WAVE "PURSUIT OF PLAYFULNESS AND ORIGINALITY": TUTORS' FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' CREATIVE WRITING STORIES IN A CHINESE EFL CLASSROOM

Wang Meng
(wm199182@qq.com)
School of Foreign Language and Literature
Wuhan University, China

Abstract

Much attention has been paid to morphological and syntactic error patterns in traditional Chinese EFL writing classroom. But little research has been done to investigate the Chinese students' critical and creative thinking in creative writing classroom. Two postgraduate students work as tutors in a creative writing course at Wuhan University. The emphasis of this course has been placed on encouraging students to write playful and inventive stories, and without drawing too much attention to linguistic errors. Therefore, one of their responsibilities is to provide written feedback directing at content problems, which is difficult to assess objectively. This study seeks to analyze the effect of their written feedback. Two successful English-major EFL learners in this course took part in a think-aloud and an interview session, respectively, on how tutors' feedback assists them to achieve playfulness and originality. According to students' reflective comments, learners (a) enjoy the freedom to choose topics, story settings and characters (b)are encouraged to apply rhetorical devices rarely used in conventional functional writing (c)appreciate tutors' instruction for plot planning. Different from form-focused feedback, meaning-focused feedback gives students motivation to imagine and raises students' awareness of audience and the reader's context. However, the overall accuracy of writing has been overlooked. This case study provides teachers with pedagogical support and alternative way to evaluate students' performances in creative writing in ELF classrooms.

1 Introduction

A number of studies have investigated the effects of written corrective feedback (WCF) on L2 development in EFL classrooms. Teachers of L2 writing courses as well as other mainstream composition courses spend a great deal of time and efforts in providing WCF (Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna, 2013; Ferris, Brown, Liu & Stine, 2011; Ferris, Liu & Rabie, 2011; Lee, 2008, 2009; Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). WCF, also known as grammar correction, (e.g. Truscott, 1996, 1999) or written error correction, has been heatedly discussed in applied linguistics in the last decades. Much attention has been paid to morphological and syntactic error patterns in traditional Chinese EFL writing classroom.

The paper examines a particular setting, the creative writing course in mainland China, in which students are motivated to write stories playfully and inventively. This paper aims to investigate the effect of written feedback which focuses on substance of content (or "meaning") of language. Linguistic errors were simply marked in the first draft, encouraging students to self-correct them (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008). Students were asked to peer review the second draft, directing at linguistic errors. The study investigates

students' attitude and perceptions of this type of written feedback, and attempts to provide pedagogical support and alternative ways to evaluate students' performances in creative writing in EFL classrooms.

2 Review of relevant studies

The effects of different types of WCF (e.g. error identification, direct error correction, indirect error correction, comments on errors with no correction, metalinguistic feedback, comments on content) have been examined in various research (e.g. Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Clark & Ouellette, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008; Ferris, 1997; Hartshorn, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sachs & Polio, 2007). However, the different types and amounts of WCF that work best are still unclear, and research findings in support of the use of different types of WCF demonstrate varied results.

Ellis, Sheen, Murakami& Takashima (2008) compared the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on the accuracy of the English definite and indefinite articles, with which Japanese university students used in written narratives. They concluded that the CF was equally effective for the focused and unfocused groups. Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna (2013) examined WCF through a longitudinal (16-week semester) multiple-case study approach. Their findings suggest that teachers should take a more finely tuned approach to corrective feedback and that future research designs investigating WCF should go beyond consideration of only students' written products.

3 The study

3.1 Context of study

The current study was conducted within the context of the Department of English in Wuhan University (WHU) located in central mainland China. WHU is one of the few Chinese universities that have adopted the "Write to Learn" project with English and non-English majors (Dai, 2010; Deng, Liu, Chen, Chen & Zhang, 2001; Zhou, 2004). The project, first operated in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies since 2001, lays emphasis on encouraging students to write long essays, without drawing too much attention to errors. It aims at giving students confidence about their ability to express themselves by specifying topics to which they can relate (Dai, 2010).

