The Impact of Comment Style on Learners' Essay Revisions

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This paper investigates how the type of written feedback provided by teachers affects learners' ability to revise essays. A total of 120 participants participated in two rounds of essay composition and feedback delivery. The findings indicate that learners who receive comments in the form of questions are more prone to make revisions compared to those receiving statements or imperatives. These results hold significant implications for educators and the ways they utilize written feedback to enhance learners' writing skills.

Keywords: teacher's written feedback, impact, learners' essay revisions

Introduction

Writing is a crucial aspect of communication in both personal and professional settings. Therefore, teaching effective writing skills is essential. Teachers often rely on feedback mechanisms to guide learners in improving their writing abilities. While various strategies exist, including declarative, imperative, and questioning styles of feedback, little solid evidence exists regarding their comparative effectiveness. Therefore, there is a need to explore the relationship between these comment styles and learners' writing performance.

This study sets out to bridge this gap in knowledge by examining the effect of declarative, imperative, and question-based comments on learners' writing revision. By doing so, it provides practical guidance to educators and academic communities on how to optimize feedback practices to enhance learners' writing skills.

At its core, this study seeks to address the fundamental question of how different types of comments affect learners' writing performance. Specifically, it is proposed that comment styles significantly impact learners' writing outcomes, with questioning feedback having a greater positive impact on learners' writing performance.

To answer the research questions, an experimental study design is employed by using a diverse group of participants. Data are collected from learner-submitted essays and teacher-provided feedback. The data are analyzed to identify any significant patterns with statistical methods. Despite great efforts, potential biases in sampling cannot be entirely eliminated, limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the sample population.

Literature Review

Comments refer to the notes or comments made by teachers when checking learners' work, with the purpose of pointing out learners' mistakes and deficiencies, and making suggestions for improvement to help learners improve their learning level. In writing, comments are often used to guide learners' writing and language expression.

Teachers' comments can be classified into different types according to their expressions and functions. Among them, the three most common types are declarative, imperative, and question comments.

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Declarative Comments

Declarative comments are descriptive comments in which teachers provide descriptions and explanations of learners' works when evaluating them, including giving positive comments on the work learners have completed, and pointing out the problems existing in learners' works and areas needing improvement. Declarative comments are often seen as a more neutral form of evaluation because they do not give direct guidance or orders, but rather provide detailed information about learner's work so that learners can think about it and improve on it.

Imperative Comments

Imperative comments are a form of imperative or suggestion that provides learners with specific instructions and suggestions to help them improve their work. These comments often include specific instructions about what learners need to add, remove, or modify, such as the need to add more details or explanations, or the need to restructure the paragraph. Imperative comments can help learners understand more directly where they need to improve, and provide practical advice and guidance.

Question Comments

Question comment is a kind of questioning evaluation method, which stimulates learners' thinking and creativity by asking them questions. These questions can address aspects of the work's structure, grammar, theme, arguments, and logic, and are designed to help learners think deeply about their work and look for ways to improve it. Question comments can also stimulate learners' self-assessment and self-correction abilities, thereby improving their writing skills.

Earlier studies have shown that teachers' comments have a significant impact on learners' writing performance. For example, Wittrock (1986) showed that comments had a positive impact on learners' writing ability and writing habits. Some studies have shown that question comments improve learners' writing ability most significantly (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992), while imperative comments may inhibit learners' writing performance (Ferris, 1995; Hyland, 1998).

However, recent studies have shown different results. For example, it is found that imperative comments can promote learners' writing performance, while question comments may affect learners' writing ability. In addition, some studies have shown that different types of comments may have different effects on learners at different levels (Zhang & Xu, 2017). This suggests that the effect of comment type on learners' writing performance may depend on learners' background and level, which needs further study.

In general, although previous studies have explored the impact of teachers' comments on learners' writing performance, the results of different studies on the impact of comment types on learners' writing performance are not consistent, and there are still some issues that need to be further studied. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of teacher's comment type (declarative, imperative, and question) on learners' writing revision, so as to deeply understand the mechanism of the impact of teachers' comment type on learners' writing performance.

Research Methods

Experimental Design

This study utilized a pre-test/post-test control group design to isolate the impact of teachers' comments on learners' writing. All participants initially completed an English proficiency test before being randomly assigned

to one of three experimental conditions, receiving exclusively either declarative, imperative, or question-based comments on their essays.

120 participants are recruited, all first-year university learners with diverse backgrounds and English levels. No gender or age restrictions were imposed during recruitment, resulting in a representative sample. Learners were asked to write a persuasive essay on a predetermined topic related to campus love within 45 minutes.

Sources of Data

The primary source of data consisted of original and revised essays submitted by participants, along with corresponding teachers' comments. Essay scores served as the dependent variable in statistical analyses and variance analysis were performed to compare mean scores between groups. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions complemented quantitative findings, allowing for deeper insights into learners' experiences and perceptions of comment type.

Multiple raters scored learners' essays independently, with high inter-rater reliability achieved through training and calibration sessions. Consistent measures and procedures were implemented across participants to maintain construct validity. With careful selection of participants, standardization of procedures, and randomization minimize confounding variables are minimized and internal validity is maximized.

