The Effect of Corrective Feedback on Iranian EFL Learners’ Writing Accuracy

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Abstract – The present study aimed to investigate the effect of corrective feedback on the accuracy of Iranian EFL learners’ writings. To do so, forty participants were selected from among the 70 learners who were learning English at Sanaie and Saba Language institutes in Malayer based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test. The forty sampled participants were randomly divided into two groups of twenty, one as the experimental group and the other as the control group of the study. The two groups took a test of writing as the pretest. The study lasted for one semester. In each session the teacher of each group assigned them a topic to be developed into an essay. The difference in the teaching phase was in giving the participants feedback. The experimental group were given feedback on their writing while the control group did not receive any type of feedback. After the writing sessions the two groups of the study received a test which served as the posttest of the study. The comparisons between the results of the posttest and pretest scores as well as those between the control and experimental groups showed a significant difference between the performance of the groups. It was concluded that corrective feedback significantly affects the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Keywords: corrective feedback, writing ability, accuracy, Malayer

1. INTRODUCTION

This study explains an investigation into the efficacy of corrective feedback on the improvements of EFL learners writing performance and tends to measure a change in the total number of errors over time. This doesn’t seem to be an appropriate way to measure the effect of focused feedback as it is natural that language learners will continue to develop their language skills over a long period of time rather than being able to write perfectly error-free compositions.

Writing is a complex process requiring many skills. It has been under study to be improved. A lot of researchers have focused on developing this skill structure (Ellis, 2003). Writing is a very difficult skill for native and non-native speakers. They have a lot of problems in this field. Writers must balance multiple issues as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, such as capitalization.

Writing is especially difficult for non-native speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate students of all those elements in a foreign language. Acquiring a language is a difficult learning how to write in a completely foreign language is the case. Writing process focuses not only on the final product but also on different stages, e.g. jotting down ideas, writing drafts, correcting, rewriting and editing. The process requires teacher interaction and going beyond enumerating the major elements of writing and written
text. The main concern of many scholars is how to give writing instruction to the students learning a second or foreign language. On the other hand, a large majority of studies on feedback in writing have examined the effect of focused feedback (feedback given on all language forms). In this field one of the major issues is how to provide feedback that best helps students in improving their writing ability.

1.1. **Purpose of the Study**

This study was conducted in order to investigate the effect of corrective feedback (if any) on the accuracy of Iranian EFL learners’ writings. In fact, the present study focuses on the feedback and grammaticality of the writings composed by the cited learners. The study is also trying to analyze the possible effect on the accuracy of writings. Thus the grammaticality, punctuation and factors which are related to the form or accuracy of the writings will be the focus of the present study. As it was mentioned before, feedback has been proved to be influential in writing improvement. Teachers’ perceptions towards the type of feedback have been different. For this reason, some teachers have emphasized on the form while others’ attention has been on the content of writings.

The teachers’ views towards the type of feedback they provide affects their assessments since correcting the students’ writings is directly the result of the subjective assessment of the teachers. Thus the researchers of the present study has made use of effective rubric in assessing the learners’ writings in order to achieve the goal of the study more reliably.

1.2. **Statement of the Problem**

In the learning language writing, feedback is very important. Teachers use the writing correction systems to provide feedback to their students, but they may have no knowledge about feedback and do not have accurate comprehension of feedback. Teachers may unintentionally harm their weaker students by using this type of feedback. So, it is hoped that a kind of suitable feedback used for teaching writing.

Writing is a key skill in EFL and ESL settings and all teachers need to evaluate their students' writing abilities (Weigle, 2002). In Iran, there are a lot problems concerning teaching as well as assessing writing. Teachers usually have problems whether to give feedback to the form or to the content of the writings. Moreover, they do not know to provide indirect or direct feedback to their students. The problem goes further to the point that assessing writing also becomes a dilemma for language teachers. Perhaps for this reason inter-rater reliability has come into existence.

The problem as was explained is very important. It seems that it deserves studying and investigation in this area will solve a lot of problems Iranian EFL learners and teachers have while writing or assessing writing. In the next section of the study, the purpose of the study has been explained.

1.3. **Significance of the Study**

The present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners’ writing. It is hoped that this study will contribute in improving the teaching and the learning of writing skill.
Since evaluating writing is a central issue, it provides valuable feedback on EFL writing to both students and teachers. Reliable assessment will also benefit practitioners and syllabus designers in guiding them to review their objectives and plans of teaching and scoring the writing skill in secondary schools. According to the researcher's knowledge, very few studies have been conducted the effect of corrective feedback on the quality of writing assignment in Iran.

1.4. Research Question and Hypothesis

On the basis of the purpose of the study which was mentioned in the previous section, the following research question was formulated:

Q: Does corrective feedback have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners’ writing accuracy?

