

A Critique on Giving Feedback for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' Writing

Esti Junining¹

¹A Lecturer of University of Brawijaya
Malang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT— *Giving feedback has still become a controversial issue in language pedagogy. Some experts regard it as a useful practice in language learning and the others claim it as a useless one when it is not delivered correctly and effectively. On the basis of this controversial issue, the purpose of this paper is to review some current findings on giving feedback, that is reviewing the issue of formative feedback, formative online feedback system and peer feedback. The research method used was library research by comparing the current practice of giving feedback in Indonesian context. The result of the research indicated that there were some changes from the conventional practice of giving feedback into the implementation of online feedback system, formative feedback and peer feedback. Three recommendations for changes are proposed as well. These three recommendation are proposed to overcome the problems of the teachers (working too much on giving feedback) as well as the students (to build communication mechanism, reduce frustration, and confusion) to create less threatening and meaningful learning.*

Keywords— formative feedback, formative online feedback system, peer feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

A critique on giving feedback for EFL students' writing is given as a part of assessment procedure required in the teaching and learning process. As a part of assessment, it should be delivered correctly and effectively in order to achieve the goal and fulfill the learning objectives. However, the current practice of giving feedback in the classroom is often beyond the expected result (Hyland & Hyland, 2010). Many factors are assumed to affect this issue such as giving more emphasis of mechanic rather than content. Giving more emphasis on the mechanic means correcting grammar or minor mistakes and punctuation more than the content of the text itself. This seems only focus on the superficial issue of the writing than the deeper one. The second issue, giving grades, makes the feedback less neutral in the way that the good grades make learners think that the writer is good, whereas the low grades could make most of the students desperate in writing. The good grades encourage them to stop trying, and the bad grades discourage them to keep trying. Then, this seems to be an unwise decision. The last issue is related to giving praise rather than criticism and suggestion. The same as giving grades, this overwhelming praise can encourage students especially beginners to stop trying. On the basis of this issue, this paper intends to discuss current practices of giving feedback in the classroom, compare some findings regarding the current issues and give some recommendation for changes in the classroom practice.

2. THE CURRENT PRACTICES OF GIVING FEEDBACK

The current practice of giving feedback in writing classes tends to be still conventional such as correcting grammar, spelling, and editing instead of giving more emphasis on the purpose, audience and text type (Curtin, 2014). While writing teachers realize that the most important aspect in writing is beyond grammar and spelling like identifying purpose, audience and text type, they still tend to give feedback on grammar and spelling mistakes which do not really help the students develop their ability in writing (Lee, 2011). The worst thing happened to the effect of the feedback given in which the learners rarely edit or proof read their tasks resulting in the repeated mistakes made during the writing process. This negative effect surely does not pay the time consumed and burden of the teachers in correcting their student's writing.

Another type of feedback that occurred in the current practice is marking or giving grades for the students' writing as an assessment for learning. Giving grades in the formative assessment does not surely help learners to develop. The learners tend to pay more attention to the mark given rather than editing or revising their work. The time given to revise their work will be used only for comparing marks, whispering and reacting in various ways such as giggling and cooling aggrieved. Moreover, the worst situation could occur when the learners try to persuade the teacher to make the marks higher (Lewis, 2002). Thus, giving grades is more necessarily applied for summative assessment as part of information delivered to schools and parents.

On the basis of these issues again, what are the issues? , I would like to review some findings related to effectiveness of giving formative feedback and conducting peer feed back to reduce teachers' burden as well as equipping more meaningful and appropriate feedback for the students. The following section is attempting to review two findings on

formative feedback, one from Shute (2008), the other from Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis (2010) and one finding regarding peer feedback by Rolinson (2005).