In traditional mainland China classroom, creative writing has been accepted as an innovative warm-up task or writing strategy (You, 2004). In WHU, it is an optional course for freshmen in the English department. The course, going beyond the project "Write to Learn", targets at genres like poetry, short stories rather than academic essays. It was initiated by Yu Ouyang, a scholar from Australia. Ouyang mainly focused on poetry, and the course ran from 2007 to 2009, ending when his contract was over (Dai, 2010).

Later on, Dr. Danli Li took over the course and shifted the focus from poetry to English stories. The creative writing course which will be discussed in this paper was offered from February 2014 at WHU. Three books "The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing", "Great Essays" and "A Practical Guide to English Story Writing and Appreciation" were

chosen as the supplementary resources for students. The course ran for one academic year, during which the students need to complete 6-7 English stories. One reason for choosing creative stories is that students can turn to their personal life experience for stories. For instance, some students selected themes like puppy love, friendship or family reunion. It is noteworthy that more students prefer to write fables, science fictions or detective fictions. Popular novel styles in current Chinese literature, for example, time-travel novels, were also adopted in their own English stories. Students were motivated to write longer passages in this course than in traditional writing course. Most importantly, they gained a sense of achievement and ownership towards what they wrote (Zhou, 2004).

3.2 "Being playful"

Language play has recently received increased attention within the field of SLA (Chantelle, 2004). Play is a difficult term to define, and harder to explain. Despite the potential challenges of doing being playful, research has documented that learners at different proficiency levels do use language playfully, creatively, and for humorous purposes (Bell, 2005; Belz, 2002; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Davies, 2003; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011; Shardakova, 2010).

Guy Cook (1996) divided language play into two types, corresponding to the formal and semantic levels of language. At semantic level, there is play with units of meaning, combining them in ways in which create worlds that does not exist: fiction (Cook, 1996). For adults, one instance of language play is literature. When writing fictions or poetry, people have the opportunity to try out-to play with-new and unreal worlds in a way which would be quite impossible when we use language to do real things with real people (Cook, 1996). When students write English fictions, they are motivated to imagine a totally unfamiliar world.

A male students wrote a fiction about the adventure of five boys trapped in a mysterious room. The course gave him a chance to write about an adventure as follows:

> "What's more, there are some words written on the roof, if read in order, it's "Lucifer trapped human in hell for seven days. Only one escaped on each day. At the end of the 7 days everything in the hell was destroyed. Lucifer called it '7 Days Samsara'." The words are in scarlet, which likes the color of blood (Peter, male)."

A female students, when doing weekly think-aloud verbal reports, just emphasized that:

> "I felt excited when I planned the plot of my story, especially when I wrote "To live" (a science fiction). I thought the story should be special...I mean, the ending should be unexpected, and there need to be a twist. I could create a story that are distant from the campus life. It is stimulating (Vanessa, female)."

It is noteworthy that she was motivated to plan plots and settings which are distant from her campus life. Descriptions like "excited" and "stimulating" were used to emphasize her feelings when write such topics, and other students also reported that writing creative stories was an enjoyment rather than a burden for them.

3.3 Written feedback directing at content and organization

Two postgraduate students work as tutors in a creative writing course. They needed to write feedback on students' writings every other week. The length of their writing, ranging from 1200 to 3900 words, is rather longer than conventional argumentative. On the one hand, if tutors provided them with focused WCF selecting specific errors to be corrected (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima, 2008), it would take a great deal of time and efforts. On the other hand, WHU is one of the top universities in mainland China. Students in the English department have gotten sufficient exposure to English grammar in their senior high school, and have learned a sufficiently large vocabulary (Dai, 2009). In addition, their basic writing skills had already been trained in their first semester. Linguistic errors are not prominent in their writings. In other words, those linguistic errors did not impede reader's understanding of the written work.

