The Use of Correction Codes in the Development of Students’ Writing Skills

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Introduction

This is an investigation into the use of correction codes in the development of students’ writing skills. This topic was chosen because of my observations in English classrooms in UAE government schools, where I noticed that students do not have the chance to write independently or to self-correct their work. This means that students are not encouraged to be independent learners. They rely on teachers who provide models of writing for them to copy from.

This research was carried out in a preparatory level girls’ government school in a city in the UAE. While the school caters for students from Grade Six to Grade Nine, students from Grade Eight were chosen as research participants because this was the level I was teaching. These female pupils began learning English in Grade One. They are a mixture of Emirati students and expatriate Arab students, and are between thirteen and fourteen years old.

Their classroom context is not a print rich environment, as the walls are empty and there are no displays in the classrooms. Students speak Arabic as their first language, and English language is studied in school as a foreign or second language. Generally, English is taught to these students in a traditional way, which is teacher-centered, and learners are not given the opportunity to participate and be actively engaged in the lessons. My teaching experience in UAE schools suggests that students are not taught how to write with appropriate punctuation, spelling, grammar, text organization, capitalization and word order. They typically write a whole essay in just one paragraph, and they make lots of mistakes with their verb tenses. As a result of these observations, I decided to implement the use of a writing correction code, in order to develop their writing and to promote self-correction.

Research Questions

Because of my observations regarding the teaching of writing in English class in school, I decided that the implementation of a correction code might be helpful in developing students’ writing, and I sought answers to three specific questions in this regard:

- How can correction codes be best used in the ESL classroom in a UAE school?
- What are the effects of using correction codes on students’ writing?
- What are some effects of using correction codes on students’ ability to write independently?

Literature Review

Existing literature regarding the use of written correction codes was reviewed. Four themes emerged from my reading, and they are as follows: summative and formative assessment, learner autonomy, writing in the ESL classroom, and self-correction.
Summative and Formative Assessment

Assessment is “the process of collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting information to aid in decision making” (Airasian, 2000, p. 10). Similarly, Payne (2003) defines assessment as “the interpretive integration of application tasks (procedures) to collect objectives-relevant information for educational decision making and communication about the impact of the teaching-learning process” (p.9). This means that assessment is a form of collecting data which has meaning when making judgments on students’ learning. On the other hand, Moon (2000) suggests that assessment is “a way of providing feedback on learning and teaching” (p.148).

These authors highlight two different purposes in assessing students. One purpose of assessment is collecting data and information in order to measure students’ progress and achievement. Teachers also collect data from students’ work in order to give them feedback on their learning. Therefore there are two main types of assessment: summative assessment and formative assessment. Summative assessment, as Payne (2003) states, is “the use of evaluation data to determine the effectiveness of a unit, course, or program after it has been completed” (p.579). This means that summative assessment is done at the end of each semester or year because the teacher wants to check if the students are able to go to the next level. Moon (2000) notes that summative assessment “happens only periodically, e.g. at the end of a term or year or period of study. It takes place when the teacher or someone else wants to check whether pupils have achieved certain goals or targets, usually through a test or exam” (p.152). Formative assessment, on the other hand, is defined by Cameron (2001) as assessment that “aims to inform on-going teaching and learning by providing immediate feedback” (p. 222). So, formative assessment is when a teacher gives students an assessment task during the course or the term with direct feedback, whereas summative assessment is done at the end of the course or the year. In this study, the use of assessment is for formative purposes, because the focus is on student self-correction where students correct their mistakes by themselves, and it is used throughout the semester.

Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is an important concept in education. Boud (1988, p.18) cited in Benson and Voller (1997), believe that “A fundamental purpose of education is assumed to be to develop in individuals the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do” (p.4). Learner autonomy is when the students are independent and responsible for their own learning. I think EFL teachers should encourage or promote learner independence, and I think there is a link between autonomy and motivation. My opinion is that if learners are highly motivated in their learning, they will be more responsible and independent, and Benson and Voller (1997) point out that “students’ willingness to act independently depends on the level of their motivation and confidence” (82).

Correction Codes

Riddell (2001) states that teachers can use correction symbols (correction codes) to
feedback to students on their writing (2001, p 157). Teachers can underline the errors to signify the mistakes and write the symbols for these mistakes in the margin. Then students can correct the mistakes by themselves (p. 157). Hedge (1988) suggests that teachers can indicate “an error and identify the kind of error with a symbol, e.g. wo = wrong word order” (p. 151). This means that teacher can use correction codes when feeding back on writing tasks and then students should find out the errors they made from the symbols and re-write it again with the corrected mistakes. This strategy “encourages learner independence” (Riddell, 2001, p 152), and students become more responsible for their learning. Also I think students can learn better from their mistakes and when they correct their work by themselves.

