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THE RELEVANCE OF PEER FEEDBACK IN EFL CLASSES FOR TERTIARY LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Abstract: This paper reports on a study conducted at the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and USAMVBT “Regele Mihai I al Romaniei” from Timisoara, Romania, analysing the effect of peer feedback in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning. The authors hypothesized that peer feedback was not perceived as a genuine strategy for learning languages, while it could be put forth as a useful strategy for improving not only language skills but also critical thinking, as well as empathy. Based on the participants' responses, the students' perceptions were analyzed with an aim of encouraging them to become more confident learners, to improve their English language proficiency and to gain feedback skills. The study was conducted throughout the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 21 ($n=21$) subjects who participated in this study included 14 ($n=14$) students from the seventh semester of the UT, English Language and Literature Department and 12 ($n=12$) students from USAMVB “King Michael I of Romania” from Timisoara, Romania. The effects and perceptions of peer feedback were discussed from the students' perspective and from our corroborated points of view. Data were collected using student questionnaires in which participants were asked to reflect back on their experience on peer feedback throughout their studies. Student responses were subjected to a modified content analysis to identify the main themes and topics. Semi-structured interviews with 12 students were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of content analysis.

Keywords: EFL language learning; Peer feedback; Error correction; Content analysis; Communication skills.

1. Introduction

One of the most difficult aspects of language teaching is providing effective but non-aggressive feedback on student production. The outcome of any student engagement, in oral or written form, requires some sort of feedback, because errors are part of learning in all areas of life and language learning

skills may certainly be enhanced by means of trial-and-error mechanisms. Error analysis (EA), according to Ellis & Barkhuizen (2008:51), “consists of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learner errors.” Correspondingly, error analysis is described as “a set of procedures for assessing the relativity of learner errors” (ibid.)

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Most learners, including more and less successful ones, produce errors and inaccuracies in their learning output. Harmer (2001: 42) describes "good learners" as those students who, among other characteristics, are able to "make errors work for themselves". Further research into what makes a good teacher enables us to analogically make reference to the ability of turning students into autonomous learners by training them and engaging them in authentic tasks (Harmer, 2001: 336).

One of these tasks is evaluating their own progress and reflecting back on their learning in forms of journals or renderings of their learning experiences, language difficulties, preferences, etc. (Harmer, 2001: 336-339). These would hypothetically be deemed as basic conditions that would be conducive to achieving higher communication skills, based on self or peer feedback processing.

Following Harmer's suggestions, Kamberi (2010; 2012) previously argued that journal writing is a very useful way of fostering students' critical thinking skills, learner autonomy, as well as improving writing skills and overall proficiency. Therefore, journal writing was employed as a consistent self-reflective technique over a longer period of time, throughout academic studies. It also proved to be a tool for developing analytical abilities and critical thinking skills. As to the question of preferring one over the other type of feedback, it was difficult to identify the most effective way of responding to errors in student writing, as teacher feedback has been the main and only source available.

The dilemma regarding the provision of an optimal type of feedback to learner errors has been discussed by many scholars who have shared their research findings (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Klimova, 2015; Kamberi, 2013; Lam, 2010; Lee, 2008; Rollinson, 1998, 2005; Sackstein, 2017; Zhang, 1995, etc.) Some researchers have argued in favour of teacher feedback, while others prefer peer feedback. For instance, Miao, Badger, &

Zhen (2006) concluded that teacher feedback had much more significant effects than peer feedback.

However, most researchers seem to opt for a combined strategy, which would ensure the highest effectiveness. A mixed feedback approach was also used in our previous studies to provide feedback to student writing (Kamberi, 2013). Based on student responses, it was argued that students preferred feedback which was provided by the teacher, who is generally seen as the authoritative 'knower' and 'expert'. Similarly, Zhang (1995) also pointed to some of the negative aspects which were related to peer feedback, in the students' perceptions, for instance trust in the capacity of their peers to give accurate assessments. For that reason, 94 % of a sample of ESL students in Zhang's (1995) study preferred teacher feedback over peer feedback. In addition, students also seem to direct more attention to teacher feedback than to that offered by their peers.

