

The Effects of Meaning-focused Feedback on Students' Essay Writing: An Experimental Study

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper was to look for the effects of Meaning-focused feedback on learners' writing performance. Ninety students from two sections were set in experimental and control group. Random sampling was employed to assign the subjects of the study. Data collection tool contained writing component rubrics, writing achievement pretest and posttest and was analyzed by independent samples t-test. The finding showed that learners developed their writing performance after experiment. Writing achievement results portrayed statistically significant differences between experimental and control group which favor towards implementing meaning-focused feedback in improving students' essay writing achievement in content, organization, cohesion and vocabulary components.

Keywords: Meaning-focused feedback, Essay writing, Writing achievement, Writing components

1. Introduction

Meaning-focused feedback approach provides exposure to rich input and meaningful use of the L2 in context, which is intended to lead to incidental acquisition of the language (Norris & Ortega, 2001). Meaning-focused feedback approach is often advocated by

methodologists and materials development researchers because of its match with second language acquisition research findings. However, meaning-focused feedback approach is rarely put into practice in classrooms or course books because of its lack of face validity with administrators, teachers and students who believe in the explicit teaching and learning of languages. One compromise which has been put in to practice involves focus on form into focus-on-meaning (Long & Norris, 2009).

Feedback is essential to achieve writing instruction. Constructive and formative feedbacks are critical to students' writing achievement (Carol, 2000). A consistent approach to the writing process and feedback used by the subject teachers help students for writing achievement in the writing work (Nation, 2009). Among different varies of teacher's feedback on students' written work, meaning-focused feedback is one which denotes instances where the teacher provides an immediate interpretation of the errors.

Although teachers always offer feedback on students' written work, there are typically a number of problems raised. For example, some students pay little attention to the feedback they receive (Cohen, 1987). Besides this, Ferris (1995) and Hedgcock (1996) find that students sometimes do not understand, or know what to do with teachers' feedback. In addition, the kind of feedback desired by students does not always matched with the feedback offered by their teacher (Charles, 1990), and students would seek more information about what they are doing well, in alternative to the given comments.

The distinction between meaning-focused feedback (MFF) and error feedback by Ferris (2002) who defined MFF as one "when a teacher provides the meaning feedback using high-level features of writing (content, organization, coherence, vocabulary)". Error feedback occurs when teachers correct surface errors using low-level features of writing (grammar, mechanics, spelling). In surface error feedback, the teacher indicates that an error has been made, and signs the error wrong to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error (Ferris, 2002,). On contrary, meaning-focused feedback occurs when the teacher indicates in some way (underlying or providing codes) that an error exists but does not provide the correction, therefore letting the writer know that there is a problem but leaving it to them to solve.

When providing meaning-focused feedback, there are different categories of questions: Detailed questions ask for information directly to be stated in the paragraph/ essay writing; Inference questions ask for information that is implied, but not directly stated in the text; Sequence questions require knowledge of events in their order of occurrence; Cause-and-effect questions name cause and ask for its effect or mention an effect and ask for its cause; and vocabulary questions ask for the meaning of key words (Valdois, Habib, & Cohen, 2008).

Genet (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of studies of feedback and found that the average effect of writing feedback intervention on achievement was quite positive. In other words, the achievement of writing depends on the nature of the feedback. According to Bitchener and Young (2005) writing feedback should offer students clear and specific guidance on how to improve their achievement. In addition, the goal is to providing students a clear message about what they must do to improve future submissions. If not, students report that

they are often left not knowing what they have done well, what they need to change and why they have achieved the grades they have.

Students' writing achievement is the expected product of the writing process. Cohen (1987) describes that unless foreign language learners value the feedback they receive on their errors in writing, they do not incorporate various components of writing such as content, organization, development, grammar, mechanics, and writing style in their written work. Achievement in writing can be greatly affected by feedback application. In other words, the main effect that influences the result of writing activities is the nature of the feedback learners receive. In this regard, learners may obtain no feedback at all or perhaps only receive a grade with no comments about their definite achievement (Bitchener, 2008).

Zamel (1985) states that a teacher's feedback on students' written work helps to develop their writing. That is, students are simply expected to take comments and advance their writing. Tesfaye (1995) finds that providing writing feedback on students' written work using clues helping students to improve their writing performance. Dawit (2003) and Davis (1999) state that feedback is helpful and plays a great role in improving students' writing quality. Sommers (1982) assessed the impact of teacher feedback on students' writing apprehension level and essay writing ability. Rahimi (2009) and Sheen (2007) have provided some evidence that error feedback can be effective in improving the accuracy of L2 writers. The present study attempts to investigate the effect of meaning-focused feedback on students' essay writing achievement.

