From Monologue to Dialogue: A Case Study on Mediated Feedback in a Transnational Asynchronous Online Writing Tutorial

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Abstract

In recent years, computer assisted language learning and online writing forums have increased exponentially; however many questions remain about how learners and teachers engage in learning in these contexts. This qualitative case study examined the writing, revisions and feedback processes that occurred in a transnational asynchronous online writing tutorial. Findings revealed strategic acts of feedback, which have implications for second language pedagogy. L2 writers not only incorporated feedback in their revisions, but also confirmed the extensive thinking opportunities brought by the tutor’s written feedback.

Purpose of Inquiry

Recently computer assisted language learning and online writing tutorials have increased exponentially; however many questions remain concerning how learners and teachers may engage in learning in these contexts. Although there is a growing body of research on second language (L2) writing and written feedback in second language acquisition (SLA), the effectiveness of written feedback practices has remained in dispute among L2 writing specialists (see Goldstein, 2005). Much of the research that has found a positive relationship between written feedback and SLA is based on short term experimental designs (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron 2005, Bitchener 2008, Bitchener & Knoch 2010; Sheen 2007); however these studies do not often show how the corrective feedback may help L2 writers throughout the writing process. This study fills this research gap by offering close analysis of the learning opportunities that may occur during the feedback exchange process among writers and their tutor. This study contributes to four areas of research (SLA, writing, computer mediated communication, and language teacher education) by conceptualizing an online writing tutorial as a context to better understand second language acquisition and to tap into previously neglected opportunities for teaching and learning.

The following questions guided this research: How are L2 writing and revising processes mediated through tutor-learner feedback in an asynchronous online writing tutorial? More specifically, what types of feedback acts do tutors use to mediate the revising process, and how do writers incorporate and perceive this feedback?

We approach these questions through a sociocultural theoretical lens (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky 1978, 1986) which conceptualizes learning as socially mediated and cognition as distributed across participants in an activity. Drawing from this framework, we consider the written feedback to be a mediational tool for tutors and writers to discuss how language works and to guide thinking in revising writing.

Research Methods

The setting of this study was an asynchronous online writing tutorial which involved L2 writers (enrolled in an English academic writing course in a Taiwanese university) and graduate student tutors (enrolled in a teacher education course on ESOL reading and writing at a University in the U.S.). The participants interacted via discussion forums of an online learning management system. We collected data from 3 tutors and 6 L2 writers over sixteen weeks. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on 1 tutor (Marsha) and her two tutees (Hong and Rey). We selected Marsha as a focal case because her written feedback contained the most variation of feedback acts and were representative of the range of feedback found in other tutors’ comments. Marsha was an English dominant, female graduate student. Prior to enrolling a TESOL M.Ed. program in a mid-Atlantic university, Masha worked as a nurse. The two focal L2 writers were male students working on their PhD in engineering. They worked on two writing assignments: (1) biodata and (2) summary of a paragraph and
conducted two rounds of feedback for each assignment. Between rounds of feedback, the writers used uptake documents to ask tutors questions or indicate areas of confusion. In serving a pedagogical purpose, the uptake sheet can assist L2 writers understanding the written feedback better and communicating with the tutor regarding any confusion in writing.

Data collected included L2 writers’ drafts and revisions of two assignments, tutors’ comment entries, forum messages, uptake documents, transcriptions of interviews. To understand how tutors and L2 writers mediated the feedback and revising process, this study conceptualized the tutors’ written feedback not simply as statements, but as actions. Using discourse analysis, we analyzed linguistic features and functions in feedback that signified actions (e.g., make suggestions/requests, etc.). We adapted Ferris et al.’s analysis model (1997)—with theoretical roots from Austin (1962) and Searle’s (1979) speech act taxonomy—to examine the use of directives by the tutor. Ferris et al. explained that directives consist of “all specific acts whose function is to get the hearer to do something” (p. 337).

After reviewing 47 comment entries in the four rounds of feedback to the writers’ drafts, we identified eleven types of feedback acts. The acts regarding content included “Asking questions”, “Making suggestions/requests”, and “Giving information”, while those regarding language were “Making corrections”, “Making language-related suggestions”, “Giving metalinguistic explanations”, “Giving examples”, “Giving models for revision”, “Cross-linguistic comparisons”, “Using humor and admitting one’s own imperfections”, and “Giving positive comments/personal responses”. See Table 1 for definitions and examples. In addition to identifying acts of feedback in terms of linguistic function we also analyzed linguistic features of the feedback such as the use of hedges, the use of the second-person (you), and the use of colloquial or conversational language that invited the L2 writers into an informal exchange of ideas and questions.

