Using formative feedback to enhance EAP students' written performance and autonomous learning

Dr. Evangelia Xirofotou

Adjunct lecturer, University of Thessaly, Greece

exirofotou@hotmail.com

Abstract: **Because of the full reception of learner-centred techniques and approaches to foreign language instruction more importance is placed on the role of the learner in the learning process. Learners are no more regarded as passively involved in their education but rather become responsible of their learning. The emphasis on the learner's role in the learning process has brought about the concept of learner autonomy referring to the student's capacity to set appropriate learning goals and to take charge of his/her learning. Formative feedback plays an important role in developing the learners' autonomous learning skills because teachers respond to all parts of the process of writing. In this current research the relationship between indirect corrective feedback (IDF) and the students' writing were explored in order to determine the degree to which IDF has contributed to the students' development of autonomy as well as/ leading to their written texts' improvement. IDF refers to the teacher's provision of feedback through the use of underlining, circles or a correction code indicating errors in students' writing without providing the correct forms; instead the learners are responsible for self-revising and correcting the errors following the correction code. The study showed that the students successively achieved higher scores participating on a 11-week summer pre-sessional course and improved their written performance. On completing the pre-sessional course, the students improved their writing performance by achieving a 6.5 IELTS level i.e. 60-69% meeting the university's language requirement for this particular skill. This was indicated through the statistical analysis of the students' scores since there was a statistically significant difference regarding the scores obtained in Writing task 2 (formative coursework 2), Writing task 3 (formative researched writing task) and Writing task 3 (summative task – reworking of Writing task 3).**

Keywords: **academic writing skills, learner autonomy, formative feedback, written performance, correction code, feedback tutorial.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Formative feedback is important because teachers respond to all parts of the process of writing i.e. outlining, rough draft and final draft enabling the learner to modify his/her thinking or behaviour not only for the purposes of improving the current text but also focusing on learning. Even though there are a number of key factors that can affect a student's performance including among others the curriculum, motivation, teaching methodology, learning environment; the current study focuses on the impact of the formative feedback as one of the many key variables which contributed to the students' overall score at the end of the programme. According to Ferris (2008) clear feedback in the form of teacher-student regular meetings involves international students in the feedback process more fully and helps them develop different areas of writing through the provision of explanations and clarifications. Therefore, face-to-face formative feedback tutorials embedded in the course are beneficial for the students' engagement with the writing process.

It has been widely argued in the literature that for formative feedback to be effective, students need to develop evaluative skills which match those of their tutors (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud, 2000; Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006). Butler and Winne (1995) argue that formative feedback promotes self-regulated learning enabling the students to develop a number of skills including setting goals for upgrading knowledge; deliberating about strategies to select those that balance

progress toward goals; and, as steps are taken and the task evolves, monitoring the accumulating effects of their engagement. This view sees feedback serving to help develop the students' autonomous abilities to "monitor, evaluate and regulate [students'] own learning" (Nicol, 2010, p. 504).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study investigates the effect of indirect feedback (IDF) on the writing performance of Chinese students on a 11-week summer pre-sessional course in guiding them and helping them to solve the problems themselves. A group of 16 students received indirect comments in the form of general comments as well as a correction code encouraging students to reflect on aspects of their writing i.e. content, structure, use of sources, accuracy and provide improvements. It has been found that there is a statistically significant difference among the average mark achieved by Chinese students in writing tasks 2 3 4 by using the Friedman non parametric test $x^2(3) = 39.72$ p < 0.001. Therefore, indirect feedback provides the students with opportunities for individual discovery and construction of knowledge helping the students to improve their academic wring competence rather than an individual written product.

Research hypotheses:

1) Has the students written performance improved through the completion of the three successive writing tasks?

2) What research methods can be employed and what results are evident?

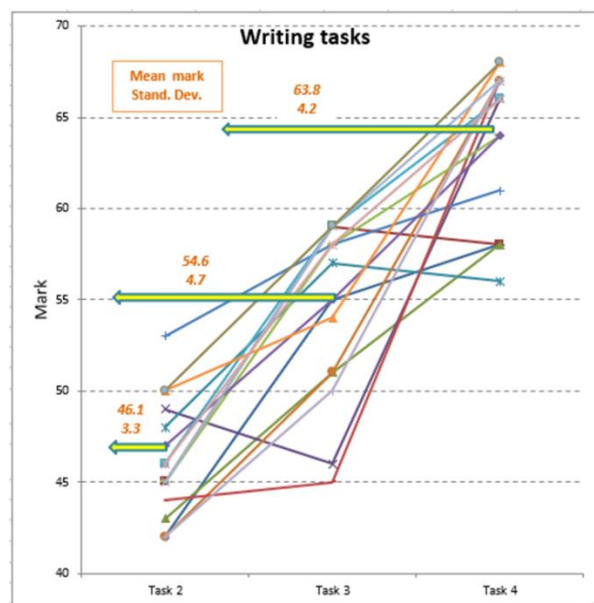3) What are the teaching recommendations and what can be concluded?