Methodology

This study uses action research methodology to investigate the effects of providing feedback on students’ writing in the form of correction codes, in order to develop young learners’ writing skills. The theoretical framework that guided this research is the ‘teacher as researcher’ action research framework focusing on a small-scale, classroom-based teaching intervention. According to Richards (2003), “Action research has two essential elements: to improve and to involve” (p. 24). In this case action research was implemented to improve students’ confidence in writing and to develop their self-correction skills.

Implementation of the Action

During the first semester, I gathered information about students’ attitude toward writing by observing the students during their classes, conducting a questionnaire, and having discussions with the students. Also, I introduced the idea of correction codes by showing the students an example of a teacher’s feedback on a written text which had a correction code focusing on spelling errors only. I did not introduce them to all the other correction codes at that stage because I was afraid it might confuse them.

During the second semester, I gave each student a portfolio to keep all her written and re-written draft work. Then I asked the students to write the first essay on the topic, “What did you do during your holiday?” Before asking them to write the essay, I discussed the topic with the students and elicited some information in order to plan for the writing before starting. I also showed students how to correct their mistakes. Once I had checked their writing, I gave it back along with the codes and their meaning, and gave them an error recording sheet, where students had to count how many errors they had made. After implementing this strategy I conducted another questionnaire and interviewed some students to find out the students’ feeling about using the correction codes.

Data Collection Tools

In order to examine the effects of the use of a correction code with these students, I collected different types of data to answer my research questions. According to Mills (2003), researchers should “Collect data that is appropriate and accessible” (p. 51).
Therefore the data collection tools that I used were questionnaires, observations and documents.

Mills (2003) declares that “Questionnaires allow the teacher researcher to collect large amounts of data in a relatively short amount of time” (p. 63). Students were asked to complete a questionnaire during the sixth week of the teaching practice placement. I wanted to implement the new strategy, and then see how it affected the development of students' writing skills. This questionnaire was answered by the whole class of twenty five students, except one student who was absent for several days.

**Observation**

Observation was another tool that was used to collect accessible data for this action research project. The observations were conducted throughout the ten weeks of my Internship. There were no specific criteria that I followed to observe my students. I wanted to see my students’ reaction to the use of correction codes, in order to see if their use helped them to develop their autonomy and their writing skills.

**Samples of Students’ Work**

The third form of data that I used was samples of students’ writing. Students were asked to write three essays. Before writing any essay, we had a classroom discussion about the topic and the task. The main reason for using this type of data was to find if the students actually wrote independently or if they copied from the reading text.

**Interviews**

Agar (1980), cited in Mills (2003), states that “information from interviews can serve as the “methodological core” against which observational data can be used to “feed” ongoing informal interview” (pp. 168-169). Interviews with selected individual students were used to find out more information about students' attitudes towards writing and using the codes. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, as requested by the students.

**Data Analysis**

Data was sorted into three major themes that emerged from this study, themes that are in line with the research questions. These themes are: the development of writing skills, the development of autonomy; and increased motivation.

**Writing Skills**

By interviewing selected students, and by observing the class, I found that one student I interviewed liked the way I gave her feedback on her writing, by using the written correction codes. She mentioned that this helped her to recognise the mistakes she made so that she could correct them. I asked her a direct question which was:

*Teacher:* Did the correction codes help you to be more independent?

*Student:* Yes it helped me. Before, my English teacher when she asked
us to write an essay or a paragraph, I didn’t know if my writing is correct or not. I used to write the paragraph with lots of mistakes and I ask some one to correct the mistakes for me. But now with the writing code I search for the mistakes by myself and correct it by myself. And now I don’t need any one to help me to correct the mistakes for me; I can do it by myself. And from the codes I know what my mistakes are and correct it.

To find more about the role of feedback, I focused specifically on feedback during some of my lessons. By observing students during these classes, I found that students learned a lot from these classes, and it helped them to understand how to correct their mistakes.

I found that students were less likely to repeat errors and common mistakes. From the students’ writing I found that students did not repeat the same mistake they made in the previous writing. They corrected the mistakes by themselves, so it seemed that they had memorized the correct forms. Riddell (2001) says that “self-corrected mistakes are more memorable and less likely to be repeated” (p. 152). Speaking about how they learned to self correct, one of the students said:

Also sometime you teach us how to correct the common mistakes that all of us have, for example, when you correct the sentence “my favorite hobbies is writing, reading, ---” it was wrong and the correct one is “my favorite hobbies are ----” you said because here we are counting plural not singular so we have to use (are).

