



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 7 Sayı: 32 Volume: 7 Issue: 32

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

EXPLORING ELT PREP CLASS STUDENTS' VIEWS ON "PEARLS OF WISDOM" CORNER IN WRITING CLASSES*

İsmail YAMAN**
Emrah EKMEKÇİ***

Abstract

Developing writing skills is a critical threshold on the way to proficiency in the target language for EFL learners. It is an indispensable component of this process to provide feedback for the students' writings in order to help them see their strengths and weaknesses. This study aims to show the efficacy of an indirect form of giving feedback, "Pearls of Wisdom Corner", to the writings of students. Following a treatment process of one-semester, interviews are conducted with the students attending ELT prep class at Ondokuz Mayıs University to collect data. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews indicate that students find this new application quite fruitful and motivating. They report that "Pearls of Wisdom" sheets hung on the wall following almost every writing assignment, quiz, and exam help them reduce their mistakes and bring a positive atmosphere into the writing class. In the light of the qualitative data gathered in this study, it is concluded that "Pearls of Wisdom" application in writing classes can be an effective way of enhancing student motivation and their awareness of the commonly observed mistakes and errors during writing practices.

Keywords: Pearls of Wisdom, Feedback, Process Approach, Mistake.

I. Introduction

Writing lessons are generally regarded as an overloading and demanding component of the language education process by both students and language instructors. Heaps of paragraphs and essays render this actually-enjoyable dimension a tedious and challenging burden in that learners feel forced to work against the clock. What is more, student mistakes corrected via peer and teacher feedback, especially in the "responding" stage of the writing process, need to be kept fresh. Keeping writing portfolios constitutes a sort of solution to the possibility that learned things sink into oblivion over time, even within the current semester. However, an additional dimension can be added to the portfolio keeping process through which students can have the opportunity to look at the common mistakes they have made throughout the semester during breaks while sipping their tea or coffee.

This study aims to show the efficacy level of forming a "Pearls of Wisdom" corner on the classroom wall in order to keep the students' motivation towards writing lessons and awareness of their mistakes, especially those likely to become fossilized, as high as possible. Although "Pearls of Wisdom by the Class" (see Appendix 1-2-3 for sample sheets), the title of the sheet on which the wrong sentences by students are written, may seem somewhat offending, it actually aims to enable students to identify their mistakes once more and make fun of them. During the one-semester treatment process, the common mistakes and errors, mostly caused by thinking in Turkish rather than the target language, identified on the writing papers of the students are selected and put on the wall anonymously and with no change by the

* This study was presented by the researchers as a poster presentation in the 16th International INGED ELT Conference at Dokuz Eylül University on October 5, 2013.

**Instructor, Ondokuz Mayıs University, ismail.yaman@omu.edu.tr

***Instructor, Ondokuz Mayıs University, emrah.ekmekci@omu.edu.tr

researchers. Thus the students are encouraged to become aware of their repetitive and common mistakes and given the chance to see these mistakes whenever they want in the classroom even during coffee breaks.

II. Review of Literature

II. 1 Teaching Writing Skill

Writing, as a productive skill, is actually directly related with its receptive counterpart, reading skill. Therefore, reading can be regarded as the input for writing outputs. Even if instructors show the students model paragraphs and essays for each type, it is not so easy to develop writing skills at a desirable level. The writing products yielded by the students are generally expected to have components like a broad range of lexis, accurate grammar, punctuation and spelling, unity and coherence in ideas, rich sentence structures and cohesive devices, strong major and minor ideas, and a sound organization. The absence of even one of these components poses problems in terms the smooth flow and comprehensibility of the writing products. Within this context, Rivers (1981: 291-292) provides the following account on the importance and complexity of developing writing skill:

We must realize that writing a language comprehensibly is much more difficult than speaking it. When we write, we are, as it were, “communicating into space”. When we communicate a message orally, we know who is receiving the message. We know the situation, including the mood and tone it requires of us, even if it is as impersonal as “someone in the office” taking a phone message. We receive feedback from the interlocutor or audience (oral, emotional, or kinesthetic) which makes clear how the message is being received and if it is being comprehended. With spoken messages, many things are visible, or are part of shared knowledge, which cannot be taken for granted in writing.