On the basis of these research questions the following hypothesis was formed:

H0: Corrective feedback does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners’ writing accuracy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researchers have reviewed some of the relevant literature to the corrective feedback and learners’ writing accuracy. Since the topic of the study was about writing, the researchers have tried to narrow the topic down to the accuracy of writing so that they would be able to tackle with the problem in a better way.

2.1. Research in L1 Writing

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state: “Generally speaking, writing research in L1 contexts has been conducted along four distinct but interesting dimensions which can be represented,…, by four respective disciplines; education, psychology, linguistics and rhetoric/composition” (p.18). According to them the main concern of educational psychologists and educationists has been the socio educational contexts for learning to write. They would also like to “recognize the need to express meaning in writing as a purposeful activity and to identify different levels of learning through which writing instruction is carried out.” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, p.19) A considerable amount of this research contains case studies of individual children, learning experience approaches and whole language approaches (Dyson 1983; Graves, 1994). Some of the practical approaches are in line with Vygotskian perspectives on literacy development (Moll, 1990; Tharp and Gallimore1998).

A parallel dimension of research in the field deals with ethnographic research in educational contexts (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). This part is mainly done by sociolinguists who try to explore ways in which children from divergent social and linguistic backgrounds learn in mainstream educational contexts. This type of research examines differences between school and home environments (Boggs, 1985). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state that “researchers [in the field] have found that exposure to literacy events, attitudes towards school literacy, and teaching of meaningful literacy tasks are important conditions for writing development” (p.21).

Some other scholars are involved with cognitive issues in writing (De Beaugrande, 1990; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). They are interested in clarifying
the writing mental process. Much of the works have been carried out in this area concentrate on developing models of the overall writing process (Archibald & Jeffery, 2000). These cognitive process models (e.g. Hayes & Flower, 1980; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987) have emphasized on writers in their native language. Most of these (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). Many scholars use retrospective case studies and observational research as qualitative research methods to examine the nature of composing process (Raimes, 1991; Rijlaarsdam & Van den Bergh, 1996). They are concerned with shifts that writers make while doing pre-writing, writing and revising tasks.

2.2. Research in L2 Writing

In the area of research in L2 writing, too, some models of the process writing have been developed. It seems that some recent models of the process writing in the second language have similarities with the first language models or even the extension of them. (Kroll, 2001; Silva, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). They believe that to apply such models to writers in a second language certain modifications need to be made. These modifications are to account for the writer’s first language background and knowledge of second language.

Zimmerman (1995) was among the scholars probed the cognitive process involved in writing process in a second language. He explored the Hayes & Flower’s model and a number of others that are either modifications of it or compatible with (particularly Keseling, 1993). He points out that, in the early version Hayes & Flower give more attention to planning and revising as subcomponents of the cognitive saprocess and less attention is given to formulating. Then he refers to data gathered from a study of German university students writing English (L2) and German (L1), and argues that formulating the language to be used may be relatively more important for L2 writers than either planning or revising.

A considerable amount of research in L2 writing has been extensively dominated by Goodman’s whole language philosophy and focus on ethnographic classroom research in order to improve students’ writing abilities (e.g. Freeman and Freeman 1992; Goldman and Trueba1987). Others have employed L1 composition research approaches to groups of L2 students (e.g. Kroll 1990; Raimes 1991; Reid 1993).

A line of research referred to as contrastive rhetoric used text linguistic research and discourse analysis to explore how student writing could be analyzed at the discourse level to understand the organizational patterns in student writings (Kaplan, 1966, 1972).

However, along with the above discussions, there are some criticisms against the originality and validity of L2 writing research. As Johns (1990) states:

So far, however, most of this research [L2 writing research] and pedagogy has been drawn, in bits and pieces, from research in first language compositions, which in turn is based upon L1 theory. Unfortunately, there has as yet been little discussion of the development of coherent and complete theories of ESL composition as allied to-or separate from-the various theories of L1 composition (Johns, 1990, p.29).

3. METHODOLOGY

In this part the researchers will focus on the methodology used to perform the study. They will briefly explain the participants of the study, the instrumentation, as well as the procedures used in the study.
3.1. The Participants of the Study
The participants who participated in the present study were 40 EFL students who were pooled out of 70 students who were from two intermediate classes at Saba and Sanaie institutes in Malayer. The control group was made up of 20 students whose age ranged from 17 to 25. The experimental group included 20 students with ages ranging from 17 to 32. The participants of the study were female. They first language was Farsi and they studied English as a Foreign language. None of them had been to a foreign country. They were intermediate language learner based on the proficiency test results they took.

