

An Evaluation of the Types of Teaching Assistants' Feedback to English Writing

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Abstract: In order to improve the quality of teaching assistants' written corrective feedback in English writing classes, this paper explores the characteristics and types of teacher assistants' written corrective feedback. By analysing the students' manuscripts with feedback provided by teaching assistants, this study finds out that in regard to feedback types, teaching assistants use direct feedback most frequently, followed by metalinguistic feedback, and then indirect feedback. In terms of feedback focus, teaching assistants pay most attention to language form, followed by ideological content and text structure, while pay less attention to the overall quality of writing. With respect to feedback tone, teaching assistants can provide writing feedback with various feedback tones based on students' writing conditions.

1. Introduction

As one of the important components of the "Three Assistants" system, graduate assistant system plays an increasingly important role in undergraduate education. Due to the large number of students in most English courses, it is a heavy task for English writing teachers to provide feedback for students' assignments. In order to reduce the burden of English writing teachers, many Chinese universities have set up the teaching assistant (TA) system. The TAs are responsible for correcting students' homework and helping writing teachers complete other auxiliary work. However, there are still some problems in TAs' feedback practice, such as low adoption rate and unsatisfactory of TAs' feedback, which affect learning efficiency and teaching quality.

Previous studies on writing feedback mainly focus on teacher feedback, peer feedback, electronic feedback and so on. While the existing studies on TAs mostly investigate TA policy, TA role, TA identity, TA career development and so on, and there are relatively few empirical studies addressing TAs' feedback [1, 10, 11]. Therefore, this paper studies the types of TAs' feedback in English writing to reveal the general characteristics of TAs' feedback.

2. Theoretical Context

From the perspective of written corrective feedback towards linguistic errors in students'

compositions, WCF (Written Corrective Feedback) can be divided into direct and indirect CF (Corrective Feedback), metalinguistic CF, focused and unfocused CF. Direct CF refers to the CF that supplies learners with the correct target language form when they make errors. Indirect CF refers to various strategies to encourage learners to self-correct their errors [4]. Direct CF can take a number of different forms, including crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme, inserting a missing word or morpheme, and writing the correct form above or near to the erroneous form [2]. When using indirect CF, teachers simply indicate errors in students' compositions, like underlining the error, and suggest students correct errors by themselves. Direct CF is explicit, while it limits students' involvement in revising process, and contribute little to students' long-term learning. Indirect CF can improve students' abilities of self-editing and problem-solving, which is considered more likely to lead to long-term learning [6]. But indirect CF is criticized for its unclear and inexplicit nature. Ferris and Roberts [6] indicate learners' language proficiency influences the effectiveness of different feedback strategies. Direct CF is probably better than indirect CF for student writers of low levels of English proficiency. Therefore, teachers need to take students' individual differences into consideration while providing feedback.

Metalinguistic CF proposed by Ellis [2] is a technique to solve the problem of insufficient information, which compensates the weakness of direct and indirect CF. Errors are corrected explicitly to avoid ambiguity, and metalinguistic messages are used to explain reasons for the correction [4]. Metalinguistic CF can be divided into two forms: first, providing error codes in the margin; second, providing learners with a metalinguistic explanation of their errors in the form of grammar rules and examples of the correct usage [9]. Although it is time-consuming to provide metalinguistic CF, this is proved to be more effective than direct CF in the long run [3].

Besides teacher feedback on linguistic errors, teacher commentary is a widespread and important feature in responding to L2 writing. Teachers' written feedback commentary (WFC) can be divided with respect to focus or target, mode and tone, syntactic structure, explicitness and length [8]. According to Ene and Upton [5], feedback target consists of three levels: the general level, the discourse level and the form level. The general level of feedback concentrates on the overall quality of essays. The discourse level of feedback addresses content and organization. The form level of feedback deals with grammar, vocabulary, and mechanisms. Each of these subcategories is further classified into more fine-grained subtypes. For example, feedback on mechanisms includes feedback on punctuation, spelling, formatting and style [8].

In terms of mode and tone, Pearson [8] summarizes a framework towards teacher commentary tone, including 9 feedback tones: advisory, criticism, correction, description, giving information, need to, praise, question posing and reflection. Related to mode is the tone of comments, which can be positive, negative, or neutral [7]. Some positive comments, like praise, are advocated for enhancing the learners' confidence and self-esteem, but praise is also criticized if it is perceived as insincere. Negative comments may undermine learners' confidence and motivation. Therefore, teachers should use criticism cautiously [8].

Although the typologies of WCF and WFC are mainly applied to investigate the effects of teachers' written feedback, this study will adapt these two systematic approaches to categorise and analyse the characteristics and types of TAs' feedback.

3. Methodology

This study was carried out at a foreign language university in Beijing. In order to relieve the pressure of English writing teachers and help graduate students accumulate working experience, graduate students are hired to assist English writing class teachers to correct writing homework and do other auxiliary work. Four second-year graduate students majored in English Language and

Literature, Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics participated in this study. The four TAs take charge of five classes of 138 English major sophomores. The researchers have collected a total of 266 student assignments with TAs' written feedback through one semester. The collected texts are argumentative essays and narrative essays written for ten different assigned topics.

