EFL LEARNERS' PREFERENCES FOR FEEDBACK TYPES FOR THEIR WRITTEN PRODUCTS

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Abstract: In recent years, while research on various feedback types has gained increasing interest, the studies investigating language learners' preferences for the effective feedback type and amount which complement with their needs in writing skill have been neglected. Furthermore, existing research merely focused on learners who have high level of language proficiency in ESL context, but ignored the preferences of EFL learners who have lower level of language proficiency. In this sense, the current study aims to examine EFL learners' preferences for the effective feedback type and amount for writing skill. For this purpose, the participants of the study were selected among low level EFL learners. As part of the data collection procedures, a questionnaire including yes/no, Likert Scale; and open ended items based on qualitative and quantitative research design was administered to learners to collect data and the findings imply that EFL learners prefer to receive feedback for their errors.
Key words: EFL learners, writing, feedback, preferences.

INTRODUCTION

While feedback is commonly defined as the informing process about expected outcomes based on the learners' language production (e.g., Mory, 2004), it is suggested to be a significant element in language teaching and learning, therefore, an opportunity for learning by leading students to develop their future performance (Knight & Yorke, 2003). To this end, feedback is one of the key elements of language teaching for the improvement of learners' spoken and written production. Since feedback has been a popular research area for both speaking and writing skills, studies have been conducted to improve feedback practices. While the research has focused on timing of the feedback (immediate or delayed feedback) (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008) or the effect of corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009a; 2009b; Sheen, 2007), a limited number of studies have focused on learners' preferences for the types of corrective feedback (eg., Armhein & Nassaji, 2010), so taking little research on language learners with low proficiency level into account, the current study aims to contribute to the understanding of preferences of these learners.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. The notion of feedback

Feedback which can be defined in various ways and specifically refers to "an attempt to draw learners' attention to problems in their writing" (Shintani, Ellis & Suzuki, 2014, p. 105) and particularly corrective feedback that is defined as "any feedback provided to a learner, from any source, that contains evidence of learner error of language form" (Russell & Spada, p. 134) have been prominent research topics in second language learning as they are regarded among ways to improve learners' ability in the language. In terms of writing skill, corrective feedback can be provided to learners in two ways, namely direct corrective feedback such as crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme and indirect corrective feedback such as underlining or circling the error; recording in the margin the number of errors in a given line; or using a code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is (Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

The effectiveness of feedback on writing skill has been investigated extensively and various findings have been revealed. For instance, a number of studies have focused on the effect of feedback in a general way (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, & Anderson, 2010; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In this sense, one of these studies, the study of Truscott and Hsu (2008) which was carried out with 47 EFL graduate revealed that students who received feedback were more successful in writing than the control group who did not receive any feedback. The effect of revision has also been explored (e.g., Bruton, 2009; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). To this end, it emerged in the study of Truscott and Hsu (2008) that revision of the written products had no effect on students' success in writing. Furthermore, a great number of studies have been conducted to examine the effects of focused and unfocused written corrective feedback on the learners' grammatical accuracy (e.g., Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Evans, Hartshorn, & Strong-Krause,

2011; Sheen, Wright, Moldawa, 2009) and they concluded that students who receive focused written corrective feedback achieve the highest accuracy scores (e.g., Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). Additionally, studies have been conducted to explore the effects of different feedback types (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener, Young, Cameron, 2005; Chandler, 2003). For example, Chandler's (2003) study that was carried out with 31 conservatory students revealed that direct feedback and underlining of errors are better than other feedback types such as explaining the type of error. Yet, the study of Bitchener and Knoch (2009) has revealed no significant difference in the effect of different feedback types such as direct corrective feedback and metalinguistic explanations. On the other hand, a limited number of studies have focused on teachers' and learners' views about the feedback types (e.g., Carless, 2006; Lee, 2004; Ormond, Merry & Reiling, 2005; Poulos & Mahony, 2008; Armhein & Nassaji, 2010) as also stated by Poulos and Mahony (2008): "Few studies have been identified in which the research focus is specifically on students' views of feedback." (p. 144) These studies have suggested that students' preferences for a feedback type have significant impacts on their learning. In this sense, if a student prefers a particular type of feedback, he or she may tend to focus on the feedback provided by using this type (e.g., McCargar, 1993; Schulz, 2001, in Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010). In other words, students are selective in their preferences for the type and amount of the feedback even though it is suggested in the literature that direct corrective feedback is only effective for certain types of errors (Sheen, Wright & Moldawa, 2009). For example, it is suggested in the previous research that direct explanations on structural and lexical errors and comments on content are preferred by the students for their errors (e.g., Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985; Woroniecka, 1998; Ashwell, 2000; Leki, 1991; Ziv, 1984 as cited in Armhein & Nassaji, 2010). On the other hand, a few studies have indicated that students find indirect correction such as underlining and coding more effective than the other types. (e.g., Lee, 2005) With regard to varied research findings, it can be implied that there is still a need to investigate students' preferences. Considering that most of the studies conducted have been carried out with ESL learners (Armhein & Nassaji, 2010; Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005) with high level of proficiency (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010;Ellis et al, 2008; Hartshorn et al, 2010), therefore, the current study aims to contribute to better understanding of preferences of EFL learners' with a low level of proficiency for amount and type of feedback. With this regard, the following research questions will be addressed.

