to task-based learning [9, 3], comprising of pre-task phase, task preparation, task realisation and post-task activity, the latter representing the feedback session conducted with the aim of raising student awareness of typical deficiencies in the organisation of their discourse. Although sentence-level or formal errors were pointed out and discussed, the activity aimed issues related to discourse organisation, such as clearly formulated position on the subject (degree of agreement or disagreement), clearly formulated arguments with logically and clearly rendered supporting details. This implied a focus on:

4.1. Pre-task phase. As each phase had a specifically established goal in the process, the activities occurred throughout several 90-minute classes as follows: in the first class of the series students were reminded of the paragraph pattern, with the purpose of reactivating their schematic knowledge related to the conventions on a written paragraph. This session was organized as a standard presentation-practice-production class through which more scaffolding was provided at first, gradually getting to the phase when students formulated their own topic or detail sentences. The activities involved the presentation of a sample paragraph, followed by a series of exercises involving the selection of adequate topic and detail sentences, organized as a multiple choice exercise. In the final phase of the lesson students formulated their own examples on given topics, which were subsequently discussed in class. In the larger framework of the task-based teaching pattern, this class represented the pre-task phase (sample paragraph) and a part of the preparation for the task.

4.2. Task preparation. In the second session the preparation for the task continued with a reenforcing speaking activity with the objective of students formulating elaborate arguments by providing a supporting argument (for or against the statement) and developing explanations or providing examples to support their argument. In this activity, the speakers were expected to produce a complete ‘paragraph-length’ argument. The speaking activity undertaken in preparation for the writing task was conducted within the frame of a contest between two or three groups (depending on the number of students). A member of the group extracted a statement from a pile and together with the other group members sought possible arguments on the internet. (*The class took place in the language laboratory financed through The Ministry of National Defence Research & Development Sectorial Plan / 2023*) After the allowed time expired, the members of the group formulated as many arguments as possible within a given amount of time (3 or 4 minutes, depending on the number of participants). During this time the other group(s) made sure that the same argument or the same example would not be used more than once and timed the session. Groups would take turns in formulating arguments and the winner was the group which had more arguments (recorded by the teacher). As the main goal was to produce well-developed arguments, students were given the freedom to find both arguments that supported or opposed the extracted statement.

The activity can generally engage students due to its interactive nature; however, it may prove problematic with larger groups as it may not engage all the students’ attention. Moreover, the best setup for this activity is one in which two groups of a maximum number of 6 students are engaged. A similar task-preparation activity can be performed without applying the frame of the contest by simply asking members of the class to extract a statement and then allow the whole class to interact on the topic. As the objective is the practice of formulating a paragraph-length argument consisting of main idea and explanation/example, the teacher’s role is to point out the absence of these constituting elements or point out if any of these is unsuitable or irrelevant for the statement.

4.3. Task realisation. In the task realisation phase, the third class in the process, the students had to produce an approximately 150-word text in which to state their opinion on one of the statements ‘rehearsed’ in the task preparation phase, during the argument contest. It was required that students write a three-paragraph text, introduced with a short opinion statement, clarifying their stance on the subject and add two arguments in the form of two paragraphs. Similarly to the previous activity, students were allowed to formulate arguments supporting or opposing the statement as long as they clearly specified their position on the subject in the introduction. The task also reminded them to focus on language (adequate vocabulary and grammar), organisation (well-constructed paragraphs, use of the necessary transitional expressions) and relevance of content (two clearly formulated different arguments pertaining to the given subject). The allotted time for this activity was 40 minutes.

4.4. Language focus/Feedback. The feedback session which took place during the fourth class was conducted in accordance with the principle underlying task-based learning: raising students’ awareness of the typical mistakes they are making. The post-task activity usually includes language focus through which certain problematic vocabulary or grammar issues which have occurred during the activity are discussed. Further practice is provided or the language items in question may become the focus of a subsequent task.

In the feedback session, students received both local and global feedback in the form of WCF and addressed questions, requested clarifications individually. Since the scope of the feedback activity primarily concerned aspects related to content and organisation on a discourse level, local errors concerning sentence-level grammar patterns, collocations or use of vocabulary were only discussed individually with the students, if necessary. The strategy of the feedback was predominantly direct as the teacher used WCF in both local and global feedback, adding a suggested rephrasing in the case of the latter. Indirect feedback was only used in cases of repeated individual errors (e.g. plurals, repeated vocabulary, subject-verb agreement errors, etc.), or in situations when the inadequacy of the linguistic element used was obvious (colloquial expressions, such as ‘*kinda*’, ‘*guy*’, ‘*stuff*’, ‘*bad thing/good thing*’).

