UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

INSIGHTS FROM VERBAL PROTOCOLS OF ESL WRITERS' RESPONSE TO WRITTEN FEEDBACK

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By

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Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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DEDICATED TO

My beloved Amama

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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By

SHARON SHARMINI

February 2010

Chair: Dr. Vijay Kumar Mallan

Faculty: Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

Feedback is essential for the development of ESL writing skills. The responses that lecturers provide on students' writing are essential to encourage and develop students' writing. However, there is a paucity in the literature as to how students attend to feedback. This study investigated the thought processes of six ESL postgraduate students as they attended to written feedback. Using a case study qualitative approach, concurrent verbal protocols of the writers were recorded as they attended to written feedback. Written texts and lecturer comments supplemented the data.

The findings indicate that written feedback encouraged the writers to plan, justify, reflect and evaluate recursively. A second finding is that statement, question and imperative types of feedback encouraged recursiveness.

This study concludes by suggesting that it is important for lectures to be aware of the impact of feedback. The study also suggests that the think aloud method is useful as a tool in teaching ESL writing to help student writers to reflect on the feedback and develop their writing.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master of Arts

RESPONS MAKLUM BALAS BERTULIS DARIPADE PENULIS ESL MELALUI PROTOKOL LISAN

Oleh

SHARON SHARMINI

February 2010

Pengerusi: Dr. Vijay Kumar Mallan

Fakulti: Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Maklum balas adalah penting sekali untuk pengembangan kemahiran
menulis. Maklum balas yang disediakan oleh pensyarah adalah penting
untuk menggalakan dan membina kemahiran menulis. Walau
bagaimanapun, kekurangan maklumat dalam literature yang berkaitan
tentang bagaimana penulis bertindak selepas menerima maklum balas dari
pensyarah. Kajian ini menjelaskan bagaimana enam orang pelajar siswazah
mengenal pasti dan bertindak selepas menerima maklum balas. Penyelidik
menggunakan pendekatan kajian kes dan kaedah kualitatif dan data lisan
penulis telah dirakam semasa mereka menulis dan bertutur sambil bertindak
ke atas maklum balas yang diberikan. Di samping itu, teks yang ditulis dan
maklum balas yang diberikan oleh pensyarah telah diselidik.

Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa maklum balas menggalakkan
penulis untuk merancang, mengimbas kembali dan menilai semasa bertindak

berdasarkan maklum balas yang diberikan oleh pensyarah. Dapatan dari kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa maklum balas berbentuk kenyataan, persoalan dan imperatif mengalakkan penulis untuk menyemak dan menulis semula teks mereka.

Hasil dapatan kajian membuktikan bahawa adalah penting bagi pensyarah untuk sedar bahawa maklum balas mempunyai impak. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan bahawa metodologi "think aloud" adalah sesuai sebagai alat pengajaran untuk membolehkan penulis mengimbas kembali dan menilai maklum balas yang diberikan dalam pengembangan kemahiran menulis.

I also have deep gratitude for Dr. Wong for her support, intellectual contribution and interest in my research. She provided feedback that was intellectually prodding. I am grateful to her for her kindness and firm support.

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Last but not least, Mr. & Mrs. Victor Danarajan, my wonderful parents for always telling me to reach for the sky, and today I have touched the sky. Thank you for being there for me.

Finally, my adorable Amama who is with the Lord. She was the reason why I pursued my study. It was her dream to see me come up in life and would have been proud to tell the whole world that her granddaughter is somebody today. Though she is not here to share this special moment I can feel her laughter and see her smile of joy in my heart. Amama, I have done it!

APPROVAL SHEETS

I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 5th February 2010 to conduct the final examination of Sharon Sharmini on her degree thesis entitled "Insights from verbal protocols of ESL wirters' response to written feedback" in accordance with in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

Members of the Examination Committee were as follows:

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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Date: 15 July 2010

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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SHARON SHARMINI

Date: 24 November 2009

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TA   Think Aloud

LTM   Long Term Memory

WM   Working Memory

CE   Central Executive

STM   Short Term Memory

LTM   Long Term Memory

RT   Read Text

RF   Read Feedback

RD   Revised Draft

RRF   Re-read Feedback

FD   First Draft

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background to the present study. It discusses the research propositions and justifies the purpose of this research.