Rivers (1981) compares the two productive skills, writing and speaking, and puts forward that writing comprehensibly is much more difficult than speaking comprehensibly as writing does not bring instant feedback unlike speaking. In order to eliminate this comprehensibility problem, a new perspective to writing called “process approach” has begun to be adopted in recent years. Process approach can be defined as “an approach that emphasizes teaching writing not as product but as process; helping students discover their own voice; allowing students to choose their own topic; providing teacher and peer feedback; encouraging revision and using student writing as the primary text of the course” (Matsuda, 2003: 67). As the definition makes it clear, process approach takes writing as a skill to be developed on a student-centered and process-oriented basis. The following figure describes the major steps included in the writing process.



Figure 1. Process Approach to Writing
(taken from www.mywritingportfolio.net)

As Figure 1 above illustrates, writing is composed of a process beginning with prewriting and ending with publishing. A writing piece goes through several steps from the first stage to the last one, which helps to make sure that the final published product appears error-free. In this process-based approach, probably, the most noteworthy phase is the “responding” stage during which peers and then the teacher provides feedback for the draft at hand. It is this feedback that shapes the rest of the process a piece of writing goes through. Feedback can come in different forms. The form may be oral or written teacher feedback, peer feedback, direct (explicit) feedback, indirect (implicit) feedback, and so on. Direct or explicit

feedback means identifying an error and providing the correct form, while indirect or implicit feedback occurs when the instructor indicates that an error has been made but does not provide a correction, thereby leaving the student a chance to diagnose and correct it (Bitchener et al., 2005). Indirect feedback can also be divided into coded and uncoded forms of feedback. Coded feedback shows the exact location and type of an error with a code while uncoded feedback occurs when the teacher underlines an error, circles an error, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error (Bitchener et al., 2005). It is evident that directing the students' attention to their mistakes and errors can be achieved in different ways, if not so easy. Kroll (2001: 230) suggests a few alternatives to this end:

- To point out specific errors by using a mark in the margin or and arrow or other symbolic system.
- To correct (or model) specific errors by writing in the corrected forms;
- To label specific errors according to the feature they violate (e.g. subject-verb agreement), using either the complete term or a symbol system;
- To indicate the presence of error but not the precise location, e.g. noting that there are problems with word forms;
- To ignore specific errors.

One of the above types or ways of providing feedback cannot be asserted to be the ideal one. Teachers should choose the correct form in accordance with the specific conditions they have (age, level, expectations of the students, etc.). For the reason that there are a lot of variables included in writing classes and writing process, many studies have not been able to find a significant difference between groups that received different types of feedback (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). Likewise, the study of Ferris et al. (2000) investigated the effects of different feedback forms (direct and indirect) on both text revisions and new pieces of writing. The results of the study indicate that direct error correction led to more correct revisions (88%) than indirect error feedback (77%). However, considering the whole semester progress the results suggest that indirect feedback helped to reduce error frequency ratios substantially more than direct feedback. The findings of the above-mentioned studies show that it is not scientifically correct to say which form is better or worse to apply in writing classes. Therefore, teachers may choose the form they regard as ideal for their classes or decide to develop their own way of providing feedback.

II.2 The Application of "Pearls of Wisdom Corner"

Establishing a "Pearls of Wisdom Corner" in a writing class can be regarded as an indirect and implicit way of giving feedback to the writings of the students by the instructor. This type of feedback covers the drafts in the "responding" stage of the writing process as illustrated in Figure 1 above or the students' final drafts they submit in writing quizzes and exams. A "Pearls of Wisdom Corner" established under the framework of this study is illustrated in the following figure:

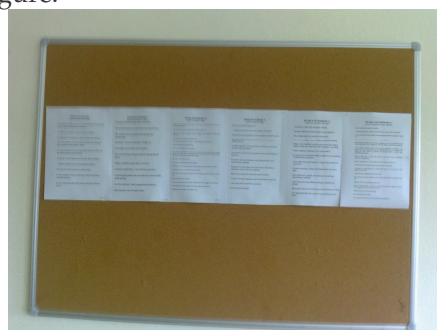


Figure 2. Pearls of Wisdom Corner

In this form of giving feedback the teacher follows an indirect or implicit approach and points the attention of the students to their mistakes by just identifying the incorrect sentences. It is not possible to place all mistakes on the corner; therefore the teacher selects which sentences to give place and tries to show the sentences of as many students as possible.

