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IRANIAN INSTRUCTORS' PERCEIVED AND ACTUAL ERROR CORRECTION OF EFL LEARNERS' WRITING: THE IMPACT OF THE INSTRUCTORS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION AND WRITERS' LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY

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October 2012

IN THE NAME OF GOD

Declaration Form

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Abstract

Iranian Instructors' Perceived and Actual Error Correction of EFL Learners' Writing: The Impact of the Instructors' Teaching Experience and Level of Education and Writers' Level of Proficiency

By

Babak Emami

The focus of this study was to investigate teachers' beliefs about and perceptions of errors and their actual error correction in the EFL context of Iran. The participants were 30 male and female English language instructors and professors with B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees who had already taught writing courses or had already been engaged in correcting students' writing tasks in universities including Shiraz University and Azad University of Shiraz as well as different language institutes. The materials and instruments of the study included three written compositions chosen by the researcher of this study and three professors at Shiraz University as representative writing samples of Iranian EFL students at three levels of proficiency (namely, low, intermediate and advanced) in an attempt to choose compositions maximally representing Iranian students' writing errors at each level of proficiency. Further, a 16-item questionnaire was developed based on the categories mentioned in Jacobs et al.'s (1981) rating scale to elicit information regarding the participants' perceptions of the importance of various types of errors (i.e., mechanics, structure, vocabulary, organization and content) before and after the task of correcting the writing samples. The findings of the present study indicated that among all the categories, errors pertaining to content were the main focus for almost all the raters. Additionally, it was found that the raters attached significantly greater importance to the errors belonging to the categories other than mechanics after actual error correction.

Key words: writing, error correction, feedback, teachers' beliefs and perception

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction

This chapter presents ideas and concepts related to the topic of the study as the background of the study, definitions of key terms and variables under study, the study objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study.

1.1. Preliminaries

Correction has been widely known as a vital component in the process of writing in both the first and the second language. However, whether revision leads to improvement in writing depends on not only the writer's ability but also the quality of the feedback that he or she receives from the raters. According to Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992), revision is a complex process carried out with varying degrees of success depending upon the writer's competence and the effectiveness of the instruction received. The importance of feedback is emphasized as it has a central and critical contribution to the improvement of a piece of writing. Feedback informs, permeates, shapes and moulds the writing process. It raises the writer's awareness of the informational, rhetorical, and linguistic expectations of the intended reader (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994).

Assessment of writing is not an easy task for teachers of writing and raters as well. It can be viewed as a time-consuming and complicated task. When assessing writing tasks where

human raters are required, raters' subjectivity may play an important role. Raters' biases towards student performances, their different perceptions of good writing and their cultural and professional backgrounds are all factors that can influence the rating (Cumming, 1998). In second language writing evaluation, much concern has been devoted to examining potential factors affecting students' writing performance and its assessment. Some important factors identified are the writing task, rater, test-taker's characteristics, topic, and scoring procedure (Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Weigle, 2002). Among these factors, writers and raters' characteristics can significantly affect the assessment of writing. For example, raters' background, mother tongue, previous experience and amount of prior training as well as the level of proficiency of the writers have been found to affect the rating of the written responses of students of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Santos, 1988; Weigle, 1999).

More specifically, while correcting and rating students' writing, raters may differentially take into account factors involved in the process of writing, and empirical studies have found differences in rater behavior in the case of ESL writing assessments (Bachman, 2000). It is also recognized that in reality teachers respond to students as well as their written texts so that their knowledge of a particular learner can often help them to see an error as a rare lapse or a recurring inability to grasp a rule and can thus lead them to mark the text differently. Therefore, in addition to the effect of the learner's grammatical knowledge, teachers' evaluation of students' writing seem susceptible to the influence of a variety of other factors including stereotyped expectations of students' ethnolinguistic identities (Rubin & Williams-James, 1997), their own training in ESL/EFL instruction (Sweedler-Brown, 1993) and even their perception of whether writers are native or ESL/EFL students (Janopoulos, 2002).

Furthermore, error correction practices can be classified in terms of approach and scoring method. Cooper (1977) distinguished between higher order correction approach which focuses mainly on features such as rhetoric, organization and stylistic differences, and lower order correction approach which concentrates on mechanics, punctuation, grammar, etc. Generally, research findings (e.g., Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Lee, 2003) show less proficient teachers tend to be more severe and to be more obviously oriented toward correcting lower order errors, while more proficient ones pay attention to higher order errors.

As a result, it is important to explore and understand instructors' beliefs and their concerns while evaluating and correcting students' writing. Moreover, it seems necessary to see how raters' characteristics including their level of education and experience may affect their assessment of students' writing.

1.2. Objectives of the study

In order to come up with an understanding of error correction in writing classes, it is important to address the issues which affect teachers' error correction practices including their beliefs and their perceptions of errors. To achieve the above objectives, the present study is conducted to investigate teachers' existing beliefs about and perceptions of errors and their actual error correction. It is also intended to see if the instructors' level of education and their experience would affect their beliefs about and perceptions of error correction as well as their error correction practices. In addition, the study intends to examine the effect of the writer's level of proficiency on the rater's actual error correction.