2. Objective of the Study

The main objective of study is to find out the effectiveness of the meaning-based feedback approach on students' writing achievement.

3. Hypotheses

H1. The post-test mean scores of the experiment group are significantly higher than the post-test mean scores of the control group.

H2. The post-test mean scores of the experiment group are significantly higher than the pre-test mean scores.

4. Methodology

Experimental, (pretest-posttest control group) research design was employed in the current study. The pretest-posttest design is one of the most frequently-used experimental research designs in which initially two groups (experimental and control) of research participants or subjects are tested. Then, some treatment or independent variable manipulation is applied and post tested. Particular to this study, it was the most preferable design to achieve the objectives of the study.

The subjects of the study were 95 randomly selected grade eleven students from Arbaminch Limat Secondary School at Arbaminch town, in Gamo zone, Ethiopia in 2022 academic year. Essay writing tests to be used as pre- and posttests in the control and

experimental groups were adapted from grade 11 students textbook to look for the learners' essay writing achievement in pre intervention and post intervention. Alderson's (1995) analytical score was employed for the appropriateness of this study.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics was used to summarize findings by describing general tendencies in the data and the overall spread of the scores. Besides, inferential statistics was employed to examining the research hypotheses in the study. SPSS was used to analyze the data. The score differences between pre and post-tests of the control and experimental groups were compared by using independent samples t-test. The results are used to find out whether there are significant differences between the experimental and control groups. Effect size statistics of Cohen (1988) was used to measure the significance level of magnitude score.

5. Findings

The findings of this study are presented based on the results of data analysis in the following tables.

Table 1 Findings of Statistical Analysis of the independent samples T-test, Students' Essay Writing Achievement in Content

Component	Intervention	Control Group			Experimental Group			D/f	T-Value	P-Value	Significance
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
Content	Pre-Intervention	47	2.21	.657	48	2.28	.583	93	-2.09	.591	Not sign.
	Post-Intervention	47	2.32	.725	48	3.87	.815	93	-9.82	.000	Sign.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare meaning-focused feedback on students' essay writing achievement scores of the control and experimental groups in pre-intervention and post-intervention. In the pre-intervention, there was no significant difference in scores for control group (M=2.21, SD=.657) and experimental group [M=2.28, SD=.583; $t(93) = -2.09, p=.591$]. Similarly, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare meaning-focused feedback on students' essay writing achievement scores in the post-intervention.

There was significant difference in scores for control group (M=2.32, SD=.725) and experimental group [M=3.87, SD=.725; $t(93) = -9.82, p=.001$]. The difference between the two scores was found to be statistically significant indicating that the experimental group made a significant effect over its post-intervention test compared to that of the control group. The findings of the tests thus seem to indicate that the meaning-focused feedback on students' essay writing approach could have statistically significant effect on students' essay writing achievement in content.

Table 2: Findings of Statistical Analysis of the independent samples T-test, Students’ Essay Writing Achievement in Organization

Component	Intervention	Control Group			Experimental Group			D/f	T-Value	P-Value	Significance
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
Organization	Pre-Intervention	47	2.38	.491	48	2.35	.601	93	.255	.799	Not sign
	Post-Intervention	47	2.34	.700	48	3.94	.835	93	-10.1	.000	Significant

Table: 2 indicate the average scores of Control and Experimental groups in pre-intervention test and post-intervention test. As shown above, the average scores of the control group of 47 and the Experimental group of 48 students are 2.38 and 2.35 respectively for the pre-intervention test. The standard deviation of the control group and experimental group is computed as .491 and .601 respectively for the pre-test. Regarding the t-value, it is .255 and the probability value (P-value) is .799. Therefore the difference between the above two scores was found to be statistically insignificant difference over its pre-test compared to that of the control group ($P > 0.05$ i.e. .799).

The post- intervention test scores of Control and Experimental groups are also shown in Table 2 the average scores of the control group of 47 and experimental group of 48 are 2.34 and 3.94 respectively for the post-intervention test. The standard deviation of the Control group and Experimental groups in post-intervention test is computed as .700 and .835 respectively. Besides, the t-value is -10.1 and the P-value is below 0.05 (i.e. .000). Thus post-intervention test scores were found to be statistically significant indicating that the Experimental group made significant improvement over its post-intervention test compared to the control group. Therefore, the findings of the tests seem to indicate that meaning-focused feedback essay writing approach had substantially affected students’ essay writing achievement.