This standard feedback session was followed by an interactive class activity in which various excerpts from the written texts were discussed. Groups of two or three students received text fragments, anonymously, and were asked to identify their flaws and try to improve them. The teacher made sure that an excerpt did not get to the student who wrote it, given that he/she had already received a suggestion by the teacher on the paper. The students’ solutions were compared with the original ones and discussed by the whole class.

It must be stated, that at this level, reformulations were not much more successful than the originals students were working on. However, the activity aimed not as much obtaining better phrasings than raising students’ awareness on the typical inconsistencies of their writing style at this point. The first question addressed to the students was to identify what may be ‘wrong’ in the excerpt and what is it that makes it ‘sound’ artificial.

5. FINDINGS

In terms of the global assessment of the texts, the rephrasing activity based on the excerpts from the students’ writings focussed on issues related to the content and the organisation of their arguments on the provided subject.

While their opinions were obviously formulated in the individual style of each learner, inadequacies spotted on a discursive level do bear some common characteristics, due to the students' linguistic level and profile.

5.1. Content and text coherence. Mistakes concerning content and text coherence have been pointed out at the level of clarity of the message, concerning adequacy of phrasing (wordiness, repetition, rephrasing, lack of details) or relevance of provided details (unnecessary details). Due to the unfamiliarity or complexity of the subject, students' main concern usually is to write a sufficient quantity of text (number of words as specified in the task) without considering the clarity of their ideas and the need for a more concise phrasing at times. On other occasions, ideas are insufficiently developed, thus, affecting the clarity of the message.

In addition, lack of lexical resources or possibly the familiarity with a more colloquial English due to social media and popular culture leads to the use of informal terms in writing. Although imposing formality was not the main scope of this activity, given the level and the personal aspect of the task, it was considered important to raise awareness on the inappropriate use of terms like *'stuff'*, *'thing'* (as in *'this is not a good thing'*) or *'guy'*.

Given the students' unfamiliarity with a more general subject, the text of the written opinion statements is characterised by wordiness and awkward phrasing. In their attempt to convey a clear statement of opinion and, at times, to employ a more formal style, learners at this level struggle to get their message across. In the following example, the writer repeated details and phrases without succeeding to clarify the advantage related to graduating from college:

I think that graduating college is the best choice because the moment you get your bachelor's degree, you can legally perform what you have learned for the past years, assuming that you went to a college that you were dreaming of. If you go to the college, you have ever wanted to go, this will be the best experience because you only get to become better at what you like to do.

The phrases *'assuming that you went to a college that you were dreaming of'* and *'... the college you have ever wanted to go'* are not only repeated but they add a detail that the writer does not develop either by referring to what happens if you do not join a college of your choice or what becoming *'better'* or the *'best experience'* may imply. In such situations an additional explanation was suggested or elicited from the students (e.g. *'you become better because continue learning about your domain by getting hands-on experience'*). In most of these situations a local-level vocabulary is also implied, however, the aspect focused on is the clarity of the idea, which is not sufficiently explained.

Lack of clarity is often caused by an insufficient development of the idea, as in the following thesis statement: *'... technology has been progressing even for the little ones in school'*. The argument continues with an example referring not to the development of technology per se, but to the fact that the internet provides information and is a learning resource: *'the internet is full of tutorials that teach you 'how to make money from a young age'. So, for us, students, the internet represents a better way of learning anything. Now we learn from a young age things that our parents, or grandparents have discovered way later or even not have discovered, yet.'* While the original thesis statement is too general, therefore, unclear, the explanatory statement *'the internet represents a better way of learning'* may have been a more adequate choice for it. Therefore, in this excerpt, the lack of clarity is also due to an organizational issue.

In addition, the last sentence of the excerpt, *'we learn from a young age things our parents or grandparents ...'* is redundant, or could be replaced by a simple phrase in the thesis statement (e.g. *'better way of learning than earlier generations had'*).