Their feedback was written in Chinese, focusing on story's plot, setting and theme. General comment such as "showing rather telling" or "creating more vivid scenes" were given at the end of the feedback, more importantly, detailed suggestions were given from the perspective of the reader rather than the teacher. The grading criteria was based on composition grading scale designed by the department of applied linguistics and ESL in Georgia State University.

3.4 Research methodology

The data for this study were collected through weekly verbal reports and semi-structured interviews (more than 200 minutes in total) with informants at WHU. The verbal reports and semi-structured interviews were audio-taped, and all the interviews and verbal reports were conducted in Chinese. Students may feel at ease when expressing emotions and attitudes in their mother tongue.

The case study focused on two English-major freshmen taking the course of creative writing, "Peter" and "Vanessa". Peter, a 19-year-old student, was admitted to WHU through independent recruitment after graduating from one of the first-class foreign language high school in mainland China. He has been studying English for more than 10 years, beginning in primary school. Vanessa is a 18-year-old girl. She is one of the top student in her high school, and has been studying English for 8 years. Before they began to write the first story, they completed a semi-structured interview. The researcher met them once per week, asked their attitudes and perceptions about the their creative written work and tutor's written feedback. After they completed the final-term story, the researcher conducted another interview, inviting students to comment on the effect of written feedback.

Every time when students were asked to write, they were given a broad topic, such as "write a story about the door". Revision of the first draft is done by the teacher or tutors. After receiving written feedback, students need to revise their first draft. The second draft is revised through peer review. In the written feedback, all the linguistic error were simply marked by a symbol, and students need to self-correct them. In the margin of their printed written stories, the reader (the teacher, tutors or peer students) should provide detailed comment or suggestions.

4 Discussions

4.1 Writing playfully

Both Peter and Vanessa showed anxiety in the interview at the beginning of the semester. They had never written any English stories before. The generic structure of argumentative, with which they are quite familiar, does not have too much in common with creative stories. Peter had a negative attitude towards writing a long story:

"I think it's too difficult for us. I mean, I never tried to write any stories in Chinese, not to mention an English one. Hmm, it is too hard."

The first topic they were asked to write in the course was "the mirror". When they were asked to report their plot planning process, Peter replied:

"I don't know how to write a mirror. At first, I thought about the mirror and Snow White. But I am not interested in fairy tales. I mean, I want to write something new, something different. This morning, when I looked at the mirror, I noticed the logo "Escape" in my hoodies. All of a sudden, I was inspired. But I need to set more twists in my story. It will not be bland. I want it to be original."

After planning his story plot, Peter invented a magical cube which is made up of six mirror facets in his fiction. In the story, a man named Judas was trapped in the cube by his colleagues intentionally. When Judas managed to get out of it, he said:

"Well, I'd better face them. Or maybe I should apologize to them at first."("them" refers to his colleagues)

The tutor was bewildered, so she marked the sentence and commented:

"As a reader, I cannot understand why Judas wants to apologize. He was a betrayer and had been trapped by his colleagues in the cube for more than 20 days. When he managed to escape, I think the last thing he wants to do is to apologize."

When Peter read the feedback, he was surprised that it is not targeted at grammatical mistakes. The theme of the story is that no one can escape his destiny. He had already revised his stories for several times, and when he read the feedback, he reported that,

"Actually, when I read the feedback, it was interesting to find that the teacher regarded herself as a reader. She did not correct me, but rather, she made some helpful suggestions. Those questions she raised was reasonable. I took her advice, and changed the whole plot. I felt like a real writer. But I did not pay too much attention to linguistic errors. I just corrected some typos. But for grammatical errors at the sentence level, hmm, actually, I just let it go. I mean, those errors did not impede the understanding of my story."