Table 3: Findings of Statistical Analysis of the independent samples T-test, Students’ Essay Writing Achievement in Cohesion

Component	Intervention	Control Group			Experimental Group			D/f	T-Value	P-Value	Significance
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
Cohesion	Pre-Intervention	47	2.42	.499	48	2.48	2.43	93	-.108	.915	Not sign
	Post-Intervention	47	2.25	.765	48	3.87	.672	93	-10.2	.000	Significant

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' essay writing achievement scores of the control group and experimental in pre-intervention and post-intervention. In the pre-intervention, there was no significant difference in scores for control group (M=2.42, SD=.499) and experimental group [M=2.48, SD=2.43; t (93) =-.108, p=.915]. Similarly, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the students' essay writing achievement scores in the post-intervention.

There was significant difference in scores for control group (M=2.25, SD=.765) and experimental group [M=3.87, SD= 3.87; t (93) = -10.2, p=.000]. The difference between the two scores was found to be statistically significant indicating that the experimental group made a significant effect over its post- intervention test compared to that of the control group. The findings of the tests thus shows that meaning-focused feedback essay writing approach could have statistically significant effect students' essay writing achievement.

Table 4: Findings of Statistical Analysis of the independent samples T-test, Students' Essay Writing Achievement in Vocabulary and Spelling

Component	Pre- and Post-Scores	Control Group			Experimental Group			D/f	t-value	p-value	Significance
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
vocabulary	Pre-intervention	47	2.53	.504	48	2.52	.583	93	.099	.921	Not sign
	Post-intervention	47	2.55	.685	48	3.90	.736	93	-7.20	.000	Significant
Spelling	Pre-intervention	47	2.62	.573	48	2.81	.641	93	-1.57	.623	Not sign
	Post-intervention	47	2.63	.679	48	3.87	.535	93	9.12	.000	Significant

The mean scores of the control group of 47 and the experimental group of 48 students pre-intervention test are vocabulary 2.53 and 2.52 and spelling 2.62 and 2.81 respectively. There appeared to be no significant difference between the groups in vocabulary and spelling. The pre-intervention score p-values for vocabulary 0.921 and spelling 0.623 respectively. Both are greater than the p-value set at 0.05 levels of significances. Thus, there was no significant difference between the groups in writing components achievement at the beginning of the study. The groups were relatively at a similar level of achievement in each writing components. From this output we see the mean achievement components for control and experimental group. In the above table, the Independent Samples Test indicates that achievement variances are different. This notes that there are 93 degrees of freedom. The p-value for t- lies between 0.05 and 0.01. From this the researcher concludes that there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

A statistically significant difference may not tell the magnitude of the differences observed; it simply implies that there is a difference. To know if an observed difference is not only statistically significant but also important or meaningful, effect size is dominant important as it is a standardized measurement. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) an effect size can lie between 0 to 1 even if some formula yields an effect size that is larger than 1. This can be qualitatively indicated as 0–0.20 = weak effect, 0.21–0.50 = modest effect, 0.51–1.00 = moderate effect or >1.00 = strong effect. The effect size is calculated using t-test score and degree of freedom. The calculated effect size of content is 0.71, organization 0.72, cohesion 0.73, and 0.60. As calculated, the effect size of the intervention i.e. MFF (meaning-focused feedback) 0.71, 0.72, 0.73, and 0.60 were moderate effect. This indicates that experimental group students of the study scored better results in the post intervention test than the control group students. To sum up, the students essay writing achievement result portrayed difference due to the intervention of MFF.

6. Conclusions

Findings attained indicate that it is actually value giving meaning-focused feedback which the learners achieve components in their essay writing activities because they have recognized about writing achievement and the phases of meaning-focused feedback ideal still improve their understanding of meaning achievement too. Learners the study gone to the procedure of rewriting, reviewing their fault in content, organization, cohesion, and vocabulary with the supporting from meaning-focused feedback and then the afterward draft would be tested their grammatical, mechanics and spelling mistakes distinctly. Besides, the results of meaning-focused feedback improve learners' writing achievement in organization, cohesion and vocabulary. Because, meaning-focused feedback is encouraging, and good reflection configuration of understanding among a teacher and learner in smoothing learners on incorporating, and appreciating essay writing activities. This study, therefore, uncloses that meaning-focused feedback has statistically significant effect on students' essay writing performance.

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