The redundancy of details is more obviously present in another text, in which opinion is stated about working from home: *'One argument in favour of this statement supports the ones who have to take care of their baby or an old member of the family, who cannot do it by themselves. For example, my uncle is working for an IT company from home, with a flexible schedule, that gives him the opportunity to help his sick mother, nobody but him being able to do it.'*

It was not only the additional phrases *'cannot do it by themselves'* or *'nobody but him being able to do it'* that were considered redundant, but students were encouraged formulate a more concise thesis statement as well, in an attempt to avoid metadiscursive formulations like *'one argument in favour of this statement'* (e.g. *For those who have a family member in their care, working from home can represent an advantage*).

Frequently, extensive details of a certain situation given as a supporting example may constitute an entire narrative, as in the case of the following opinion statement on the choice of graduating college: *'On the other hand, learning is not easy for everyone. Some people might not be able to graduate from college even if they start it. Or maybe they graduate after long, hard years and will not be good and professional in their future jobs, or worse, they would hate their job. Trying too hard and not succeeding could be depressing. For example, graduating from Math college after years of hard work could be meaning that you will not be a good Math teacher. Maybe Math is not for you and as hard as you try you will not be happy with what you do. You would have been happier by doing something else but you insisted on graduating from college just to get that diploma because your parents wished so.'*

Throughout the excerpt the same idea is rephrased, that of *'trying hard'* contrasted with *'not succeeding'* or Maths being *'not for you'* and not being *'happy'* doing it. In this situation students were encouraged to synthesize the two ideas into one complex sentence and either omit the additional detail of the *'parents' wish'*, or add it in a more concisely formulated explanation (e.g. *Graduating a college may not be a guarantee for professional success. For example, people who choose a college due to their parents' pressure may not be happy working in that domain.*)

5.2. Organisation. Inadequacies concerning the organisation of the paragraphs were less frequent than those related to content and text coherence. Those that occurred were related to formulating the same or very similar examples for the arguments stated. For instance, a student wrote in the thesis statement of his first argument:

'Smart phones can be useful in schools to improve teenagers' knowledge', and continued by pointing out that *'they can use the phone to find out whatever they want to know. If they have a project at any class, they can search for useful information on different websites for finishing the project and for beneficial ideas.'*

In the second paragraph the student argued that *'smart phones make teenagers' school life much easier because they don't need to search in hundreds of books to do their tasks'* but continued with an explanation that was, in fact, a rephrasing of the idea in the first paragraph: *'They can easily search online anything they want with just a click. Any person can improve his education level by using a phone. If a student wants to learn a new language, he can by using his phone, searching for books and exercises and also phone applications in that language without any kind of external help.'*

A further, more formal aspect pertains to the heading-like phrasing of the thesis statement of the paragraph, as in the following paragraph:

Flexibility of schedule: online learning offers a very flexible program because you can access any time a lesson. For example, at 9 a.m. you cannot go to the second class of Math because you have to go to the hospital but at 13 p.m. you will be back at home and start the course.

The phrase '*flexibility of schedule*' indicates a 'telegraphic' style that is probably due to the students' using writing predominantly as a means of synthesizing and classifying information. It also echoes the practice of notetaking used in the language classroom as the main method of indirectly practicing writing skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Discourse-level inconsistencies of the analysed written opinion statements have indicated the a typical struggle of the intermediate learner with the wording of ideas related to issues that have a more general relevance than the concrete familiarity of everyday personal experience. Although consistent in quantity and relatively accurate (with high-frequency grammar and lexis), the samples reveal a lack of familiarity with producing more general content, displaying inadequacies in coherence and clarity, with details either exceedingly rendered by repeated reformulations and irrelevant details or on the contrary, phrasings that remain too general or vague, due to lack of explanatory details.

The significantly few mistakes that occurred regarding the organisation of the paragraphs may be due to the students' schematic knowledge on paragraphs and opinion statements that they have been practising in their first language and the activation that happened during the speaking activity undertaken in the task preparation phase. The fact that they still occurred in some instances may be caused by the absence of a consistent draft devised before writing the paragraphs.

The interactive feedback activity aimed to raise the students' awareness on the types of challenges they are facing at this phase of their language acquisition and attempted to provide an insight to the characteristics of the texts that are produced on a higher proficiency level.

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