Students are given the opportunity to brainstorm about their own and others' mistakes. Actually they are given the chance to explore their own sentences again and again as the pearls of wisdom sheets stay within the sight of the students throughout the whole semester. Thus, they can observe the general tendency of their mistakes and try not to repeat them over and over again. The following are the most commonly observed error categories in EFL writing settings:

- Articles
- Prepositions
- Infinitives
- Using wrong parts of speech
- Agreement
- Verb tense and forms
- Active and passive voices
- Sentences structure
- Punctuation
- Style

(taken from www.buowl.boun.edu.tr/)

The above-listed errors can be frequently seen in the writings of students in Turkey. What is important here is the discovery of the ideal way to put an end to the repetition of them. Establishing a “pearls of wisdom corner” can be deemed as one of these effective ways. As its name implies, there is sheer irony behind its philosophy. Some may argue that it is not irony, it is sheer sarcasm; however, in practice, it proves to be an entertaining way of discovering one's own mistakes in writing papers. It is not applied to offend students, if so it would be totally discouraging. The title alongside the whole application is intended to let the students make fun of their mistakes and notice what they cannot while producing written texts. The most important aspect of the application, as students agree, is the anonymity principle. The teacher writes the sentences casually with no specific order and without any clue of identity. Thus nobody, except for the owner of the sentences and the teacher, has any information as to the identity. This secrecy actually adds more fun to the learning process. Figure 3 below illustrates how students discuss their mistakes during a break.



Figure 3. Students Discussing Their Mistakes Shown in the Corner

As Figure 3 illustrates, “pearls of wisdom corners” in writing classes helps to promote cooperation and collaboration in the context of writing skill which is normally thought to be an isolated and individual activity. Thanks to this application you can see students gather around and laugh aloud at the anonymous mistakes on the corner. Moreover, with each assignment given or quiz or exam a new sheet of pearls of wisdom is hung on the corner by the instructor. Accordingly, it also enables the students to see whether they continue to repeat their mistakes or not.

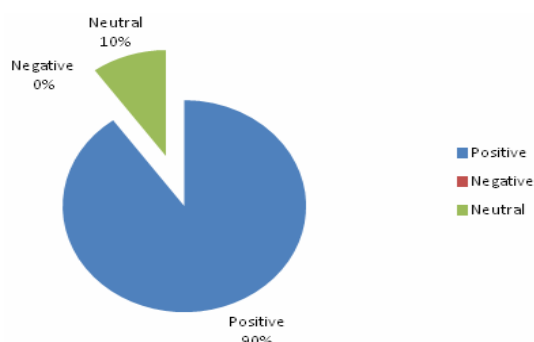
III. Methodology

The study is a qualitative one the subject group of which is composed of 20 students attending ELT Prep Class in the School of Foreign Languages at OndokuzMayıs University at 2012-2013 academic year. During the one-semester treatment process, the common mistakes

and errors of the students were selected and put on the wall anonymously and without changing even a comma by the researchers. A new sheet of pearls of wisdom was added to the corner with every new homework, quiz, and exam. At the end of the experiment, through a semi-structured interview, the students were asked to express their opinions about the application with which they had not been familiar at all. Their responses were recorded and then transcribed. In order to analyze the obtained data, the researchers examined the responses of the students closely and extensively. The answers were categorized and interpreted as qualitative data following a content analysis. The employed categories were the general approach of the students towards the pearls of wisdom corner, its contributions to their writing performance, their perceptions about the anonymity of the application, the cooperative dimension, and the irony included in the very nature of the application. Finally these qualitative data were shaped into lightening findings with the contributive views and help of experts specialized in qualitative data analysis.

IV. Findings and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the students' opinions as to the innovative application of pearls of wisdom corner indicates that almost all of the students (90%) included in the subject group find it quite entertaining, necessary, and educative within the specific context of writing lessons. Only 10% of the students report a neutral insight into the application. On the other hand, none of the students hold a negative view as to the pearls of wisdom corner. The related percentages are illustrated in the following graph:



Graph 1. General Approach of the Students towards the Pearls of Wisdom Corner

As it is evident from the graph above, almost all students think that this application is a useful and effective technique just as Student E and I state consecutively: "Pearls of Wisdom Corner helped us in a lot of ways." "In my opinion, this method is very effective for learning English." In addition, some other students combine the entertaining and pedagogical dimensions in their comments. For instance, Student K states "When we see the exam's sentences on the paper, we laugh at first, but later or in the next exam we remember our mistakes and try not to make them again." Correspondingly, Student N comments "Pearls of Wisdom Corner is a need for every class. It's very useful and funny; we learn a lot of things from it." and Student J says "I laugh at my fault as if it belonged to somebody else."

