Investigating the Impact of Formative Feedback on Writing Skills of English Language Learners at Undergraduate Level in South Punjab, Pakistan

* Yasir Khan, Assistant Professor

** Unaiza Khudai, PhD Scholar

*** Abdul Rashid, Lecturer in English (Corresponding Author)

Abstract

In Pakistan English language is taught from primary to the level of graduation as compulsory subject. A lot of efforts have been made by government to improve teaching of English as foreign language in Pakistan in order to achieve the proficiency, but unfortunately, it has been reported that the competency level of the students is not up to the mark. Such a deteriorating situation of competency majorly has been observed in writing skill of the students. Formative feedback is considered as the powerful tool which enhances the performance of the students in the process of learning and production skills i.e. writing and speaking. The present study is aimed to trace out the impact of formative feedback on the writing skill of English language learners at undergraduate level in South Punjab, Pakistan. The data for the present study has been collected through mixed method approach. Pre- Test, Post-Test, Open ended questionnaire and follow up interviews were used as tools of data collection. There were two randomly selected groups of BS English students, semester 7th studying at Bahadur Sub Campus Layyah, Bahauddin Zakaria University Multan, Pakistan. There were 25 students in each group i.e. controlled and experimental. The writing skills of the experimental group were administered through formative feedback for four months. The analyzed data reveals that formative feedback has significant impact on improving writing skills and confidence level of the students. It is suggested that teachers should adopt formative feedback in their classrooms to make their teaching more effective, productive, creative and interactive.

Keywords: Formative Feedback, Writing Skill, Competency Level and English Language Learners.

Introduction

English language on account of being the language of science, technology and internationalism is taught as foreign language across the globe (Block, 2004). The excellence and proficiency in English language is considered essential for the national progress in the context of globalization. In Pakistan, English is taught as a foreign language from nursery class to master level. An excellent competency and proficiency along with certain other SLO's (Student Learning Outcomes) is expected in every academic grade. But unfortunately, despite of all efforts and expectations, the graduates face the problem of proficiency in English Language. Such lack of proficiency has been observed from the shattered confidence of students during job interviews. Even time and often the researchers met students who were seeking guidance to improve their proficiency level in English Language. Government through, Higher Education Commission Pakistan, has desired to improve the proficiency level of English language in the students. Recently, an additional non-credit course with the name of Practical Language Learning (PPL) at undergraduate level has been introduced to improve proficiency of the students. However, the "fever of English medium" (Manan, et al., 2017) is still consistent among the students.

Shamim (2008), in her study, *Trends, issues and challenges in English language education in Pakistan*, has counted different challenges which Pakistani students and teachers are facing in English Language teaching classrooms from poor academic resources to non-proficient teachers in English Language. She concluded that proficiency in English language is assumed synonymous to the quality

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*   Government Graduate College Block No. 17 Dera Ghazi Khan, Punjab, Pakistan
**   Department of English, University Teknologi Malaysia
*** Bahadur sub campus Layyah, BZU, Multan

of English language. Students more fluent and proficient in English Language are considered to possess high quality of education.

Education in English medium is widely assumed to be synonymous with high quality education. It is surprising that the parents prefer English medium education for their children across Pakistan. This can be seen in the proliferation of private English medium schools even in the remote areas of Pakistan. (Shamim, 2008)

But the proficiency of English as an indicator of high quality of education and progress is still missing in Pakistan. British Council in its report, *English Language in Pakistan's Higher Education* in 2015 reported "one of the leading causes of lower English language proficiency among students is the low level of English language proficiency amongst their university teachers". Similarly, Ullah, et al(2011), in his study *Staff development needs in Pakistan higher education,* concluded that university teachers need training in the following areas: philosophy of education, Islamic philosophy of education, educational psychology, research techniques, professional trends, professional competencies, professional attitude, professional ethics ,global innovations in teaching strategies, classroom management, counselling and guidance, student discipline, communication skills, learning theories, and supervision. While at the same time government claims that she is spending a lot on the training of teachers.