3. FORMATIVE FEEDBACK BY SHUTE (2008)

Shute (2008)'s finding on formative feedback proposed a non evaluative, supportive, timely and specific feedback given to the students. Non evaluative feedback means that the feedback given to the students should not be given mark or grade unless it is for summative assessment. It is supported by Nurmukhamedov, & Kim (2010) who summarized that students receiving just grades showed no learning gains. Students getting just comments showed large gains, and those with grades and comments showed no gains. In addition, effective feedback should relate to content of the comments. Thus, besides giving no grades, it is suggested to focus on content rather than form meaning that teachers should provide more attention to the purpose, audience and text type of the writing rather than to the grammatical or spelling mistakes made by the students.

In terms of giving supportive feedback, teachers should give more constructive and encouraging feedback to the students. The example of this feedback is like giving more focus on the task rather than on the learner. The feedback given should address specific features of the students' work in relation to the tasks with suggestions on how to improve it. It is not recommended to present feedback that discourages the learner that is giving feedback which is too controlling or critical to the learners. These too controlling and too critical feedbacks may cause the students' discouragement, frustration and confusion which will result in no learning at all (Sugita, 2006).

Regarding timely feedback, Shute (2008) proposed immediate and delayed feedback for a task with different level of difficulties. For a more difficult task such as a task which is more procedural and conceptual, she suggested to use immediate feedback which could help fix errors in real time, produce greater immediate gains and more efficient learning. For a relatively simple and transfer of learning task, she suggested to apply delayed feedback for transfer task performance. Immediate and delayed feedbacks are defined as direct and indirect feedbacks by Ellis (2009) who emphasized that indirect feedback or delayed feedback (a term defined by Shute, 2008) caters to "guided learning and problem solving" and encourages students to reflect about linguistics forms that could lead to long-term learning.

The last aspect of giving formative feedback proposed by Shute (2008) was giving specific feedback. Giving specific feedback means giving a clear feedback with clear message and meaning that could be linked clearly and specifically to goals and performance. If feedback is not specific or clear, it can impede learning and can frustrate learners. Ellis (2009) defined specific feedback in this regard as a focus corrective feedback. Focused corrective feedback in this regard is proven to be more effective because the learner is able to examine multiple correction of a single error.

The four aspects of conducting formative feedback proposed by Shute (2008) seem to have both strengths and weaknesses. One of the advantages of this finding is that these are able to accommodate detailed aspects of giving feedback such as timely, motivational, individual, manageable and directly. However, the implementation of these formative feedback still affect on teachers' performance in terms of time, energy, competence and readability. This formative feedback is still time consuming and energy taking. Teachers' competence and readiness toward the changing are necessarily to be prepared as well. One of the ways to overcome this shortcoming is by integrating formative feedback with online system such as what is being discussed in the following section.

4. FORMATIVE FEEDBACK THROUGH ONLINE FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Integrating formative feedback with online system is introduced by Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis (2010) in which they proposed Online Feedback System (OFES) to support the provision of formative feedback. This online feedback system is arranged to enhance feedback reception and to strengthen the quality of feedback through the way feedback is communicated to the students. They strongly recommend integrating effective communication mechanism with a student online learning system to motivate the students to engage with feedback. In this OFES, Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis (2010) introduced three common feedback techniques and communication methods namely word-processed feedback forms, emailing comments or feedback forms and electronic annotations on students' work. Three of these types attempt to reduce teachers' burden such as time consuming and less effective result. Besides, this type of feedback has some advantages such as maintaining students' personalization, motivation, manageability and timelines. Keeping the student's personalization means that the student's privacy among their friends can be hold. The two-way communication between the teacher and the student encourages honest and sincere communication between the two so that the student's personal problem can be solved privately between the teacher and the student, without involving the whole members of the class. However, this also carries some disadvantages in maintaining interpersonal relationship between teacher and students because the students prefer to discuss face to face or through intermediary to save their face in front of the tutor. And this, of course, will result in a failure in building more interpersonal relationship between the tutor and the student (Towndrow, 2004). Yet, if we compare the benefits and the shortcomings, still this online system feedback has more advantages in terms of time consumed by the teachers and students' personalization. The other type of feedback that fosters time saving, reduces teacher's burden and learning effectiveness is conducting peer feedback like what is described in the following section.