In order to achieve progress in any field or skill, a learner should develop awareness of self-strengths and weaknesses. As this applies to the writing skill as well, it is quite satisfying to see that students are aware of their repetitive mistakes and show the will to improve their writing skills. Student B says "Unfortunately we still write our sentences by thinking in Turkish, not English. As we see our mistakes we are trying to give up this habit." Likewise Student A tells "The more you notice and correct your mistakes, the more you can reduce them and improve your writing." Parallel with what Student B and A report, Student G expresses his/her views with the following statement: "These mistakes should not only stay on the wall, we should also save them in our mind." It is clear from the above-mentioned accounts of the students that this study has contributed a certain level of awareness to the students about their mistakes and this point is best summarized by what Student H states: "Every student can make mistakes, it is normal. But the most important thing is not to do them repeatedly." These

accounts make it clear that this application encourages students to correct their mistakes in a constructive way.

Especially the anonymity of the selected sentences eliminates the likelihood of anxiety among students. Thus, the students are observed reading the sheets on the wall with smiling faces. Just parallel with this observation of the researchers, Student C tells "The students' names that made the mistakes are secret and nobody knows whose mistake they are unless the owner tells it in public." Further, Student F thinks that this anonymity constitutes the best aspect of this application by saying "The best side of this technique is that the students' names are unwritten and this makes the event much funnier." Such accounts of the students verify that anonymity adds an important asset to the application.

The application does not only contribute as a mistake-shooting agent but it helps foster cooperation among the students as well in that it fosters an atmosphere in which students can observe others' mistakes and discuss them in a constructive manner. In this context, Student O states "Thanks to this method, I can understand the reasons of my mistakes. When I see my sentences on the board, I ask my friends and we discuss them." In a parallel direction, Student S comments "We can see not only our own mistakes but also our friends' and we learn new things from others' mistakes as well."

As it is apparent from the title and information provided before, there is irony within the very nature of this application. This point has been smartly caught by Student N: "When you hear it, it sounds very cool but it is our failure's wall and warns us not to repeat our mistakes and errors again and again." It is clear that students are aware of the fact that it is their mistakes that are written on the corner no matter how fantastic the title is. This ironical aspect, probably the most striking dimension covered in the application and thus this study, helps teachers and students better see the pedagogical, funny, collaborative, and inquisitive sides of this application in a combined way.

V. Conclusion and Suggestions

It is clear from the findings of the study and above-provided discussions that students included in the subject group of the study unanimously agree that "Pearls of Wisdom Corner" application is a fairly useful and essential aid for writing classes. Considering the students' comments obtained at the end of the treatment process, it can be concluded that the application received positive reactions from each student who qualified it as necessary, effective, beneficial, funny, and encouraging. At the beginning of the study one of the worrying points related with this application was the possibility of offending students by making their mistakes explicit. However, this likelihood was eliminated by the anonymity principle and students' awareness of the irony covered in the title. Thus, it is quite satisfying for the researchers to observe that the study has contributed valuable additions to the writing class without any extractions.

It is believed that such applications can be of remarkable contribution not only for students but for writing instructors as well. By revising or changing some dimensions included in this study, receiving better results and student feedback might be possible. For instance, best examples from the students' assignments may be hung on the corner in addition to their mistakes so that the irony of the title can be better reflected.

It is likely that such techniques are currently applied in writing classes as alternatives of giving feedback. However, there is a serious lack of scientific research on such topics. Such alternatives like "pearls of wisdom corner" should receive more attention and these classroom applications should be positioned in line with their scientific implications so that the scope of their classroom use can be broadened.