On the other hand, research has refuted distrust in peers' abilities to provide accurate and trustworthy feedback by showing that 80 % of feedback provided by college students in a study by Rollinson (1998) was confirmed to be valid on a large scale. The aim of studies such as the ones cited above has been to try out and suggest the most productive feedback options in teaching and learning EFL and to share best practices with teachers and academics worldwide. Despite recognizing that peer feedback represents "a social process" enforcing collaborative learning and interaction among peers" (Hyland, 2010), making students more autonomous learners, still, fear of inexperience and inability calls for more peer feedback training as a strategy for learning not only languages but all subject areas and interpersonal skills (Kamberi, 2013:4).

As a follow-up of this earlier study, the current analysis attempts to focus more on peer feedback. Therefore, we seek to compare

and analyze peer feedback and its effect on student learning from the students' perspective, given that what teachers believe to be effective may not be perceived in a similar manner by students, the ultimate beneficiaries of our services.

Moreover, this paper offers tentative suggestions about the significance of enabling constructive peer feedback, focusing on the use of constructive affective strategies to generate a comfortable environment in the English language classroom from the students' perspective. We hypothesize that some of the more relevant implications of introducing feedback sessions in EFL classrooms would be to decrease the anxiety in relation to error correction, which should be primarily seen as an opportunity to permanently strive for higher degrees of quality. If students are aware of their errors and they are able to fill in knowledge gaps for one another, it becomes easier and more attractive for them to become equal members of a collaborative learning community and also to learn from their mistakes as a highly constructive frame of mind.

2. Methodology

2.1. Aims and methods

This paper reports on a research conducted in the academic year 2018/2019 at the University of Tetovo (UT), Northern Macedonia and USAMVB "King Michael I of Romania" in Timisoara, Romania. Research was aimed at analysing the perceptions and utility of peer/teacher feedback as seen by students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The main focus was to analyze the undergraduates' perceptions regarding the issue of peer feedback, given that this is one of the main provisions in any communicative and interactive classroom environments. The qualitative research method that we put more emphasis on enables a more in-depth understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2003).

2.2 Research Questions

Based on our professional teaching experience and informed by the emerging findings in the literature review, the research questions addressed in this paper include:

1. What are the students' perceptions with regard to peer feedback?
2. Is peer feedback perceived as a constructive approach?

2.3. Settings and Participants

Acknowledging convenience sampling, the 21 (n=21) subjects who participated in this study included 14 (n=14) students from the seventh semester of the UT, at the English Language and Literature Department and 12 (n=12) students from USAMVB "King Michael I of Romania" in Timisoara. Their ages range from 20-21 years old.

2.4 Data Collection and analysis

Data were collected using student questionnaires in which participants were asked to reflect back on their experience on peer feedback. Student perceptions were subjected to a modified content analysis (Silverman, 2005; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) to identify the main themes and topics. To triangulate the quantitative results, semi-structured interviews with 2 students were undertaken to substantiate the essential findings of content analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Applying a modified content analysis as put forth by Silverman (2006) and Dorney (2007), findings from the study identified a range of positive and negative attitudes deriving from students' perceptions of peer feedback. While recognizing that the sample was too small to generate meaningful quantitative conclusions, the analyses of student questionnaires and interviews displayed mixed feelings towards peer

feedback and its beneficial effects on EFL learning.

The first question referred to the students' peer feedback experience requiring respondents to state if they had previously encountered this type of activity in their language classes. All the respondents, except one who could not remember, had received feedback at some point in their learning experience, among others in their high school classes, as interviews revealed. Nonetheless, only 80 % of the respondents answered the question. The remaining 20% gave no response, which is an indication they might not have been familiar with this type of feedback. The second question was related to their attitude towards fairness of peer feedback. The responses varied with 62% believing in its objectivity opposed by 27%, with the remaining 9% being undecided. If these uncertain responses were added to those against peer feedback a solid 40% would belong to the group who do not trust fair-play.