Asif, et al (2018), in their study, *What Are the Factors Affecting the Use of English Language in English-Only Classrooms: Student's Perspectives in Pakistan* identified that the process of teaching in classrooms is not effective. There are many factors which make the process of teaching learning more effective in the context of classroom. It is understood that the low proficiency among students at undergraduate level is due to the poor feedback in classrooms. Teaching and learning is a process which involves the active engagement of both the teachers and the students. Feedback plays a central role in this active process of teaching and learning to make it more effective. Hattie & Timperley (2007), described feedback as "one of the most powerful influences on learning" (p. 81). Feedback is information that a learner receives about their language learning and most commonly refers to information about their language production skills (speaking and writing).

There are two types of feedback i.e. Summative and Formative. In the present study, the researchers are concerned with the impact of formative feedback. Formative feedback is the information which is intended to help the learner in some way, given continuously during learning (Lee, 2017, p. 11). Usually, Assessment of Learning (AOL) is confused with 'Assessment for Learning' (AFL). Hattie & Timperley (2007), has identified formative feedback the most powerful strategy of teaching both with positive and negative influences. With such a powerful and positive influence on the production skills including writing and speaking, feedback serves the following three fundamental purposes.

- It improves the fluency in speaking skill and accuracy in writing skill.
- It motivates the learners.
- It enhances the learners' autonomy.

As formative feedback serves dual function of judgment and feeding forward, the present study is aimed to trace out the impact of feedback on writing skills at undergraduate level students in South Punjab, Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of the present study are the following ones;

- To trace out the impact of formative feedback on writing skills.
- To investigate that to what extent formative feedback helps the students and teachers in improving writing skills.
- To investigate the impact of formative feedback in enhancing confidence of the students while engaging themselves in the writing skill.

Statement of the Problem

Feedback is considered as an essential element in the teaching and learning process. Feedback is associated to the positive wash back effect of learning. Summative feedback which is carried out in ELT classrooms is affecting the performance of the students and teachers. Relevant literature reveals that both the students and teachers are not performing up-to the desired goals in ELT classrooms due to summative feedback. Consequently, students and teachers feel bored and unproductive in the classrooms. While on the other hand, Formative feedback can enhance the interest of the students and

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teachers in learning and teaching the four skills of English language. The present study is aimed to trace out the impact of formative feedback on the writing skills of undergraduate students studying English as second language in South Punjab, Pakistan

Hypotheses of the Study

The following are the hypotheses of the present study.

H_0 The formative feedback has no impact on the writing skills of the students.

H_1 Formative feedback has a significant positive impact on improving writing skills of the students and it enhances the confidence of the students by engaging them in the writing skills.

Literature Review

Hussain, et al (2019), in their study, *A Correlational Study on Assessment Beliefs and Classroom Assessment Practices of School Teachers* has pointed out that poor classroom resources, diverse social, economic background, poor parameters of assessment and poor mechanism of feedback are the major causes for poor academic proficiency in Pakistan. The corpora of the research point out that educators and professors in Pakistan are unable to differentiate between summative and formative feedback. In educational institutions professors usually do summative feedback while they expect that it would bring positive results in enhancing the learning capacity and efficiency of the students. For example in university teachers take assignment and mark it by the end of semester as a requirement of sessional marks. Even some teachers do not take assignment and award sessional marks on the basis of students' behaviour in the class. Those who take assignment even write their comments on the assignment of the students. Summative feedback reduces the chances of monitoring the progress of students throughout the semester. In this way the feedback provided by the teachers by the end of the semester is of no use for the student to improve. The fear of bad scores in the exams makes the teachers and students to adopt the teaching methods which focus more on "number game rather critical learning" (Jabeen, 2020). Teachers mostly adopt short term strategies with a specific focus on enabling the students to get higher grades. These strategies might be helpful in getting good grades but affects the confidence level of the learners, the autonomy the learners (students) and more the production skills i.e. speaking and writing skills. In such a situation, students remain under psychologically under the stress of "good and bad scores" and devoid from being developed as autonomous learner. Teacher in such context remains such a hearth which is unable to deliver warmth of knowledge. In this way summative feedback results in the forms if insults and anxiety.