1.1   Background to the study

In the early 1970s, the focus of writing was on the product. A writer was assigned a written task and was graded on the teacher's discretion. The writers' development, moving from being an unskilled writer to a skilled writers was hardly the focus on writing instruction, as writers were not given the opportunity to revisit their writing, to add new ideas or information, or revise the language used in earlier drafts. In other words, writers were usually provided a summative evaluation of the written task. The role of formative feedback to guide a writer to master skills was not clearly evident in the product approach to writing. Researchers such as Janet Emig (1977) and Flower & Hayes (1981) however shed new light into writing as a process. The focus of research then shifted from product to the actual processes in writing, resulting in the notion that writing is not an end product to be evaluated summatively but as "an activity, a process, which a writer can learn how to accomplish" (Lawrence, 1972, p.3). This popular historical notion of writing as a process contributed professionalism to composition studies (Matsuda, 2003) where the process approach to teaching of writing

both in L1 and L2 became the norm. Writing instruction focussed on aspects of brainstorming, planning and rewriting. Hayes (1996) study on the writing process propagated the notion of recursiveness in writing. Formative suggestions became the order of the day with multiple drafts being requested of any given task. The notion of the development of the writer was clearly evident. However, the process approach to teaching came under serious scrutiny in the early 1990s. One of the reasons for this close scrutiny was the argument that the process approach did not take into consideration the social-cultural aspects of writing. This post-process era, also referred to as the "social-turn" shift, emphasised the social view of writing (Trimbur, 1994, p. 109). In the social view, writing is understood as a process of discovery that allows the writer to develop inner self-relationship with the social environment (Atkinson, 2003). Interestingly, this notion has been transferred to the ESL context too (Krapels, 1990; Susser, 1940).

Writing is indeed a complex task that requires a writer to orchestrate numerous stages of writing. For instance, a writer can be planning while revising the text or generating ideas while writing by considering a social cultural environment which is laden with expectations. In other words, the writer is moving back and forth and this process is called the recursive process in writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Three models of writing that encapsulate the recursive nature of writing are the Flower and Hayes (1980), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and the Hayes (1996) models of writing. These models highlight that the writing process is a distinctive thinking

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process where writers organize their ideas through various stages which are influenced by of socio-psychological dimensions. These models form the basis of the conceptual framework of this study.

Within the recursive writing process, feedback plays an intervention role. It should be recalled that, in the product approach, a summative assessment was the focus. In the process approach, drafts are required and this provides an intervention platform through the form of teacher feedback. In the post-process era, feedback took into consideration not only the goals that have been set for the writer, but also the expectations from a social point of view. As a result of this important and yet crucial role of feedback as an intervention and interactive tool, feedback has been claimed to be socio-emotionally situated in the learning process (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). It has also been argued that that feedback is a tool of communication loaded with information (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Having understood the development of writing from product to process and to post-process and the importance of feedback as a formative tool to achieve writing goals, this study considers writing as a recursive cognitive process which may benefit from intervention in the form of written feedback. This study investigates ESL writers' engagement with lecturer feedback by analyzing their thought processes. This study has two purposes: the first is to investigate what writers do when they attend to lecturer feedback. The

