Individual Learners' Development in EFL Writing at a Japanese Junior High School: Effects of Teacher's Feedback and Peer Responses on Their Performance

Instructions to improve junior high students' writing abilities have been neglected (Aoki, 2006, p. 7) because of the current emphasis on oral communication activities prescribed in the present Course of Study (MEXT, 1998) and because of the lack of lesson time which were allocated to writing instruction. These pedagogical trends were reflected in the results of the recent survey done by MEXT and by local boards of education; they indicated that scores in writing had not reached a satisfactory level. It is thus necessary to explore what factors contribute to L2 (English) writing performance on Japanese EFL junior high school students and how teaching writing can be improved.

One of the issues which are considered to contribute to the solution of the problems is the ways in which teacher feedback should be provided to the students writing. The previous studies conducted with the adult ESL learners in the United States suggested that indirect grammar corrections are more favorable to direct, overt corrections (i.e., giving answers) because indirect teacher feedback for learners play a role of guided learning (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lalande, 1982). Apart from the corrective feedback to improve grammatical accuracy in writing, written feedback (comments), which focused the meaning of learners’ written products, has been proved effective (Goldstein, 2004, 2005; Leki, 1990a). In addition, the roles of peer response activities in ESL writing classroom, in which learners share the meaning of their drafts actively and give their responses to their peers, have been focused on since 1980s (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

Currently, however, very little research on EFL writing has been conducted, especially, in the context of Japanese junior high schools, although much more studies with EFL learners at tertiary level can be found. The present study thus addressed the following research questions concerning the teaching of writing in the EFL junior high school context: (a) How would teacher’s feedback/comments enable learners to notice errors they made in their writing and eventually correct them by making use of resource materials, including bilingual dictionaries, a grammar reference book, and in-class newsletters which contained the students’ sample writing; (b) how would classroom social interactions, e.g., group and peer response activities, foster learner engagement in writing tasks and improve their writing; and (c) what factors contribute toward the development of learners’ skills and positive attitudes toward writing in EFL.

To answer these research questions, we conducted a five-month classroom research, in which the students in a public junior high school experienced passage writing tasks. In the writing tasks the students used various resource materials. 75 eighth-grade students volunteered to participate in the study and were taught by a male teacher in the school. All the tasks in the English lessons were jointly planned by the author and the teacher, who taught the lesson. The students’ writing were compiled in their notebooks, which were collected and feedback and comments were provided by the author. Direct corrective feedback was deliberately avoided because the previous literature suggested that mere corrections by the teacher would deprive students of their
chances to notice errors and would not lead them to renewed language awareness. In addition, teacher comments on the students’ drafts were given as feedback to encourage the students to be more involved in the writing tasks. During the tasks, group and peer response activities were introduced, which were expected to reduce students’ difficulties and create collaborative atmospheres in the classroom. At the end of the research, the author interviewed 25 students to understand their perceptions toward the tasks and L2 writing.

During 15 lessons, the followings were collected as data: (a) students’ written products; (b) feedback and comments (from both the author and peers) on the students’ written products; and (c) student interviews. The first and second were carefully categorized and the frequency of each feedback/response type were calculated. The results showed that the encouraging teacher feedback and meaning-based comments on the students’ writing were prominent. This clearly indicated that the author paid much attention to the contents of the students writing and process of the students’ writing rather than just correcting their grammatical errors (Chapter 3, Data Analysis 1). The post-task interviews were conducted to confirm the results of Data Analysis 1, which suggested that the students used teacher feedback/peer responses to improve their writing skills or increase their engagement in writing activities. One student’s interview scripts was analyzed by Grounded Theory Approach (Craighill-Saiki, 2006, 2008; Sato, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which revealed a dynamic relationship of important categories; e.g., “generating a sense of security in writing,” “taking the initiative in writing activities” and “writing as a means of communication with peers” (Chapter 4, Data Analysis 2).

Data Analyses 1 and 2 provided the following three findings:

1. As the indirect teacher feedback eventually made the students use resource materials frequently, some students showed their appreciation of their skill improvement (e.g., effective use of dictionaries), and also showed their fledgling sense of autonomous learning.

2. Open-ended, meaning-focused writing tasks and group and peer response activities allowed the students engaged in the writing activities. In particular, the students developed the sense of readership/authorship while collaboratively working on writing tasks, which were considered rather demanding for eighth graders.

3. Encouraging and meaning-based comments from both the author and peers not only reduced the students’ anxieties in making errors but also helped become independent L2 writers, as many students started to take risks and write more creative sentences. Moreover, this tendency was observed in advanced learners as well as novice learners.

The study revealed the effectiveness of indirect teacher feedback attached with the instructions to use resource materials effectively, and the importance of social interactions which engage learners in writing more cohesive passages in L2. In other words, the results indicated that even young adolescent learners in EFL context have the potential to acquire meaning-focused, cohesive L2 composition skills.

However, some pedagogical issues remained untouched such as: teachers’ feedback sensitivity, ways to reduce time-consuming feedback workload, and the need of long-spanned assessing framework (e.g., authentic assessment) of the students’ writing performance as it seems to fit the approach of process-oriented and meaning-focused L2 composition tasks.