1. What amount of feedback do EFL learners prefer for their written products?
2. What types of feedback do EFL learners prefer for their written products?
3. For what types of errors do EFL learners prefer correction in their written products?

THE STUDY

3.1. Setting and Participants

Due to convenience and eligibility issues, Bülent Ecevit University, School of Foreign Languages has been selected as the setting of the current study. Therefore, participants consist of 120 EFL learners studying at the Department of Basic English of the same school. The learners obtain a one-year long language education before they carry on their studies in their own departments and their proficiency is determined by a proficiency exam administered at the beginning of the academic year. The students failing the exam with a lower grade than 60 are placed in classes appropriate for their language levels which range from A1 to A2 and they obtain approximately 26 hours of language instruction in an integrated course design in which writing skill constitutes 15% of the whole distribution of language knowledge and skills a week. In writing classes, the learners are provided with various authentic writing tasks and genres based on real life and their writing skill is assessed in proficiency exams administered at regular intervals. Additionally, with new trends and approaches, one of the alternative assessment tools, portfolio, has taken its part in this language program. Thus, learners are involved in the assessment process by self-evaluating their progress in writing. Implementation of portfolios proceeds in this way: Students write their assignments, teachers give feedback to their assignments by using correction codes and students revise their assignments in light of the correction codes provided, finally keep their written products in their portfolios. At the beginning of each academic year, students and teachers are informed about this process through norming sessions and explanations. Students evaluate their own progress at the end of each term and their grades combined with teachers' grades constitute 5% of total proficiency scores at the end of the year. In order to provide variety in procedures related to writing skill and gain the utmost use of alternatives, new ways are searched in the school. Therefore, implementation of different feedback types has been a fruitful experience for the purpose of finding better ways of giving feedback by focusing on students' preferences at the school.

3.1. Material

As the data collection tool, the questionnaire of Armhein & Nassaji (2010) was adapted following getting permission of the authors to use the material since it was appropriate for the context and likely to be an effective tool to collect data in light of the aim of the study. With this regard, the questionnaire includes closed ended

(Likert-scale, Yes/No) items that constitute quantitative data and open ended items that constitute qualitative data of the study.

3.2. Research Design

In order to investigate students' preferences in depth and obtain more reliable and valid data both quantitative and qualitative research designs were used in the present study. Besides, getting students' preferences in a 5-likert scale question type, open ended and Yes/No questions were used to analyze the reasons for their choices. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was used for descriptive statistics and percentages of the analyses. As for the qualitative data analysis, students' explanations for each choice were analyzed through thematic analysis. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were organized in tables and figures.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire includes items about the amount of feedback and types of feedback. Considering that the first question of the questionnaire is related to the first category, findings are listed as follows:

4.1. Amount of feedback

In order to examine students' preferences for the amount of feedback provided, the question "*If there are many errors in your writing, what do you think your English teacher should do?*" (M=1.12, SD=.53) has been asked to the students in the questionnaire and the findings suggest most students (N=113, 94.2 %) prefer that all mistakes are corrected by their teachers. Learners' preferences for this choice and the other choices are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: *Learners' preferences for the amount of feedback*

Preferences for the amount of feedback	Frequencies	Percent
Teachers should mark all errors.	113	94.2 %
Teachers should mark all major errors but not the minor ones.	3	2.5 %
Teachers should mark most of the major errors, but not necessarily all of them	2	1.7 %
Teachers should mark only a few of major errors	1	.8%
Teachers should mark only the errors that interfere with communicating your ideas	1	.8%
Teachers should mark no errors and respond only to the ideas and content.	0	0
	Total 120	Total 100 %