Through the interaction between the tutor and Peter, he was aware of the logical problems in his story. But the overall accuracy of writing has been totally overlooked. Peter wrote all

together six stories, and all of them are science fiction. At the end of the semester, he showed a rather positive attitude towards writing his own stories:

> "I really like the course. It was fascinating. I realize that I am good at writing science fictions. Those stories are precious records of my first year at WHU. When I revised my stories, all I wanted was to attract my readers. I did not need to focus on grammar. It was different from traditional writing course. I want to write more stories!"

It is obvious that Peter has become a motivated writer. His awareness of audience and the reader's context has been raised. In addition, he also makes progress in the course. His grades have been improved from 74 points to 86 points.

4.2 Feedback on feedback

Vanessa, when interviewed at the beginning of the semester, has showed anxiety as well. She decided to adopt fairy tales she read in the childhood:

> "For beginners like me, I think adopting famous fairy tales is a good attempt. But I am not sure if I can write a good story."

The students were given instructions on using rhetorical devices, such as personification or metaphor, in their creative writings. Vanessa got an average grade in her first written work. She was not satisfied, and tried to find ways to improve her writing skills. When she made the verbal report, she said:

> "I want to apply rhetorical devices such as simile or personification in my writings. But I rarely used them in conventional writing course. The tutor suggested me to read novels written by O Henry or George Orwell in the feedback, and I need to read more. "

After two weeks, when she wrote her story entitled "The Golden Birdcage", she used simile to describe the bird:

> "Every time when she spread her wings and soared in the sky, she was like a burning flame, with her wings shining against the blue sky."

Later on, when she received the feedback, she noticed that the sentence was marked by the teacher, and with praises. She expressed her attitudes when making weekly verbal reports,

> "I feel so good. When I wrote the story, I wanted to give details about the bird. So I used simile, a rhetorical device the teacher has taught us in the class. I felt happy when I saw the praising words in the feedback."

Obviously Vanessa was motivated to use rhetorical devices in her writings. The tutor engaged her attention, gave her guidance and controlled for frustration. Through Vanessa's reflective comment, the tutor also noticed learner's language anxiety and weak points in writing.

4.3 Peer review directing at linguistic errors

Different from form-focused feedback, meaning-focused feedback gives students motivation to imagine and raises students' awareness of audience and the reader's context. However, the overall accuracy of writing has been overlooked in the first draft. Therefore, the second draft was revised by their classmates, who could mark linguistic errors and assist the writer to correct them.

For most students, it's quite challenging to correct their classmate's written work. They may feel that they do not have the luxury of focusing exclusively on a single error when they correct their classmate's written work. But under the guideline of the teacher, they gradually understand how to revise others' writings. The following comment by Vanessa reflects what many students said about peer review:

> "When I was asked to revise Jessica's writing. I noticed some grammatical mistakes and some problematic expressions. But I was not sure. I had to turn to the dictionary or the grammar book to confirm my assumptions. When I pointed out those errors, I realized that some of the linguistic errors were also marked by the teacher. I thought I would not use those problematic expressions."

When Vanessa received her classmate's written feedback, she said:

> "I am surprised that I misused tense in my writing. Because this time I wrote a time-travel story. Planning the plot took me a great deal of time. When I received Amy's feedback, the problematic expressions in my writing were all marked with detailed explanation. I realized that it helped me a lot."

With the help of their peer review, the scaffolding sets up conditions for learner success. Through the interaction between peers, learners becomes more competent in writing creative stories.

5 Conclusion

The case study examined students' attitudes and perceptions of written feedback directed at content and organization issues in students' creative writings. It is obvious that students are motivated to write stories playfully and inventively under the guideline of the tutor's feedback. Through peer assistance, linguistic errors are marked and corrected. However, there are several limitations in this research. First, the study only ran for a semester, and the sample size was quite small. Thus the collected data and conclusions are not representative. Second, there is no standardized criteria for written feedback directing at content and organization in creative writing course. This is an issue in need of further research.