The collected TAs' written feedback on students' first drafts was divided into two parts: corrective feedback towards linguistic errors and written feedback commentary. Then, three typologies have applied to categorise and analyse the characteristics and types of TAs' feedback. Ellis et al.'s [4] theory is adopted for the analysis of feedback types, and Ene and Upton's [5] electronic feedback analysis framework is adopted for the analysis of feedback focus. The tone analysis framework summarized by Pearson [8] has applied to analyse the tone of TAs' comment. Through text analysis, the frequencies of different feedback types, feedback focus and feedback tone are counted, the percentages of specific categories in the total feedback frequency are calculated, and the characteristics of TAs' feedback are summarized.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

In terms of feedback types, TAs' written correction feedback of linguistic errors can be divided into three sub-types: direct feedback, indirect feedback and metalinguistic feedback according to the classification of written correction of language errors proposed by Ellis et al. [4].

Table 1: Frequency of Feedback Types

Assignments	Number	Frequency of Direct Feedback (%)	Frequency of Indirect Feedback (%)	Frequency of Metalinguistic Feedback (%)
Assignment 1	26	82.7(162)	2.0(4)	15.3(30)
Assignment 3	28	81.8(36)	0	18.2(8)
Assignment 4	30	83.3(50)	0	16.7(10)
Assignment 5	20	86.4 (342)	0	13.6(54)
Assignment 6	20	76.5(315)	0	23.5(97)
Assignment 7	30	91.9(57)	0	8.1(5)
Assignment 8	28	95.8(69)	1.4(1)	2.8(2)
Assignment 9	26	98.4(243)	0.8(2)	0.8(2)
Assignment 10	26	99.5(193)	0	0.5 (1)
Total	266	87.2(1467)	0.4(7)	30.6(209)

Table 1 shows the total frequency of direct feedback, indirect feedback and metalinguistic feedback in 234 assignments, and the frequency of different feedback in each assignment respectively. Assignment 1, 7 and 8, assignment 3, 4, 9 and 10, assignment 5 and 6 were reviewed by 3 TAs respectively. Since the TA did not provide feedback on linguistic errors in assignment 2, students' writing of Assignment 2 are not included in the calculation of feedback types. The statistics show that direct feedback is the most preferred way for TAs, and the total frequency of direct feedback is 1467 in 266 assignments, accounting for 87.2%. The second is metalinguistic feedback, the total frequency of which is 209, accounting for 30.6%; The last is indirect feedback, the total frequency of which is 7, accounting for only 0.4%. Among the four TAs, two of them use indirect feedback. In terms of TAs' feedback types, the clarity of TA feedback is high, but it is insufficient in promoting students' subjective initiative in learning and improving students' ability to solve problems. The data shows that when TAs use direct feedback, they use modification symbols to correct students' mistakes and directly provide students with the correct language forms. In the application of metalinguistic feedback, students are given grammatical or semantic explanations.

Both direct feedback and metalinguistic feedback are explicit, and the way of feedback is clearer, but at the same time, students' participation in feedback is reduced. Indirect feedback has the advantage of improving students' self-modification ability and promoting students' long-term learning. Ferris and Roberts [6] believe that direct feedback is more suitable for students with lower language proficiency, while indirect feedback is more suitable for students with higher language proficiency. It is suggested that TAs adopt different feedback strategies for different levels of students based on their individual differences, and appropriately increase the frequency of indirect feedback for students with good foundation.

According to the electronic feedback analysis framework suggested by Ene and Upton [5], TAs' written feedback comments can be divided into the general level, the discourse level and the form level in terms of feedback focus. Among them, the general level refers to the feedback on the overall quality of essay in all aspects, while the discourse level refers to the feedback on the content, organization, cohesion and coherence of the article, such as the feedback on the clarity and understandability, the overall quality of the content, accuracy of information, the topic sentence of the paragraph and paragraph order. The formal level refers to the feedback on vocabulary, grammar, syntax, morphology and mechanism, such as the feedback on word choice, collocation, overall quality of vocabulary, sentence structure, word order, verb tense, agreement, noun form, article, preposition, punctuation, spelling, format and style and so on.

Table 2: Frequency of Feedback Targets

Assignment	Number	General Level (%)	Discourse Level (%)	Form Level (%)
Assignment1	26	0	25.2(70)	74.8(208)
Assignment2	32	7.0(12)	78.2(133)	14.7(25)
Assignment3	28	0	58.1(54)	41.9(39)
Assignment4	30	3.6(5)	39.9(55)	56.5(78)
Assignment5	20	0	14.6(70)	85.4(411)
Assignment6	20	0	11.6(58)	82.4(441)
Assignment7	30	0	31.6(31)	68.4(67)
Assignment8	28	0	22.9(24)	77.1(81)
Assignment9	26	0	65.8(48)	34.2 (25)
Assignment10	26	0	64.8 (35)	35.2 (19)
Total	266	0.9(17)	29.5(578)	69.6(1364)

Table 2 shows that, in general, the total feedback frequency of TAs in 10 writing tasks is 1959, among which TAs pay most attention to the language form of students, accounting for 69.6%, followed by the discourse level, accounting for 29.5%, and finally the overall level, accounting for only 0.9%. It can be found that the vocabulary and grammar problems in students' assignments are still the most concerned parts of TAs' feedback. In addition to language forms, TAs also pay lots of attention to text structure, ideological content, cohesion and coherence, while making fewer comments on the overall quality of the paper. TAs focus more on local issues than the general level, and they made both positive and negative comments on the general level. This might because specific and clear comments are helpful for students' understanding and subsequent revision so as to ensure the effectiveness of TAs' feedback.