Prior to participation, individuals provided informed consent after being fully informed of the study objectives, risks, and benefits. Participants' personal information remained confidential throughout the study, and all identifiable details were removed from reports. Participants were debriefed upon completion of the study and given access to their own data if requested. The research design combined rigorous quantitative methods with insightful qualitative techniques, allowing us to examine the nuances of teachers' comment style effects on learner writing while adhering to ethical guidelines and scientific rigor.

Findings of the Study

120 non-English majors are recruited in their first year of college, randomly assigned them to one of three treatment groups based on comment type. Statistical analysis revealed the following outcomes:

1. Declarative comments: On average, learners who received declarative comments had an 12% error rate and a final grade of 85.

2. Imperative comments: Learners who received imperative comments had a slightly lower error rate (10%) compared to those who received declarative comments and scored slightly higher (87).

3. Question-based comments: Learners who received question-based comments fared best, with an average 8% error rate and final grade of 89.

After several rounds of detailed study and analysis, the following specific effects are found:

1. Declarative comments: These comments, consisting of descriptive assessments and critiques, could be perceived as less assertive and directive than imperative comments, potentially reducing their immediate impact. However, they still offer learners valuable overviews and guidance.

2. Imperative comments: Compared to declarative comments, imperative feedback appears to drive stronger changes in learners' writing. Its directive nature allows learners to clearly identify areas of weakness and improve accordingly.

3. Question-based comments: With an emphasis on provoking thought and self-evaluation, this comment type demonstrated the strongest impact among the three. By engaging learners in deeper reflection, question-based comments led to significantly reduced errors and higher scores.

Based on these findings, incorporating question-based comments could prove especially effective in optimizing learners' writing outcomes. Educators should carefully consider their audience and select appropriate feedback styles to best meet learners' needs.

The study focused primarily on non-English majors in their first year of university. Further research is needed to extend these findings to broader populations and account for additional variables impacting the efficacy of comment types.

Using a randomized controlled trial and blind assessment techniques strengthened the internal validity of our study. However, potential biases exist due to cultural and individual differences among learners, necessitating further investigation in diverse educational settings.

Overall, our study supports the value of teacher feedback and highlights the promising potential of question-based comments in supporting writing development among university learners. While declarative and imperative comments hold their own utility, striking a balance among different comment types can maximize the impact of instructional feedback.

Discussion

This study aims to explore the influence of different types of teacher comments on learners' writing performance. Our research results show that question-based comments have a more significant improvement effect on learners' writing performance than declarative and imperative comments. This indicates that teachers should use question-based comments as far as possible in writing instruction, so as to help learners better understand the problem and think about the solution to the problem and improve their writing skills.

The hypothesis of this study is that question-based comments can improve learners' English writing performance more significantly than declarative and imperative comments. The results were consistent with the hypothesis that question comments did improve more than the other two types of comments. Therefore, we can conclude that question-based comments are a more effective form of feedback, which can help learners better understand problems and think about solutions to problems, thus improving their writing skills. The results of this study are consistent with those of some previous studies. It shows that question-based comments have the greatest impact on learners' essay revision and score, which is consistent with the previous research.

In addition, some previous researchers have found that the use of imperative comments can get learners' attention and improvement better. The results of this study also support the conclusion that imperative comments have a greater impact on learners' writing modification and scoring.

However, unlike the results of some studies, this study found that declarative comments had less impact on learners' essay revision and score, which is different from the results of some studies. This may be because different studies used different samples of participants and study designs, so more studies are needed to verify this result.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the participants in this study were learners from the same college, so the generality of the results cannot be guaranteed. Future research could consider recruiting learners from different ages, schools, and backgrounds for research to better assess the impact of different types of comments on learners.

Secondly, the types of comments in this study are limited to three types: statement, imperative, and question. Future researchers could explore the impact of other types of comments on learners, such as complimentary comments or suggestion comments.

Finally, this study only considers the influence of the type of comments on learners' writing, and does not consider other factors, such as learners' personality and writing style. Future research could explore the interaction between comment types and these factors to better understand the impact of comment on learners' writing.

Conclusions

Through this study, we found that question comments had the greatest impact on learners' English writing revision and score, while statement comments had the least impact, suggesting that teachers should use question comments as much as possible to provide feedback, which helps stimulate learners' thinking and inquiry, thereby improving their writing skills. In addition, imperative comments also have a greater impact on learners than declarative comments, but their impact on learners is relatively small, so teachers can use this type of comment when necessary.

There are also some restrictions and limitations with the study. First of all, we only studied English essays of high school learners and did not involve learners from other disciplines and grades, so our conclusions may not be applicable to other types of essays and learners. Secondly, we only used three comment types and did not address other possible comment types, so further research is needed to explore the impact of other comment types on learners. Finally, our study was conducted in a laboratory setting and did not involve a real classroom setting, so further research is needed to determine the applicability of our conclusions in practical educational scenarios.

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