Table 1 – Please see Appendix

Findings

We found Marsha strategically used multiple acts of feedback in a single comment entry to mediate the revising and learning process of the writers. The most frequent type of feedback used by Marsha was “asking questions”, followed by “giving metalinguistic explanations” and “giving examples”. The excerpts below will show how Marsha used linguistic features and different types of feedback acts to scaffold her explanation of language through the writing tutorial process.

Excerpt 1: Feedback on Rey’s 1st draft of summary

*When your airplane lands, you descend. When you go come down from the top of a mountain, you descend. When numbers, proportions, or populations go down, they “decrease.”* [Giving examples]²

*Do you think “descending” or “decreasing” works better here?* [Asking questions; Making language-related suggestions]

In this comment, Marsha did not simply make a correction. Instead she showed Rey the difference between “descend” and “decrease” by giving context-rich examples. Instead of an explicit correction, Marsha used a question to encourage Rey to think about which word would be more appropriate for his writing. We found Marsha used interrogatives quite often to spur writers’ further thinking and to create dialogues with them.

Excerpt 2: feedback to Rey’s 1st draft of biodata

*Are you a MEMBER OF a the BSI Laboratory STAFF AT NCTU? In English, laboratories have employees; staffs and groups have members. You’d either say you are a member of the XYZ group, a member of the XYZ staff, or you could be employed by XYZ the laboratory…but you would probably not say you*

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[1] As explained by Mackey and Gass (2005), an uptake sheet is one way to elicit learners’ perspectives on what they learn in L2 classrooms. The uptake document included the following guiding questions: “What is new to you in the feedback and comments you received?”, “What are the parts that you are still unclear about?”, “What parts of the paragraph do you need more help with?”

[2] Feedback type is in brackets
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were a member of the laboratory (Note: member OF not WITH)

In this excerpt, Marsha wanted to distinguish the differences between “member” and “staff” and to teach Rey the conventional use of them in English. Marsha began by asking Rey a question, not only to contextualize the following explanations, but also to make the meaning relevant to him. The question spurred Rey’s further thinking, as shown in his uptake document.

Excerpt 3: Rey’s message to Marsha in uptake document:

As you mentioned, “I would probably not say you were a member of the laboratory”. The staffs and groups have members. However, why laboratory cannot be regard as a group or staffs? I have been studying some researches in this laboratory. Please kindly advise your opinion. Thanks.

Excerpt 4: Marsha’s answer on Rey’s uptake document:

Tough question! I think it is probably a cultural way of looking at things. We think that when we are a "member," we are one individual in a collection of similar people. A club is made up of members, a staff is made up of members, an organization is made up of members, a group is made up of members, a band is made up of members, etc. They are all groups of individual people (the members.) A laboratory is a physical structure, a place, a building, a job location and is not a group of people. A group of people work there AT that place. We don't consider that we are a member of a place or a thing. Rather than saying we are a "member of a laboratory" (thing/place), most Americans would think of saying "We work AT the laboratory" (We work at the place) or, if we are going to use the word "member," we say the type of group we are a member of... "We work as members of the Laboratory Staff." (We are a member of the group that works at the laboratory.) Sorry for the long explanation, I hope it helps!

Excerpt 2, 3 and 4 show how the dialogue between Marsha and Rey continued across several turns and offered expanded learning opportunities as they both discussed elaborated examples of “member” and “staff”.

Throughout her comments, Marsha used hedge and modal verbs (e.g., “I would probably not say you were a member of the laboratory …”) and lexical softeners (e.g., “Perhaps in Chinese you say …”) to mitigate any face-threatening corrections and to make room for negotiation in her feedback. Marsha’s use of interrogatives and hedges facilitated the mediation process; consequently Rey was eager to learn more about word usage and go beyond simple grammatical corrections. Marsha’s use of daily life examples for mediation also prepared them for future writing, since preposition use is one of the most common challenges for L2 writers (Bitchener et al., 2005).

With regard to the writers’ incorporation of feedback, Hong and Rey applied 92% of the feedback. Except for nine comment entries in which Marsha provided personal responses or encouragement (e.g., “Wow! I hope you can do something to stop air pollution. We need it!” or “Good use of a transition word”), Hong and Rey revised their drafts by applying 33 out of 36 corrections/suggestions for revision. From the interviews, both writers confirmed the usefulness of the feedback. Hong applied all of Marsha’s suggestions, while Rey partially applied three of the suggestions. In his interview, Rey explained his partial application of the feedback was due to his personal preference for certain word choices. This is evidence of the dialogic nature of Marsha’s feedback in which she encouraged writers’ thinking through making their own choices.

Writers were found to be responsive to Marsha’s feedback in their continued questions to Marsha in the uptake document and discussion board. For example, in the uptake document, Hong asked about his use of prepositions (e.g., “at”, “in”) and articles (i.e., “the”). What is interesting is that his question was not derived from a direct correction/suggestion, but from Marsha’s use of humor. In his interview, Hong acknowledged the feedback on prepositions and articles usage was the most beneficial for him. Hong explained that the feedback he had received from previous tutors had been about fixed sentence patterns, in contrast to Marsha’s feedback that encouraged him to do more thinking in revising writing.

