The Effects of Explicit Grammar Feedback on Student Writing

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Abstract. Grammar, the order and coordination of words in the English language, is essential to useful and elegant communication. This study addresses the effect of teacher feedback on student writing. Three groups of five freshmen students wrote three essays, and following teacher critique, revised the writing. Each group received different styles of feedback: explicit grammar corrections within the text, marginal notes without specific correction, or narrative teacher response. The results showed that all students improved their writing, but the group receiving a narrative response from the teacher developed a higher level of ideas and organizational structure within their writing.

1. Introduction

The multifarious aspects of English grammar require a successful teacher to deliberately give opportunities to students to use, incorporate, and generate new meaning from grammar instruction. While many studies seemed to agree that grammar instruction should be integrated into useful and relevant exercises for practice, little was mentioned about the effects of affective responses to student writing. Myhill determined that tacit knowledge was needed as well as explicit knowledge in order for students to write successfully [1]. For that reason, this study was undertaken to evaluate the effects of a teacher’s feedback on students’ writing, in particular focusing on three modes of teacher responses: 1) explicit grammar correction only, 2) marginal hints which pointed to mistakes in grammar, and 3) narrative teacher responses, which included affective responses to the students’ writings. Because of the emotional connections and the psychological impact of an authority, Simpson (2005) drew the conclusion that affective comments are just as effective if not more effective than corrections of grammar only [2].

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Experiment: Participants and Procedure

Fifteen students, aged 14 and 15-years, and representing a cross-section of grammar-proficient writers, participated in this study. Five freshmen participants were in each of the experimental groups. Students were first administered a base-line test to evaluate the level of grammar competency for each individual. Data was collected from the students’ standardized grammar test scores to form evenly matched groups. For the pre-study evaluation, each student wrote a prompt-based 100-word essay. Each grammar mistake resulted in a deduction of a point; therefore, if the student made fifteen grammar mistakes in the writing, the score was 85 (100 minus 15). For the following three weeks, students were assigned three writing assignments, completing a round of 1) writing 2) teacher response, 3) whole class instruction, and 4) student rewriting. For each assignment students wrote a minimum of 100 words in 25 minutes. Each essay was then evaluated according to the delineated teacher-response for the essay. Following the return of the initial responses, all students received whole-class grammar instruction in response to mistakes that were made in the students’ papers. Students then corrected the papers and resubmitted them. Two weeks following the round of three essay writing assignments, students wrote a post-study essay, which was not corrected.

Results

Throughout the instructional and feedback period of the three-weeks, the greatest gain seemed to be in the narrative-response group; however, the improvement shown by the grammar-only group was close, and since the experimental groups were small, could be considered statistically unremarkable. Furthermore, the narrative-response group started at a higher base level than the grammar-only group; therefore, the change is minor as compared to the improved change in the grammar-only group. The marginal-markings group seemed to mimic the trends of the narrative-response group, and spiked above the narrative-response group for the Essay #2 final score. The final post-study essay showed that the narrative-response group maintained a higher level of response, while the grammar-only group made gains through the essay instructional and writing
process, but dropped to a greater degree for the final post-test. Students getting narrative responses made a mean gain of +9%; the group receiving grammar only in-text markings made a mean gain of +8%; the group receiving marginal marks made a mean gain of +3.6%.

Discussion and Significance

Montgomery and Groat made the point that teaching students and responding to students’ needs took place when teachers carried on interactive discourse, which shifted teaching habits from “script-delivered” teaching to dialogue-based teaching [3]. All of the students made gains in correct grammar usage in their essays. The greatest difference in the three types of teacher-response and the effects those responses had on the writing of the students was revealed in the students’ perceptions of confidence in their own writing. In comparing pre-study to post-study writing pieces, students receiving narrative responses retained a higher level of competency from pre-study to post-study evaluations than the other groups. Grammar competency perceptions of the students were elevated in the grammar only group and the narrative response group, while the marginal marks group was frustrated.

3. Conclusions

The long-term consistency of grammar-correct writing tends to vary with the type of feedback a teacher gives to writing. Students respond more positively and show a greater long-term retention of grammar-correct writing when the instructor responds to writing in an individualized narrative manner. The long-term application of grammar rules tends to be inconsistent when rules are learned and applied outside of the investment of the student. Confidence in writing increases when the teacher personalizes affective responses to the writing.

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