second is to ascertain whether the engagement with lecturer feedback encourages revision. To address these questions, writers' concurrent verbal protocols were collected as they attended to written feedback using the think aloud method. Detailed reports of the writers' thinking process were then analysed in conjunction with their drafts.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Research in the area of writing has traditionally focussed on the thought processes of writers by comparing skilled and unskilled writers across age and learning environments. These studies both in L1 and L2 have shed light on the strategies that both skilled and unskilled writers utilise when they write. It has been suggested that skilled writers consider an audience and plan when they write (Kumar, Kumar, & Feryok, 2009). However, unskilled writers usually engage in a liner form of writing focussing on the surface features. There has also been much research on the role of feedback in the writing process. Feedback is an important component of the teaching and learning process as it gives a sense of direction to achieve writing goals (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 2002). Studies on feedback have also identified how feedback may further develop subsequent writing (Ryan, 1997). A significant amount of research has been done on how lecturers could provide written feedback both in the first language (L1) context (Freedman, 1979; Hillocks, 1979, 1982; Smith, 1997; Straub, 1996) and second language (L2) context (Chaudron, 1984; Fathman

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& Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2004; Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 1996). A considerably amount of research has been carried out pertaining to the L2 learning context. The focus has been on the types of feedback (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996; Zamel, 1985) provided to writers, the effectiveness of feedback (Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986) in the composing process, and how writers react to the feedback they received on their drafts and final product (Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Kepner, 1991; Leki, 1990).

However, there has been very little research on how ESL writers perceive lecturer feedback (Goldstein, 2004; Leki, 1990; Reid, 1994). Lecturer feedback may not be effective all the time, for example, a writer may misunderstand the feedback. Thus, it is subject to miscommunication (Cohen, 1987; Heyden, 2004; Perpignan, 2003). While some of these studies sought to understand the perceptions of writers on the feedback they received from their lecturers, there seems to be little in the literature on what students actually do when they receive feedback. While perceptions may provide some insights into how writers feel about feedback, there seems to be a paucity of research as to how students actually attend to and engage with written feedback. One way to find this out is by tapping into the cognitive processes to gain insights as to how writers respond to lecturer feedback. What do writers do when they are engaged with lecturer feedback?

The think aloud method (TA) is a useful tool to capture these thought processes of writers as they attended to lecturer feedback. In this method, verbalizations, also known as protocols, are collected. The protocols provide evidence of how writers react to written feedback and organize their thoughts (Bracewell & Breuleux, 1994) as they attend to a task. This study, argues that an in-depth understanding of thought processes provides insights into feedback practices. Thus, it aims to investigate how writers responded to lecturer feedback particularly focusing on the writers' thinking process using the think aloud method.

1.3   Purpose and Scope of the Study

This study, attempts to investigate what writers do with lecturer feedback. Its purpose is to investigate the feedback process right from its inception. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do postgraduate ESL writers respond to written feedback?
2. How do postgraduate ESL writers make use of feedback in revising drafts?

It should be recalled that the think aloud method is used in this study to tap the writers' thought processes. It is argued that there is a paucity in the literature on studies dealing with the thought processes of students as they attend to feedback. In examining the role of lecturer feedback in student responses, Belanger and Allingham (2004) made use of verbal protocol to

gain an insight of the thought processes of students as they attended to written feedback on their drafts. The drawback of this study is that the verbal protocols were collected retrospectively. During this process, the participants would have reconstructed their thought processes and relied on the long term memory (LTM) to search for selective relevant information before transferring it to the short term memory (STM) for verbalisation. Therefore, the participants may have provided coherent processes rather than the actual deliberations in their thought processes. In other words, the researchers may have not gotten an accurate account of the thought processes.

On the other hand, concurrent think-alouds have been argued to provide direct insights (Wigglesworth, 2005) into the students' cognitive processes. This is because when the participants are doing a task simultaneously and thinking aloud, they are relying on their short term memory (STM). The data is collected while a task is being performed and the participants are spontaneously verbalising their thoughts without altering their cognitively processes. Kussela & Paul's (2000) study demonstrated that participants using the concurrent method reflect information processes from the STM. It has been argued that not all writers may be comfortable composing aloud and not all their thought processes may be verbalised but that verbalisation may lead to increased attention and deeper processing (Jourdenais, 2001).

The use of verbal protocols can be a rich source of data from which insights can be drawn. For example, Keys (2000) used this method to analyse 8th grade students' writing processes during science-related activities. Wade