As illustrated in the table, 94.2 %, in other words 113 students prefer that all of their errors are corrected by their teachers. When qualitative data have been analyzed, it emerged that the reasons for their preference are that they find it more useful and effective as it both explains the errors better and enhances self-evaluation. Furthermore, according to the students, it prevents misunderstanding since errors can be noticed easily and reduced. They also suggest that as it provides an opportunity for revision of grammar, every grammar point should be focused on. Since these learners have a low level of proficiency (A1 and A2) they think that all mistakes are corrected is highly effective for their learning. In this aspect, the findings are in line with Lee's (2004) study and the study of Armhein and Nassaji (2010) in which students have stated that they prefer to receive feedback for all of their errors. However, in the current study, the students suggest that this feedback type can be changed as language proficiency gets higher, which is in line with what Knight and Yorke (2003) have suggested. According to Knight and Yorke (2003), students should have the chance of receiving feedback appropriate for their learning.

As also demonstrated in Table 1, 7 students also prefer other options. The reasons for their preferences are as listed:

- Teachers should mark all major errors but not the minor ones. (2.5 %)
Students can correct minor errors themselves.
-Teachers should mark only the errors that interfere with communicating your ideas. (.8%)
Since communication is of great importance, these types of errors should be marked.

Regarding the preferences for the amount of the feedback, the other question has been concerning repetition of the errors and teachers' corrections. Most of the students (91 %) have answered the question "If you repeat the same error in a writing assignment more than once do you think it is useful for your teacher to mark it every time it occurs?" (*M*=1.12, *SD*=.39) "Yes" while the percentage of the answer "No" is only 9%. However, students have not explained the reasons for their preferences. As conclusion, considering the amount of feedback, the findings of the study suggest that these learners prefer written corrective feedback for all of their errors in their written products since they think they can learn better by analyzing their errors.

4.2. Types of Feedback

Besides the amount of feedback, students' preferences for feedback types for their written products have also been investigated in the study. To this end, students have been provided with the options of *clues or directions on how to fix an error, error identification, correction with comments, teacher correction, commentary, no feedback on an error, and a personal comment on the content* and their preferences for each option have been analyzed. Table 2 illustrates EFL learners' preferences for feedback types for their writing assignments.

Table 2: *EFL learners' preferences for feedback types for their writing assignments*

Feedback types	useless	not useful	doesn't matter	quite useful	very useful
clues or directions on how to fix an error (*M*=3.56, *SD*= 1.36)	12 10%	21 17.5%	14 11.7%	34 28.3%	39 32.5%
error identification (*M*=2.4, *SD*=1.31)	37 30.8%	38 31.7%	16 13.3%	18 15%	11 9.2%
correction with comments (*M*=4.03. *SD*=1.13)	5 4.2%	9 7.5%	18 15%	34 28.3%	54 45%
teacher correction (*M*=3.32, *SD*=1.24)	12 10%	18 15%	34 28.3%	31 25.8%	25 20.8%
commentary (*M*=3.33, *SD*=1.34)	18 15%	13 10.8%	28 23.3%	33 27.5%	28 23.3%
no feedback on an error (M=1.41, SD=1.04)	100 83.3%	7 5.8%	3 2.5%	4 3.3%	6 5%
a personal comment on the content (*M*=2.03, *SD*=1.29)	61 50.8%	21 17.5%	21 17.5%	7 5.8%	10 8.3%

As shown in Table 2, among these varied answers, it has emerged that the most preferable type of feedback is *correction with comments* since 54 out of 120 learners (45% of all) have regarded it as very useful and the qualitative data revealed that students find it useful as they think this feedback type enhances permanent learning. Apart from *correction with comments,* the second most preferable feedback type has been *clues or directions on how to fix an error with* 39 students (32.5 %) and encouraging discovery, providing an opportunity for revision and variety in the feedback types, enhancing studying and permanent learning are the positive aspects of the feedback type noted by the students. One student has explained his/her choice by using the proverb "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime." On the other hand, a number of students have expressed drawbacks of the feedback type as follows:
 -Clues are sometimes incomprehensible and not clear enough.
 -Students do not research their errors in the book, so it is not effective especially for lazy students.
 -Since there is no focus on the error, it is not useful.
 - Looking up the errors is time consuming.
Considering qualitative data for other feedback types, it has emerged that students do not prefer error identification since the error is not clarified, it is not useful. Similarly, they do not prefer overt correction by the

teacher as it is not effective and students write the corrected form without thinking. As for the comment with no correction, one student has indicated that "Crack in the wall plaster is not excreted without being seen". Concerning no feedback on an error, a huge number of the students (N=100, 83.3%) find it useless indicating that they prefer being corrected. Lastly, considering personal comment on content, data have revealed that learners do not prefer it since they think it can be indulging and offensive, also not content but the errors should be given feedback.