REFERENCES

- BITCHENER, John et al. (2005). "The Effect of Different Types of Corrective Feedback on ESL Student Writing", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14(2005) 191-205.
- FERRIS, D. R., Chaney, S. J., Komura, K., Roberts, B. J., & McKee, S. (2000). *Perspectives, Problems, and Practices in Treating Written Error*, In Colloquium presented at International TESOL Convention, VANCOUVER, B.C., March 14-18, 2000.
- KEPNER, C. G. (1991). "An Experiment in the Relationship of Types of Written Feedback to the Development of Second Language Writing Skills", *Modern Language Journal*, 75, 305-313.
- KROLL, B. (2001). "Considerations for Teaching An ESL/EFL Writing Course", In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (3rd ed.) (pp.219-232). Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle.

- MATSUDA, P.K. (2003). "Process and Post-Process: A Discursive History", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 65-83.
- RIVERS, W. M. (1981). *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SEMKE, H. (1984). The Effects of the Red Pen. *Foreign Language Annals*, 17, 195-202.
- SHEPPARD, K. (1992). "Two Feedback Types: Do They Make a Difference?", *RELC Journal*, 23, 103-110.
<http://www.buowl.boun.edu.tr> Retrieved on June 11, 2013.
- <http://www.mywritingportfolio.net> Retrieved on June 11, 2013.

Appendix 1
Pearls of Wisdom
by ELT -B- (February 21, 2013)

- Everyone thinks their own interests.
-
- We have known ourself since we were born.
-
- We visited our ex-school for taking our yearbooks.
-
- Actually, it was not long as I hope as.
-
- I thought my twenty-tooth grew...
-
- The community of Syria want to going BesarEsed.
-
- These conflicts were done 2 forms.
-
- A short travel later, I arrived my province.
-
- Turkish geography was wanted to control with Arab Spring.
-
- On the contrast, they supported dictators.
-
- We missed a lot of each other.
-
- From born to die, you use this language mostly and try to make sentence by using it.
-
- The first of them is I take a note in lesson.
-
- Everybody is everytime need to teach anything.
-
- Than my father took the phone and said "My girl has a good marks, hasn't she?"
-
- It is impossible not to be reached this aim after we do these things successfully.
-
- In short, I had dreamed university wasn't OMÜ.
-
- ...and he invited to me for playing football.
-
- So we should be blind for not to see the "Game Over".

Appendix 2
Pearls of Wisdom
by ELT -B- (March 3, 2013)

- Years ago, when I was at my seven years old, my parents and I were on a vacation at İstanbul.
-
- And he take his personal needings like water, soap, etc.
-
- Moreover, in most countries, parents support their children for feed any animal.
- They have got a house whose two floors.
-
- The dog can get its owner to go to a supermarket, hairdresser or...
-
- Because she had my wanted thing.
-
- I put colorful flowers near to window.
-

- If we think of the reasons of staying at the dormitory, we can say that maybe the students who stay at the dormitory don't want to have the responsibilities like that cooking, cleaning, financial matters.
-
- Our rooms was seeing to sea.
-
- Now, we think that going to Miami again.
-
- These times, I was very angry this situation but now I don't think such that.
-
- When you come to a new place, you will shock...
-
- If you stay in a dormitory you don't need to make our meals, clean our rooms, etc.
-
- There are fixed times in there.
-
- Every month you give your money and then you don't struggle with anything.
-
- For example, especially alone people like living with a dog or cat.
-
- Especially place problem is the biggest one.

Appendix 3
Pearls of Wisdom
by ELT -B- (April 29, 2013)

- All of us smiles towards to camera.
-
- The photo generally reflect to the time when we are the most happy.
-
- In the next hours in that night, the photograph machine's subject brought out.
-
- Next, we decided to take a photo and took a photo.
-
- Also her/his misbehaviour's reason depends on how to be grown up by her/his family and the negligence of her/his family impress their children.
-
- Third, when a teacher doesn't know how to approach a student, it can also come out a problem that his students don't want to attend his lesson or even when he attends, he doesn't listen or does many misbehaviour things.
-
- Each of them tell a story from past. It was taken from a celebrity, weddings or anything.
-
- When I heard event, I was shocked and it made me upset, too.
-
- The family is one of the most important things in the earth.
-
- Contrast of my this friend, my other friend talks so much but it is not related with lesson.
-
- This photo was taken because of my uncle. Because he wanted to take this.
-
- Actually I heard somethings about you.
-
- When I read the letter, I was sorry not only for ended a relation but also for I know that you were sorry so much.
-
- Please, don't do wrong something.
-
- He believes me all subject.
-
- Try to spend your time with your friends as possible as.