1.3. Research questions

In line with the objectives mentioned in the preceding section, the following research questions are posed:

1) What are the participating raters' general perceptions of writing errors?

2) What are the participating raters' perceptions of writing errors after actually correcting compositions?

3) Are there any differences between the raters' beliefs and perceptions before and after error correction?

4) Does the proficiency level of the writers of the compositions affect the raters' actual performance?

5) Do the raters' level of education and experience influence their perceptions?

1.4. Significance of the study

The present study is both theoretically and practically significant. From the theoretical point of view, having an insight into the factors influencing the process of correcting errors is essential to our understanding of the nature of error correction. On the other hand, since teachers' beliefs and perceptions of students' errors may directly affect (evaluation of) students' writing, it is crucial to find out the teachers' error correction beliefs and practices and the factors influencing these beliefs and practices. In addition, it is essential to understand the actual error correction of the teachers and raters, and the components of the writing they put emphasis on. Furthermore, any bias toward the students' writing can be identified and further eliminated.

The following chapter presents the literature review on the writing, the raters' perceptions of error correction and factors influencing these perceptions, beliefs and the actual performance of the raters.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0. Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the topic and the variables under study as well as a brief review of the related studies. In doing so, the chapter first presents the theoretical background of the study with regard to the definitions of writing and different stages involved in writing, as well as error correction. With respect to error correction, it mainly focuses on the variables under study, i.e., the raters' perceptions of error correction and factors affecting their perceptions, beliefs and the actual performance of the raters. Finally, the second part of the chapter provides a review of the previous studies conducted in these areas.

2.1. Theoretical background

The following sections provide an overview of the theoretical issues underlying the present study. These sections present crucial concepts and ideas regarding the process of writing, writers' level of proficiency, error correction, rating scales, raters' experience and their perceptions, respectively.

2.1.1. Writing

Writing has long been one of the most essential tools for people from different walks of life. It is drawn on in order to serve different purposes such as writing e-mails, and reports as well as

academic writings. The importance of writing follows from not only its role in conveying information, but also from a more vital one—i.e., its use as a tool for imparting knowledge in order to create a new knowledge. Traditionally, the task of writing was solely considered as a cognitive process. However, the current literature on writing emphasizes that the act of writing is not merely the product of a writer. In fact, it is viewed as a social and cultural act which occurs in a context and serves a particular purpose (Weigle, 2002).

Writing is a highly complex task that requires coordination of numerous skills and consideration of various constraints. Thus, it has been defined differently in different approaches. Each approach views it from a different angel or perspective. In the following paragraphs, the main approaches to writing will be discussed.

With regard to the skills-based approach, writing is defined as a combination of separate and different, or as Curry (2003) put it "atomised" (p. 11), skills—namely, letter formation, spelling, punctuation, grammar, organization, etc. which students learn separately. These components are then to be integrated by the writers in actual composition tasks (Lea & Street 1998).

Furthermore, from a different perspective, the skills-based approach views writing as a product-oriented task. According to Weigle (2002), this approach to the teaching of writing emphasizes mechanical aspects of writing, such as grammatical and syntactical structures and imitating models. In this approach, the teachers primarily focus on correctness and form of the final product. In addition, this approach totally ignores that people write for a specific audience and purpose and that ideas are created and formulated during the process of writing. In this respect, McLaughlin et al. (1983) state that similar to any other complicated tasks, the task of writing requires that "learners organize a set of related subtasks and their components" (p. 42).

On the other hand, in the whole-language approach, the task of writing is defined as meaning-processes which are governed by purpose and audience rather than compositional rules. From an idealistic viewpoint, if writing is to be defined thoroughly, it should include both skills and meaning (Florio-Ruane & Dunn, 1987).

In the same vein, in process-oriented approaches compositions are regarded as phenomena which are based on an interactive framework of writing. Studies on the writing process of both beginner and advanced writers illustrate that writing is undertaken in interwoven and interrelated stages. Although these phases have been distinguished differently, researchers have reached the consensus that the steps consist of planning (pre-writing), drafting (discovering meaning/author's ideas), revising and editing, and sharing or publication (Florio-Ruane & Dunn, 1987).

Planning essays, writers are engaged in cognitive activities. These thought-oriented activities result in choosing topics, identifying goals and purposes for which writers write, considering their audience, deciding on voice, and devising frameworks for their pieces of writing (Florio-Ruane & Dunn, 1987). During the second stage, drafting, writers are engaged in the process of "putting ideas into visible language" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 373). However, at the drafting stage, planning and revising of plans are not necessarily dispensed with. The majority of advanced writers, although at the stage of drafting, use continuous revision on what they have written so far. During drafting, writers are simultaneously engaged in numerous tasks, including continued planning and constructing of meaning, implementing rules of grammar, choosing vocabulary to express meaning, spelling, and punctuation. To the extent that these tasks are performed at an automatic level, writers have more attention to allocate to the constructive processes involved in writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989).