5. PEER FEEDBACK

Peer feedback is giving comments and suggestions to the peer in writing. Rollinson (2005) reported his finding in the form of the positive and negative side of conducting peer feedback. The positive sides of peer feedbacks laid in the students' affective learning, in which they feel less threatening, less authoritarian, friendlier and more supportive. These convenient learning is able to make the students become more critical readers and revisers of their own writings. Besides, this activity could build more effective communicative purposes in terms of revising their work such as formulating their writing in line with the characteristics and demands of the readers. Thus, this activity could establish more meaningful, more informal, more encouraging and motivating collaborative dialogues compared with one way interaction between teacher and student. Despite its benefits, the negative side of this peer feedback is lack of trust in the accuracy, sincerity and specificity of their peer comments. This may result in more time consumed in giving feedback. Thus, not only the teachers need professional development, but also the students deserve training in giving feedback as well. One of the ways to compromise this problem is by setting up the group of the learners, and providing adequate training that is coaching students in the principles and practice of effective peer group interaction and responses.

6. CURRENT STATE OF GIVING FEEDBACK IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

The current state of giving feedback in Indonesian context is primarily covered by two main conditions. Firstly, most of the writing teachers have overload working hours due to the requirement to teach more than one class of the minimum 30 students (Sugita, 2006). With this condition, these overload working teachers are not possibly able to correct the English department students' writing optimally and may result in less meaningful feedback given to the students. This less meaningful feedback ranges in the tendency of correcting grammar and spelling mistakes instead of the purpose and content. In addition, many students rarely edit or proofread their feedback as a response. They tend to repeat the mistakes again and again. Consequently, both teacher and students feel frustrated and confused as well as discouraged about their work. This condition results in the students' underachievement and under expectation through unfocused marking. To overcome these constraints, there are three recommendations proposed. Firstly, writing teachers are suggested to apply Online Feedback System (OFES) proposed by Hatziapostolou and Paraskakis (2010) to stimulate motivation of the students in the effort of building their communicative mechanism between teacher and students. Secondly, teachers are recommended to build peer feedback suggested by Rollinson (2005) to reduce teacher's burden in correcting students' writing. The last recommendation is conducting formative feedback correctly and efficiently as suggested by Shute (2008) to improve the way writing teachers give feedback in the class.

7. SOME RECOMMENDATION FOR CHANGES OF GIVING FEEDBACK IN EFL CONTEXT

The first recommendation suggested for giving feedback in EFL context is implementing Online Feedback System (OFES). To stimulate students' motivation in responding feedback it is suggested to set up OFES as a part of assessment process. In setting up OFES, first of all teachers need to consult Informational Technology (IT) assistant who is capable of providing the OFES software. After the software is installed, teacher should be given some training on how to operate OFES as a part of formative assessment. The software introduced by Hatziapostolou and Paraskakis (2010) seem easy and not too complicated to operate. The interface is illustrated in the following figure:

PRACTICAL 1 FEEDBACK FORM SETUP							
INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION:							
Name:		E-mail:					
ASSIGNMENT DETAILS:							
Title:		Number:		Session:	FALL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Year:
ASSESSMENT CRITERIA:							
1.				Weight:			
2.				Weight:			
3.				Weight:			
+ ADD ANOTHER CRITERION		Individual weight of criteria			<input type="checkbox"/> Enable		
OPTIONAL PARAMETERS:							
<input type="checkbox"/> Enable automatic late submission penalties				<input type="checkbox"/> Allow students to view class performance statistics			
<input type="checkbox"/> Required to submit to Plagiarism Detection System				<input type="checkbox"/> Enable motivational images (view examples)			
		Reset Form		Complete Form			

Figure 1: Feedback form template setup interface

As seen in figure 1, the interface for setting up a feedback form comprises four parts namely *basic information about the tutor* (name and e-mail), *details of formative assessment* including assignment title, number and academic session, *assessment criteria* with percentage of option criteria, *optional parameters* of measuring the penalties of late submission, plagiarism detection, class performance statistics and motivational images and two buttons of *reset or complete form*. The second part is Practical 1 Assessment in which teacher could proceed to fill out feedback form for each individual student. It mentions students' name, identification number as well as the assessment status whether completed or pending for each student.