Autonomy

The second theme is the development of autonomy. Throughout my observations during my earlier teaching practice placements I noticed that students did not write by themselves; their teachers wrote the task on the board and they had to copy it. Students did not like this method because, as they say, they want to write by themselves, but they did not have the skills to do so. During the discussions with the students during the first semester, one student said “The teacher must give us the way how to write and the topic and then let us do it by ourselves.” It seemed that students had a genuine desire to develop as autonomous writers. When I gave them a writing task, and introduced them to the process of how to write, they were able to write by themselves. By talking to them, I found that students became more independent in their writing after they used the correction codes and when they found someone to encourage them. One of the interviewees said that the correction codes helped her to write by herself, and to be more independent through searching for her mistakes.

Motivation

The third theme was increased motivation. During the third interview, I asked the interviewee:

Teacher: How many mistakes have you got?”

Student: “For the first one I had from 8-9 mistakes but for the last one I
Students were motivated to reduce their mistakes. During the class, one student who was able to improve the number of her mistakes from thirty three errors to thirty, said:

Teacher next time you will see I will reduce my mistakes more I will get less that 30 mistakes.

She did indeed reduce her errors in the last piece of writing where she had only seventeen mistakes by contrast. When I talked to her and praised her by putting a star next to the total mistakes she got, she said:

Look teacher I told you next time I will reduce my mistakes and I will get less than thirty mistakes and I did it.”

When the researcher asked her what about the next time, she said “One day I will get zero mistakes and I will show it to you teacher.”

To find more about increasing students’ motivation, during the class I observed the students as they corrected their writing, and I heard one student say:

Now, if the teacher gave us any topic to write I can do it, it become more easier for me now after using the new strategy of correcting our own mistakes.

After hearing from this student I knew that students liked the strategy of self-correction, and I realised that they were motivated to write independently. This point was mentioned earlier in the literature review, when Benson and Voller (1997) were cited as saying that “Students’ willingness to act independently depends on the level of their motivation and confidence” (82). This data seems to suggest that if the teacher increases students’ motivation, sequentially the autonomy of learners will be developed.

Findings and Conclusions

The data collected from the action research observation lesson, from the questionnaire, the interview, and from the samples of the students’ writing appear to show that students were enthusiastic about developing their writing and writing independently. Students were motivated to reduce the amount of mistakes they made, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation. In order to be able to write independently, I found out that students used to ask someone to do their writing for them or help them with their writing, but now they can do it by themselves and they can write about any topic the teacher gives them.

Another finding concerns some weaker students who were not eager to learn English or other subjects, and who were also careless in their work. However, after implementing the writing correction codes, even the weakest students were eager to write and they were the first group to submit their writing to the teacher. These students were also motivated to reduce their mistakes. The most important findings are that students’ motivation increased; they improved their writing; and they were eager to write
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in order to reduce their mistakes. However, students seemed to like the correction codes themselves, more than the writing task.

The action research method that I followed had both advantages and disadvantages. The questionnaire, the observations, the interviews and collections of students’ writings helped me answer the questions of the research. However, sometimes while discussing with the students I found out that some of them were not quite honest with what they said. This was sometimes a problem: for example, when I started implementing the writing correction codes, I asked all the students if they had written the essay by themselves, and they said yes; and when I asked them if they corrected their mistakes by themselves, they also said yes. However, later in an interview with a group of students, I found out that there were students that were not being fully honest about this, probably because they wanted to please me as their teacher.

Despite this observation, I believe that by applying the correction codes students have developed their writing skills and this approach has worked very well with them. I believe that my students have benefited from learning how to write and by learning about the process of writing. I would suggest that all young learners in EFL classrooms in the UAE should have the opportunity to learn how to correct their own mistakes in order to develop their autonomy. In addition, teachers in EFL classrooms in the UAE need to employ a broader approach to assessment, where giving feedback is recognised as an important part of assessment, and where feedback techniques such as the correction codes are widely used.

Research such as this is needed in order to find more ways to improve Emirati students’ independent writing skills. I enjoyed doing this research because I have changed something in the students’ lives, and increased their confidence and self-esteem. This strategy was implemented with older students; but I would like to try it with younger primary learners in the future, in order to see the different effects of using correction codes. I also helped them to do what they really wanted to do, but for which they had not found someone to encourage them, which is writing by themselves. Students used to simply copy pre-written texts, but now they can write on any topic. I will seek out other opportunities for doing classroom-based action research such as this, and do further studies to improve my teaching.

References