References

Ashwell, T. (2000). Patterns of teacher response to student writing in a multiple-draft composition classroom: Is content feedback followed by form feedback the best method? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *9*, 227-257.

Bell, N. (2005). Exploring L2 language play as an aid to SLL: A case study of humor in NS-NNS interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, *26*, 192-218.

Belz, J. (2002). Second language play as a representation of the multicompetent self in foreign language study. *Journal for Language Identity and Education*, *1*, 13-39.

Bitchener, J., & Knoch, U. (2008). The value of a focused approach to written corrective feedback. *Language Teaching Research*, *12*, 409-431.

Bitchener, J., Young, S., & Cameron, D. (2005). The effect of different types of corrective feedback on ESL student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *14*, 191-205.

Broner, M., & Tarone, E. (2001). Is it fun? Language play in a fifth grade Spanish immersion classroom. *Modern Language Journal, 85*, 363-379.

Celce-Murcia. M. (2006). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language.* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Warner, C.N. (2004). It's just a game, right? Types of play in foreign language CMC. *Language Learning & Technology, 8*, 69-87.

Clark, H., & Ouellette, M. (2008). *Students' noticing and incorporation of written feedback: A snapshot of ESOL writing instructors' commentary on adult ESOL Students' essays.* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Texas. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10106/669

Cook, G. (1996). Language Art'. In J. Maybin & N. Mercer (Eds.), *Using English from conversation to canon*. London: Routledge with the Open University.

Cook, V. (2011). *Second language learning and language teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Cullip, P.F. (2009). A tale of two texts: Tracking developments in learner writing. *RELC Journal, 40*(2), 192-210.

Dai, F. (2010). English-language creative writing in mainland China. *World Englishes, 29*(4), 546-556.

Dana, R.F., Hsiang, L., Sinha, A., & Senna, M. (2013) Written corrective feedback for individual L2 writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 22*(3), 307–329.

Deng, L., Liu, H., Chen, Y., Chen, P., & Zhang, Y. (2004). Experimenting with process writing and 'write it long' in teaching college writing in English. In Z. Chao (Ed.), *Write to learn: Concept and operation* (pp. 93–98). Beijing: Science Press.

Duff, P.A. (2011). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Ferris, D.R. (2011). *Treatment of error in second language student* writing (2nd ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Ferris, D.R., Brown, J., Liu, H., & Stine, M.E.A. (2011a). Responding to L2 students in college writing classes: What teachers say and what they do. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*, 207–234.

Ferris, D.R., Liu, H., & Rabie, B. (2011). The job of teaching writing: Teacher views of responding to writing. *Writing and Pedagogy*, *3*(1), 39-77.

Lee, I. (2008). Understanding teachers' written feedback practices in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *17*, 69-85.

Lee, I. (2009). Ten mismatches between teachers' beliefs and written feedback practice. *ELT Journal*, *63*, 13-22.

Montgomery, J.L., & Baker, W. (2007). Teacher-written feedback: Student perceptions, teacher self-assessment, and actual teacher performance. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 16*, 82-99.

Pomerantz, A., & Bell, N. (2007). Learning to play, playing to learn: FL learners as multicompetent language users. *Applied Linguistics, 28*, 556-578.

Ellis, R., Sheen, Y., Murakami, M., & Takashima, H. (2008). The effects of focused and unfocused written corrective feedback in an English as a foreign language context. *System*, *36*, 353–371.

Shively, R.L. (2013). Learning to be funny in Spanish during study abroad: L2 humor development. *The Modern Language Journal*, *97*, 930-946.

Truscott, J. (1996). The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes. *Language Learning, 46*, 327-369.

Truscott, J. (1999). The case for "the case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes": A response to Ferris. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *8*, 111-122.

Zhou, P. (2004). Experimenting with 'write it Long' in the Law School of Wuhan University. In Z. Chao (Ed.), *Write to learn: The concept and operation* (pp. 103–8). Beijing: Science Press.