3. FINDINGS

Table 1: Descriptive statistics regarding the allocation of marks in 3 writing tasks

|	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
Mean	46.1	54.6	63.8
Std. Deviation	3.3	4.7	4.2
Median	45.5	56.0	66.0
Minimum	42	45	56
Maximum	53	59	68

The above table shows that the students' scores are higher in WT4 than the two preceding writing tasks

Line graph 1 Students actual marks achieved in 2 formative and a final summative writing task

ISSN 2394-9686

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning
Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (64-67), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

The 16 Chinese students' marks achieved in WT2, WT3 and WT4 at the pre-sessional course in summer 2018 exhibit statistically significant differences in the mean/average score relating to writing performance. Therefore, it can be supported that as the teaching sessions progress the average scores advance or improve. Task 2 is low; Task 3 is better and the Task 4 average scores are statistically more significant than 2 & 3 regarding the development of academic writing skills – this indicates a gradual improvement across the tasks.

Graph 2 – (Box and whisker plot) Distribution of the three types of scores in WT2, WT3 and WT4
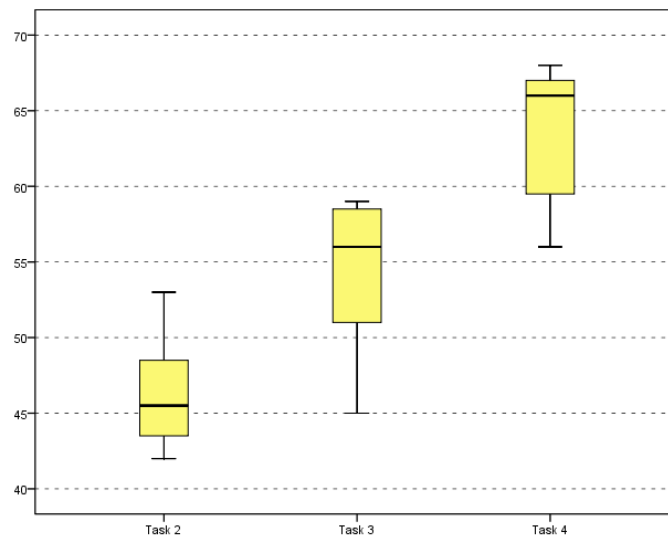
The distribution of the three types of scores is different. There is a difference observed between the three tasks during the pre-sessional course indicating statistically significant improvement in writing performance.

4. DISCUSSION

The study showed that the students on the pre-sessional programme following the formative feedback on the 3 research writing tasks, which formed part of the assessment of the writing module, were able to become active players in their own learning having developed a greater awareness of the writing process as well as reaching decisions about the areas they needed to concentrate on. This is supported by the statistical analysis of the students' scores exhibiting their progressive development of writing skills through the three writing tasks. Therefore, formative feedback has not only contributed to the increase in the marks attained but also to their enhanced awareness of the academic writing processes and an increase the leaners' autonomy through reflection, decision making and independent action.

5. CONCLUSION AND TEACHING RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should apply correction codes to all types of assessed writing. The use of the correction code can aid feedback and give students opportunities to correct their own mistakes when they receive their assessed work back. This could also include classroom and homework activities dedicated to helping students correct and understand how to improve their work.

The student should receive frequent and ongoing oral feedback through weekly tutorials where the student's progress is discussed in relation to the objectives of the syllabus, together with commenting on written work, including assessed work which has been returned. The student should be provided with clear and constructive advice because they need to develop as writers of academic English with the teacher's aim being to help the learners to work on improving their competence in this area. Feedback should be also given on the different areas of writing covered by the marking criteria and shaped according to them (e.g. content, structure, use of sources etc). One of the advantages of employing an IDF technique in teaching writing is that students are encouraged to take responsibility for revising their writing in response to the corrective feedback. While working collaboratively with writing teachers to evaluate their teacher's corrective feedback, learners make decisions about learning objectives, materials, methodology, and evaluation, and through making these decisions, a learner can develop his/her autonomy.

REFERENCES

[1] Bitchener, J. (2008). Evidence in support of written corrective feedback. Journal of Second Language Writing, 17, 102-118.

[2] Brookhart, S.M. 2001. Successful students' formative and summative uses of assessment information. *Assessment in Education,* 8 (2), pp. 153–69.

[3] Dam, L. (1990). Developing awareness of learning in an autonomous language learning context. In R. Duda & P. Riley (Eds.), *Learning styles* (pp. 189-97). Presses Universitaires de Nancy.

[4] Ferris, D.R., Liu, H., Sinha, A. and Senna, M. (2013). Written corrective feedback for individual L2 writers. *Assessing Writing,* 22, pp. 307-329.

[5] Holec, H., 1981. *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Published for and on behalf of the Council of Europe by Pergamon Press.

[6] Hyland, F. & Hyland, K. (2006). Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing: an introduction. In F. Hyland & K. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in Second Language Writing: Contexts and Issues* (pp1-15). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Murray, R., & Moore, S. 2006. *A handbook of academic writing: A fresh approach*. New York: Open University Press.

[8] Nicol, D.J., and D. Macfarlane-Dick. 2006. Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education,* 31 (2), pp.199–218

[9] Sadler, D.R. 1989. Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. Instructional Science 18, no. 2: 119–41

[10] Sadler, R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science,* 18, pp. 119-144.

[11] Shute, V. (2008). Focus on Formative Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(1), pp. 153-189.