While a number of the findings are in accordance with the study of Armhein and Nassaji (2010), a few of them are different. For instance, both studies have revealed that majority of the learners prefer correction with comments. However, while the learners in the current study have found teacher correction as an ineffective type of feedback, the participants in the study of Armhein and Nassaji (2010) have found this feedback type effective. The findings indicate that participants in each setting are aware of their needs and learning process as they can comment on what may be an effective practice for them.

The other question related to preferences for the error type has been *"If there are many different errors in your written work, which type(s) of error, do you want your English teacher to point out most?"*. The options provided and students' preferences for them are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: *Students' preferences for type of error that they would like to receive feedback*

Type of error	Useless	not useful	doesn't matter	quite useful	very useful
Teacher points out organization errors paragraph structure, sentence order) (M=4.35, SD= .88)	3 2.5%	1 .8%	12 10%	39 32.5%	65 54.2%
Teacher points out grammatical errors (M=4.63, SD=.69)	1 .8%	2 1.7%	3 2.5 %	29 24.2%	85 70.8%
Teacher points out content/idea errors (M=3.84, SD=1.20)	7 5.8%	13 10.8%	17 14.2%	38 31.7%	45 37.5%
Teacher points out punctuation errors (M=3.62, SD=1.21)	9 7.5%	12 10%	30 25%	34 28.3%	35 29.2 %
Teacher points out spelling errors (M=4.26, SD=1)	4 3.3%	4 3.3%	12 10%	37 30.8%	63 52.5%
Teacher points out vocabulary errors (wrong word choice, wrong meaning) (M=4.62, SD=.63)	0	0	10 8.3%	26 21.7%	84 70%
Total	120				

As illustrated in the table, students have different preferences for the type of error that they would like to get feedback. To start with, 85 students (70.8%) prefer to receive feedback for their grammatical errors. Secondly, majority of the students (N=84, 70%) prefer feedback for their vocabulary errors as they state that corrective feedback on vocabulary and content is significant to improve their language. Considering the findings, it can be concluded that learners are aware of their choices and the reasons for them, which may be supported by the literature: If a student prefers a particular type of feedback, he or she may tend to focus on the feedback provided by using this type (e.g., McCargar, 1993; Schulz, 2001, in Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010)

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In recent years, with the improvements in language teaching and changing shifts, language learners' communication and real language use have been of great importance. Therefore, new ways have been sought to improve their language production. As for learners' written products, learners have been encouraged to use real language in authentic contexts and writing skill has been an ongoing process in which students are involved to correct their errors, therefore, improve their skills. In terms of corrective feedback, various studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the amount and types of it (e.g., direct or indirect corrective feedback, error identification, and comment on content). While these studies have commonly focused on the effects of written corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy, only a little research has focused on teachers' and students' views about these feedback types (e.g., Armhein & Nassaji, 2010). These studies have revealed that learners tend to have positive attitudes towards corrective feedback and they have different feedback preferences. However, as the research has focused mostly on ESL learners with high level of proficiency, new studies are necessary to understand learners' preferences from different perspectives. Therefore, the current study has aimed to examine feedback preferences of EFL learners with low level of proficiency. In this sense, these learners were administered a questionnaire adapted from Armhein and Nassaji (2010) including items

about their preferences for the amount and types of feedback and types of errors that they would like to receive feedback on. The findings revealed that students prefer to receive corrective feedback for all of their errors as they think it is important to notice all the errors to learn better. Furthermore, regarding their preferences for the feedback type and the type of their errors that they would like to receive feedback, it has emerged that they have different preferences, which indicates the significance of providing variety in the methods and techniques employed in language classes as each individual differs in needs and learning styles. One of the important findings of the study is that a huge number of students have negative thoughts about overt correction by the teacher as they think it is no use for learning, which suggests that it is of great importance to encourage students' active participation and critical thinking in learning teaching process. Thus, teachers should involve students in learning practices and provide opportunities for discovery learning. Furthermore, as for the types of the errors students would like to receive feedback on, the findings have revealed that students prefer receiving feedback for their vocabulary and content errors, which implies that students are aware of their needs and learning process.

Overall, the study provides significant findings and implications about the discussion of the written corrective feedback in language teaching by revealing EFL learners' preferences for amount and types of feedback for their written products. However, it may not be possible to generalize the findings since they only reflect the case of a particular setting and context. Therefore, more research is needed to enrich understanding of the related research with new participants and contexts. As a conclusion, implications of the current study and the future studies are likely to contribute to future practices in language learning and teaching.

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