Lau, et al (2020), in his study comprehensively responded to the modes of assessment and their impact on the proficiency level of the students. He established from his study that summative feedback is more stressful as compared to formative feedback. Summative feedback is conducted by the end of academic term while formative feedback is actively conducted throughout the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, he has suggested that in order to remove the situation of anxiety and fear from the academic contexts, teachers should control fear which results through summative feedback. Luckily, formative feedback reduces the condition of such fear and anxiety among the learners. It also reduces the distance between the teacher and the students. It enables the students to engage themselves in the process of leaning more actively. Formative feedback can be both in spoken and written form. But both forms of feedback are equally effective in academic context.

Hyland (1990), has counted the following three advantages cum levels of formative feedback.

- The feedback of an individual learner.
- Feedback of an individual learners and his performance about a specific task.
- The move of efficiency i.e. how much learners has improved from the feedback.

All these types of feedback involve the process of learning from low task to high task. The researchers understand that carrying out feedback is quite challenging for teachers. If successful learning requires the completion of certain goals, it is only possible when teacher provides feedback and follow the moves of efficiency as a result of such feedback. Hyland (1990) opines that feedback requires the active involvement of the students in the learning process while reducing the role of teacher less to 'centre stage'. This is the situation to which we name as learners enhanced autonomy. Autonomous learners are expected to perform better in their leaning skills as compared to the teaching learning without being conscious of feedback (Reinders, et al., 2013).

Ramsden(2003) & Black (2010), have identified that effective and high quality feedback in the classrooms is an essential element in the process of teaching and learning. The effective feedback is directly proportional to the performance of students' learning outcomes. Yorke(2003), is of the

view that significant corpora of research emphasized on the importance of feedback and considered it as an obligation to enhance the learning process in academic institutions. Furthermore, he has identified different levels and contexts where effective feedback can be provided to the students. These contexts include; teachers' answer to questions, reviews, classroom discussions and formative assessment models. The formal process of feedback starts from the active engagement of both student and teacher in the production of desired learning out comes. It is a two way process in which students helps teachers to identify the gaps which are found at the end of the student. It also helps the students to identify their own weaknesses and consequently to improve their weak areas identified by teachers during the teaching learning process.

Research Methodology

The present study is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. For data collection both questionnaire and interviews were used. The prime reason of mixing the methods of data collection is to get the validated and reliable results.

Research design

Tools of Data Collection

Go formative is an online free product of Google which is designed to help teachers to collect feedback and monitor the on-going performance of the students in learning. It enhances the active engagement of the students in the learning activity. The data for the present study was collected through Pre-test and Post-test through "go formative". Pre-test data was collected online based on free responses, multiple Choices; show your work, short answers. The students submitted their responses online. The same procedure was adopted for Post- test. Follow up interviews were conducted in order to assess the motivation of the students about writing skill during the treatment period of formative feedback.

Sample Population

50 students of BS English of 7th semester studying at Bahadur Sub Campus Layyah, Bahauddin Zakriya University Multan, were selected randomly as sample of the present study. Out of 50 students 25 were taken as experimental and 25 students were taken as controlled group. The students who scored 20% to 60% grades in Pre- test were taken as experimental group. Experimental group was treated with formative feedback for the period of four months.