By implementing this OFES student could engage in formative assessments and more motivational and stimulating feedback environment to reduce their anxiety, lack of confidence, confusion and discouragement.

The second recommendation is conducting peer editing. In spite of the benefits and shortcomings of peer feedback, this strategy could reduce the teacher's burden in correcting the students' composition. The practical implementation of peer feedback suggested by Rollinson (2005) consists of four steps. Firstly, teacher should set up a group of 3 or 4 students, secondly, determine the number of drafts to be written, then decide the kind of evaluation (giving codes, or suggestions) and develop response activity whether using oral or written responses. The benefit of this peer editing is that it is easier to teach student editing procedure than to teach student to write correctly. Giving more practice to be critical readers is able to help them to be more self-reliant writer.

The final recommendation for giving feedback in Indonesian context is by carrying out formative feedback correctly and effectively. The way to achieve this is by following what Shute (2008) suggested in focusing on formative feedback. Teachers should follow the guidelines of conducting formative feedback which comprises things to do, things to avoid, timing and learners characteristics. By implementing the guideline correctly and appropriately, the effective formative feedbacks could be built so that time of giving feedback will be spent wisely and purposefully. All of the language teachers in my country should be given training, coaching and disseminating of these guidelines to gain more meaningful giving feedback strategies and equip EFL teachers with sufficient knowledge and competence in giving feedback.

8. CONCLUSION

Giving feedback is one of the instructional objectives that should be done by teachers. In order to obtain an optimum result, these formative feedbacks should be implemented effectively and systematically. By implementing formative feedback correctly, the effective feedback will be gained resulting in the students' success skills. Although there are some constraints in conducting ideal feedback, the benefit of running appropriate formative feedback and peer feedback could be one of the alternatives solutions to the problems.

9. REFERENCES

- Ellis, R. A Typology of Written Corrective Feedback Types. *ELT Journal* Volume 63/2 April 2009; doi:10.1093/elt/ccn023.
- Hatziapostolou, T & Paraskakis, I. Enhancing the Impact of Formative Feedback on Student Learning through an Online Feedback System. *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* Volume 8 Issue 2 2010 (pp111-122) available online at www.ejel.org
- Hyland, F and Hyland K. Sugaring the Pill Praise and Criticism in Written Feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing* (Pergamon), vol 10, pp. 185 – 212, 2010
- Lee, I. Feedback Revolution: What Gets in the Way? *ELT Journal* Volume 65/1 January 2011; doi:10.1093/elt/ccp028 1.
- [2] Lewis, M. Giving Feedback in Language Classes. *RELC Portfolio Series 1*. SEAMEO Regional Language Center, Singapore, 2002
- Nurmukhamedov, U, & Kim, S.H. 'Would you perhaps consider . . .': hedged comments in ESL writing. *ELT Journal* Volume 64/3 July 2010; doi:10.1093/elt/ccp063.
- Rollinson, P. Using Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Class. *ELT Journal* Vol. 59/1 January 2005.
- Shute, Valerie J. Focus on Formative feedback. *Review of Educational Research.*, Vol. 78. No. 1, pp153, 2008
- Sugita, Y, The Impact of Teacher's Comment Types on Students' Revision. *ELT Journal* Vol. 60/1 January 2006.
- Towndrow, P. Reflections of an Online Tutor. *ELT Journal* Vol. 58/2 April 2004.