One of the most controversial questions appears to be the one asking students to justify their response to question two, the objectivity of peer feedback. On the one hand, there are students who claim it was fair, "Because we are close to the same age and we are from the same generation we can understand each other's need more than anyone else", or "because we need more than one perspective in order to fix errors". Others added more arguments in favour of peer feedback, such as "it comes from someone my age, it enters easier my subconsciousness and remains there"; "they have been in a similar situation"; "you spend the whole week with them". It appears that these respondents display a high degree of trust in their colleagues and their ability to provide constructive feedback.

On the other hand, some students displayed decreased trust in peers, which was suggested by responses such as, "It can sometimes be tainted by envy", "It feels weird anyhow", "they are jealous" and "they

use emotions to make decisions". From this point of view, it seems necessary to invest more energy in building trust, empathy and healthy emotional grounds for students to develop collaborative relationships devoid of unnecessary anxiety.

As we compared and the effects of peer feedback perceptions with such aspects in view, we concluded it is essential to upgrade the use of affective strategies, which are an important part of learning languages collaboratively. One such strategy would require learners and facilitators to focus more on building empathy and also to collaborate in the construction of a positive environment so as to make learning more comfortable.

In discussing the affective ecology of the English class, Cozma (2015:1214) highlights the fact that teachers who display characteristics on the positive empathetic end such as openness, respect for students, honesty, authenticity, play an essential role in generating trust. When learners feel insecure in their position, teachers provide not only feedback regarding content, but also affective support and encouragement to take risks. Moreover, students who are personally affected by the language errors they have made tend to display decreased self-esteem, leading to feelings of anxiety. In such situations, the teacher should focus on the positive side of error correction, which reflects the progress made by learners who gather enhanced knowledge through trial-and-error learning processes (Cozma, 2015:1214).

The two issues on which all respondents unanimously agreed were, firstly, that feedback from the teacher was the preferred and the most effective one and secondly, the majority of students were of the opinion that peer feedback could be used when targeting all skills. The final question appeared to be the most controversial one; while the majority of the respondents claimed peer feedback was not effective and were opposing it, many nonetheless believed that

the very same type of feedback should be used in the future as a better strategy for error correction.

The study has revealed that impending action needs to be taken in order to prepare students not only for correct self-assessment, but also for constructive peer feedback, as suggested by Lam (2010), by using the modules put forth in the four step procedure. Lem (2010:118) proposes the first stage to be identification and clarification of ideas, followed by stage two in which the problems are identified, describing the problems in stage three, and finally, giving suggestions for improvement in the last stage.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study have shown that feedback is an important tool in learning and teaching, whereas peer feedback is not valued enough from the students' perspective. From a learner point of view, there were mixed perceptions regarding this strategy and its effectiveness in error correction.

The analysis has shown that the majority of the students participating in this study prefer teacher feedback rather than peer feedback.

The vast number of participants held strong beliefs regarding the teacher as the ultimate knower and the most reliable feedback provider.

However, the learners' personalities and life experience certainly provide a copious resource for sharing peer feedback with more confidence in self and others, which would help build self-esteem and mutual respect in the general context of collaborative instruction. Besides teacher responsiveness, we should encourage more empathetic attitudes on the part of learner peers, help them feel emotionally safe, and minimize the invasive role of teacher error correction.

Further research and comparison of our observations seems likely to yield useful information for the most effective types of feedback after providing students with basic training as suggested in discussions above. Also, conducting a further study with a larger sample of participants would hopefully confirm these findings and yield more consistent results.

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Appendix

Peer feedback questionnaire

Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire on peer feedback.

Thank you for your time!

Questionnaire

1. Have you ever received feedback from your peers/colleagues?
2. Do you believe feedback from peers is fair?
3. If yes why? If no why?
4. Is peer feedback better than teacher feedback?
5. Can peer feedback be used with all main language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)?
6. Will you use peer feedback as a teacher? Why or why not?