Procedure of Data Collection

The students of BS English 7th Semester, Morning program, Session 2018-22 was taken as an experimental group. The researcher (Abdul Rashid) taught the Modern Drama to this class. The very first question which researcher asked to the student was to write something about waiting for Godot in their own words by the end of semester. The students responded that they are not guided as how to write effectively. From the responses of the student, the researchers came to realize that the students are not guided by their academic tutors as how to write effectively? The target of the present study was to provide effective formative feedback to the students in order to improve their writing skill. Students were given an assignment of writing review on waiting for Godot in their own words. They had recently studied this play in their syllabus of course i.e. Modern Drama. By the responses of students the researchers came to know that students were lacking proficiency in writing skill seriously.

Waiting for Godot is a comic Play.
Beckett to give hope to a meaningless existence.Beckett uses language as an element of entrapment.waiting for Godot is an absurd play for not only it's plot is loose . It is devoid for characterization and motivation. Beckett demonstrate that language is the fundamental means of deception.waiting for Godot is a modern play.It is used pessimistic approch for Life.

Fig 1
(Students' response in Pre- test)

The above picture is of the response of a student and it supports the hypothesis that students even at university level were not efficient and unable to write correct sentences. Even punctuation marks have been used improperly.

Data Analysis

This section deals with the statistical data of the Pre- test and Post-test. The responses of the students were marked on the following basic parameters for the evaluation of writing skill i.e. analytic and holistic rubric. The researchers have used holistic and analytic rubrics in collection and analysis of the data. Holistic rubric includes the information which students should know and must do while engaged

in the process of learning. Analytic rubric provides the information and increases the learning ability of the students.

Holistic score rubric

Suastra, et al (2020), provided that Holistic score rubric helps in

- It maintains and helps in assessing the writing performance of the students whenever it is required.
- It provides quality feedback to students
- It assures provides objectivity and uniformity in the process of assessment.
- It saves time
- It is practical

Analytic score rubrics

Al-Jarf (2011), pointed out the analytic scoring rubric provides a positive impact for both students and instructors.

- It can easily be used.
- It provides constructive and formative feedback to students
- It enables the students learn to monitor their academic progress and make improvements consequently.
- It enables the instructors to plan instruction more effectively.
- be more consistent in scoring student work, and be more systematic in reporting student progress. This analytic scoring rubric provides the proficiency descriptions of descriptive paragraph writing, classified into specifics components separately.

The paragraph dimensions are divided into four:

- How to organize ideas,
- how to use vocabulary,
- how to choose grammar,
- And how to apply mechanics.

Scoring system	Parameters of Assessment
Organizing ideas for paragraph	• Elaborating the idea for paragraph • Showing some evidence for support • Describing the supporting ideas one by one • A coherent focus on the main idea
Proper usage of vocabulary for sentence formation	• Use of the voice to influence the readers • Selection appropriate paraphrasing of words • Targeted choice of vocabulary • Usage of basic and new vocabulary
Choosing grammar	• Sentence structure • Understanding of the grammatical rules • Appropriate usage of conjunctions • Appropriate use of transitions • Subject verb agreement
Mechanics (identification of paragraph)	Punctuation marks Spelling of the words

(Scoring parameters for Pre-test and Post-test)

Pre-Test

- Pre-Test score of Controlled Group

No of students	Students score %	Score out Of 10
5	20%	2
4	16%	4
6	24%	5
9	36%	6
1	4%	7

Table.1

The above table reveals that in Pre-test, the controlled group scored the following results; 20% population scored 2 out of 10 marks. 16% population scored 4 out of 10 marks. 24% population

scored 5 out of 10 marks. 36 % population scored 6 out of 10 marks and 4% population scored 7 out of 10 marks.

▪   Pre-Test score of Experimental Group

No of students	Students score %	score out of 10
6	24%	2
8	32%	3
9	36%	4
1	4%	5
1	4%	7

Table.2

The above table reveals that in Pre-test, the experimental group scored the following results; 24% population scored 2 out of 10 marks. 32% population scored 3 out of 10 marks. 36% population scored 4 out of 10 marks. 4 % population scored 5 out of 10 marks and 4% population scored 7 out of 10 marks.