According to the framework of feedback tone proposed by Pearson [8], TAs' feedback tones can be classified into nine groups. Table 3 shows the overall distribution of the feedback tone of TAs.

Table 3: Frequency of Feedback Tones

	Assignment										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Number	26	32	28	30	20	20	30	28	26	26	266
Advisory (%)	15.3 (20)	17.9 (32)	52.5 (62)	48.0 (71)	30.3 (46)	16.5 (31)	65.4 (68)	75.0 (78)	10.1 (7)	6.3 (4)	33.3 (419)
Criticism (%)	5.3 (7)	24.6 (44)	22.9 (27)	16.9 (25)	1.3 (2)	8.5 (16)	3.8 (4)	1.0 (1)	4.3 (3)	26.6 (17)	11.6 (146)
Correction (%)	26.7 (35)	0	0	1.4 (2)	0.7 (1)	0	0	0	0	0	3.0 (38)
Description (%)	35.9 (47)	0	0	0	0	0	2.9 (3)	1.9 (2)	7.2 (5)	18.8 (12)	5.5 (69)
Give Information (%)	0	0.6 (1)	2.5 (3)	5.4 (8)	11.2 (17)	21.8 (41)	0	2.9 (3)	0	0	6.0 (73)
Need to (%)	7.6 (10)	3.4 (6)	1.7 (2)	0	29.6 (45)	33.0 (62)	6.7 (7)	2.9 (3)	29.0 (20)	7.8 (5)	12.7 (160)
Praise (%)	9.2 (12)	53.6 (96)	19.5 (23)	26.4 (39)	24.3 (37)	16.0 (30)	21.2 (22)	16.3 (17)	49.3 (34)	40.6 (26)	26.7 (336)
Question Posing (%)	0	0	0.8 (1)	2.0 (3)	4	4.3 (8)	0	0	0	0	1.3 (16)

The above statistics show that the feedback tone of TAs is diverse, with 8 out of 9 tones involved in 266 assignments collected. Generally, the tones most frequently used by TAs are advisory and praise, accounting for 33.3% and 26.7% respectively, followed by need to and criticism, accounting for 12.7% and 11.6%. Tones with a lower frequency are giving information, description, correction and questions posing, accounting for 6.0%, 5.5%, 3.0% and 1.3% respectively. Judging from the frequency of the feedback tone of several assignments, the tone of the feedback used by TAs is affected by many factors, such as the feedback habits of the TAs and the situation of the students.

The data shows TAs can flexibly apply a variety of feedback tones to provide targeted feedback based on students' writing conditions. First of all, TAs often provide constructive suggestions on structural problems, language problems and content problems in students' essays. The suggestions provided by TAs include the overall level, the discourse level and the form level, which help students to recognize the problems in their own articles and timely modify their own essays according to the suggestions given by TAs. In the process of providing advices, the TAs play the role of a facilitator, aiming to help students improve their work in the aspects of making an argument, giving examples, making summary and choosing appropriate words.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyses TAs' feedback from two perspectives: written corrective feedback towards linguistic errors and written feedback commentary to explore the characteristics of TAs' feedback. In terms of written corrective feedback towards linguistic errors, statistics show that TAs use direct feedback most frequently, followed by metalinguistic feedback, and then indirect feedback. This strategy results in the high clarity of TAs' feedback, but limits students' subjective initiative. With regard to the frequency of the focus of TAs' feedback commentary, the data shows that the highest one is the formal level, followed by the discourse level, and the overall level. This feature indicates that TAs are mainly concerned with students' language form when providing feedback, followed by content and textual structure, and finally the overall quality of the essay. TAs provide more comments on the structure of a text than the content. In terms of the tone of the TA's feedback

comments, TAs used the advisory and praise tone most frequently, followed by criticism and ‘need to’ tone, and finally the tone of giving information, description, correction and question posing. TAs are generally able to use a variety of feedback tones flexibly to provide revision suggestions based on students' writing reality.

TAs should use different feedback strategies to solve students' problems. In terms of feedback types of language errors, TAs can directly modify errors to facilitate students' understanding for students with low English competence; when some language mistakes caused by the carelessness of students whose English competency is relatively high, TAs can mark the mistakes in the text without providing correct answers, guide students to discover and correct the errors by themselves, and improve students' problem-solving ability. With respect to the focus of feedback comments, TAs can appropriately increase the frequency of assessment on the logic and ideological content of students' writing.

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