Rey’s negotiation of word choice between “lab member” and “lab staff” is another salient example of L2 writer’s incorporation of feedback, which resulted from Marsha’s multiple feedback acts. In his interview, Rey explained how
Marsha’s interactions broadened his understanding of language use. Rey commented, “I found that I learned about English language logic…Marsha told me some general concepts; I got to think further about what I’ve learned in Taiwan; know better how to avoid confusion if I use the thinking or [logic of language use] I am familiar with in Taiwan.”[Interview, Jun. 21, 2012]. Rey also commented that Marsha’s strategic acts of feedback and back-and-forth questions helped him better understand how certain words work differently in different contexts.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Although previous research has argued that synchronous online communication involves more interpersonal interaction (Hyland, 2000; Liang, 2010, Hedgcock, 1994), this study demonstrated, even in an asynchronous context, strategic acts of feedback also foster communication and dialogue between tutors and writers. We found that the linguistic functions and features of Marsha’s written feedback, such as hedges/softeners and interrogatives, encouraged Hong and Rey to think further about the corrections/suggestions. The L2 writers negotiated language issues of their interest with their tutor in the uptake document, which pushed the tutor to use a variety of feedback acts to make her explanation more comprehensible to them.

Our study makes the case for reconceptualizing written feedback as a tool to construct dialogue and to expand opportunities for second language learning. Dialogic feedback was perceived to be effective by the L2 writers who appreciated the way their tutor guided their thinking and allowed them to ask questions throughout; which resulted in revisions in their writing. This study shed light on the multiple functions of written feedback beyond error corrections—to be viewed as a tool to dynamically teach to student’s future writing ability. This study illustrates how written feedback can shift from monologue to continuing dialogue between tutors and L2 writers.

This study has implications for L2 writing teachers by offering examples of dialogic written feedback that aims to meet students’ needs. The transnational setting of the online tutorial also offers EFL writing teachers new possibilities to engage their students in dialogue with tutors from around the globe.

**References**


Appendix:

Table 1: Analysis Model of Feedback Acts

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<tr>
<th>Acts of Feedback</th>
<th>Definitions &amp; Examples</th>
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| Asking questions | -Ask writer to provide information known/unknown to tutor  
*When your airplane lands, you descend. When you go come down from the top of a mountain, you descend. When numbers, proportions, or populations go down, they “decrease.” Do you think “descending” or “decreasing” works better here?*  
*More than one conference? …*  
-Ask rhetorical questions to spur further thought  
...**What exactly is decreasing?** “the number of the people” or “the proportion of the people” perhaps |
| Making suggestions/requests | -Make suggestions/requests regarding the mis-interpreted information by another author’s text  
*A lot of people spoke English in the past, speak it now, and will probably speak it in the future. So maybe you would rather say: There will always be a tendency for many people to speak English.* |
| Giving information | -Give writer information about how tutor perceives the content  
… when you say “parts of people,” I think of body parts like legs and arms and heads… |
| Making corrections | -Explicitly correct errors in grammar, mechanics, or writing conventions  
*article needed. “a” or “one of the”* |
| Making language-related suggestions | -Make suggestions for word choice, grammar, or writing conventions  
*I would say "an MS degree" or "his MS degree" instead of "the" By the way—you would use...* |
“an” in this case instead of “a” …

| **Giving metalinguistic explanations** | - Give explanations and reasons for tutee’s problems or questions with language form  
“Some” in a general term that does not fit very well here. It’s not an exact amount that can be measured; since it can’t be measured you can’t tell if it’s decreasing. … |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Giving examples**                  | - Give concrete examples to demonstrate grammatical rule  
*When it comes to describing time, “From” usually has a partner…”Until” or “To”. *Such as: “He was employed from 2011 until 2012.” Or, “from 2011 to 2012, he was employed as…”* |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Giving models for revision**       | - Give rewording or sentence frames  
...so try "he has been studying...” |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Making cross-linguistic comparisons** | - Draw upon writer’s L1 to explain the differences between language and perceived errors  
...maybe in Chinese you say "in the University?", in the US we are students "at the University "… |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Using humor and admitting one’s own imperfections** | - Use humor, joking, or recognize one’s own ongoing learning or mistakes  
*Did you ever wonder if one reason English is such a necessary language may be that Americans, UNLIKE Chinese people, are not smart enough to learn other languages? I DO. But thank you for being polite enough to avoid that topic.* |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Giving positive comments/personal responses** | - Compliment on writer’s language use or give personal response to his content  
*VERY GOOD: “at” is CORRECT; …  
Wow! This sounds really technical. I hope you can do something to stop air pollution. We need it!* |