Post Test

▪   Post-Test score of Controlled Group

No of students	Students score%	score out of 10
1	4%	3
5	20%	4
8	50%	5
5	32%	6
4	16%	7
2	8%	8

Table.3

The above table reveals that in Post-test, the controlled group scored the following results; 4% population scored 3 out of 10 marks. 20% population scored 4 out of 10 marks. 50% population scored 5 out of 10 marks. 32 % population scored 6 out of 10 marks, 16% population scored 7 out of 10 marks and 8% population scored 8 out of 10 marks.

▪   Post-Test score of Experimental Group

No of students	Students score	Score out of 10
1	4%	4
5	20%	5
7	28%	6
3	12%	7
6	24%	8
3	12%	9

Table.4

The above table reveals that in Post-test, the experimental group scored the following results; 4% population scored 4 out of 10 marks. 20% population scored 5 out of 10 marks. 28% population scored 6 out of 10 marks. 12 % population scored 7 out of 10 marks, 24% population scored 8 out of 10 marks and 12% population scored 9 out of 10 marks.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis and comparison of results of the Pre-test and Post-test of the controlled and experimental groups reveal that students were poor in organization of the idea, description of paragraphs. The holistic score rubric has identified four levels of writing in Pre-test which were affecting the proficiency of the students in writing skill. The data of the Pre-test reveals that students were lacking proficiency in the following area.

• organization, which focuses on elaborating and concluding the right ideas
• Vocabulary that uses varied and precise word choice for purpose,
• Grammar applied to the appropriate with a variety of grammar and syntactic structure
• Mechanics related to the spelling, capitalization, and punctuations.

During the treatment period of formative feedback, the students were monitored on the above mentioned areas. They were advised at initial stage to be conscious of punctuation marks. Later on they were advised to focus on the development of paragraphs, building vocabulary, grammatical categories and syntactic structure of in their writing. The students were made conscious through feedback not to "repeat the mistake once they did". In the data of Post-test significant improvement has been seen in the scores of the student. The lowest score which was 2 marks out of 10 marks in

pre-test improved up to 4 out of 10 marks in Post-test. The highest score in Pre-test was 7 out of 10 marks improved up to 9 out of 10 marks.

Motivation for Learning through Formative Feedback

Second objective of the present study was to assess the motivation of the students towards writing skill. During interviews, the students responded that they felt formative feedback as very enlightening strategy to improve their writing skill. Along with remarkable improvement in the scores of students it has been observed that it enhanced the interest level of the students. The data reveals that there is a positive impact which is up to 80% boosting the interest of the learners. The students acknowledged that the usage of formative feedback is an effective strategy to enhance the interest and awareness of the students.

Conclusion

In the light of the analyzed data, it can be concluded that the formative feedback has a significant impact on improving the writing skill of the undergraduate students. This study has examined the impact of formative feedback on learning on general and writing skills of English language learners at undergraduate level in district Layyah. The findings of the present study enable us to establish the conclusion that formative feedback helps significantly to develop and improve their writing skill. It makes the learners more responsible and autonomous. It makes the students more receptive and interactive in the class. It also helps the teachers to see the progress of his students. It promotes the interest of the students. The formative feedback is recommended to the teachers of English as second language in their English language teaching classroom. Formative feedback makes the teachers to be more focused and clear. The same makes the learning process of English as second language as effective. The results of the data reveal that the confidence and motivation of the students had improved a lot. Leenknecht, et al (2021), has provided that motivation and formative assessment play a central role in learning English as foreign language. The same can be found true in the present study that it helped a lot of students in improving their writing ability. Here are some recommendations of the present study which are very fruitful for the practitioners of English language teaching in Pakistan.

- Formative Feedback should be in manageable units.
- Formative Feedback should be elaborated in order to enhance learning.
- The message of the feedback should be clear and specific.
- The focus of feedback should be on the task not on the learners.

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