3.2. Instrumentation
This section provides a description of the instruments used in the present study such as pretest materials, writing tasks, scoring rubrics, and post-test materials.

3.2.1. Pretest Materials
The pretest materials were prepared using Oxford Placement Test (OPT). There were fifty multiple choice items in the test. OPT is a reliable and valid test. So the researchers was sure that the test could distinguish the homogenized group she needed for the study.

3.2.2. Writing Assignments
The Writing topics were selected from among IELTS series and the book entitled ‘Academic Writing: A Handbook for International Students’ by Stephen Bailey. The topics were interesting and the researchers had a wide choice for selecting the topics since there were a lot of topics in the two mentioned books.

3.2.3. Post-test Materials
The post-test materials were taken from the same materials which were used for determining the topics of writing assignments. The topics which were selected for the post-test were not similar to those about which the participants had already written.

3.3. Procedures
In order to obtain the necessary data, the researchers followed these procedures: first the researchers gave a proficiency test to the seventy participants. After the gathering the results, those participants whose scores fell one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean were sampled. 42 students were supposed to be selected but two of them said that they were going to attend math classes and were not able to participate in the experiment. Thus the researchers selected 40 of them.

The sampled participants who were female learners and were randomly assigned to two groups of 20. One of the groups was the experimental group of the study while the other one was the control group. The training sessions started and in each session the researchers assigned the learners in each group a topic to develop an essay. The two groups participated in separate training classes so that they could not inform each other of the topics and contents of writings. The only difference between them was that in the experimental group the researchers would give them corrective feedback on the accuracy of their writing while in the control group there was no feedback on the accuracy of their writings.

The design of this study was based on the quantitative variables and the participants were divided two groups. The researchers taught academic writing in each of the two classes.
Because the focus of the learners was on writing, they received the same amount of attention in this skill area. Participants asked questions about their errors and the corrections they had received and they received additional explanations and examples. The researchers asked the students which corrections they did not understand or wanted further examples. When additional explanations of the corrective feedback were given, the researchers wrote down a new sentence with the same error in it for the students to correct. The researchers then referred to other instances of the errors in the students’ texts and asked learners to correct them. Both groups participated in the writing sessions for a complete semester.

After the sessions of writing, the participants of both groups took a similar post-test of writing. The results of their post-tests were fed into SPSS to determine any probable difference between them. In the next chapter, the results of the study have been described together with the related tables.

The control group received no corrective feedback on the targeted features. The participants in this group asked questions about their errors and the corrections they had received and then. When additional explanations of the corrective feedback were given, the researchers wrote down a new sentence with the same error in it for the student to correct. The researchers then referred to other instances of the error in the student’s text and asked learners to correct them.

3.4. The Results of the Study
3.4.1. The Results of the Proficiency Test
A proficiency test was administered to a large population in order to sample a homogenized statistical sample for the study. The following table shows the results of descriptive statistics which is obtained from the proficiency test administration.

| Table 1. The Results of the Proficiency Test Administered to the Groups |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------|------------|
| N        | Minimum | Maximum | Mean     | Std. Deviation |
| proficiency | 70      | 40.00   | 98.00     | 68.3429    | 17.86251  |
| Valid N (listwise) | 70 |

Base on the information mentioned in the table 1, the mean of the scores obtained by seventy participants in the study was 68.34 and the standard deviation is 17.87. Thus, those whose scores fell one SD below the mean and those whose scores fell one SD above the mean were eliminated in order to form a homogenized group of learners to participate in the study. Based on this explanation, 40 participants were sampled.

3.4.2. The Results of the Pretest Study
The forty participants were assigned to two groups. There were both males and females in each group. In the following section, the results of the pretests are brought.
Table 2. The Results of the Pretest Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.7000</td>
<td>1.10501</td>
<td>.24709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.4750</td>
<td>.86565</td>
<td>.19356</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the provided information in table 2, the means of the control and experimental groups are 13.70 and 13.74 respectively. It seems that the two groups have been similar before the treatment. On the other hand, there were no significant differences between the two participating groups of the study at the beginning of the study. In order to see whether the results were trustable or not, the researchers ran an independent samples t-test to demonstrate this matter more statistically. The results of this t-test are summarized in table 3.

Table 3. The Results of the Independent Samples T-test for the Pretest Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretests</td>
<td>1.534</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>.717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances</td>
<td>assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances</td>
<td>not assumed</td>
<td>.717</td>
<td>35.940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the information presented in table 3, it can be inferred that there was not any significant difference between the two groups at the beginning of the study. The p value based on the table is 0.48 which is greater than 0.05. Thus there is no significant difference between the groups. It can be argued that the groups were almost similar.

As it was explained before, after the treatment and writing sessions which were lasted for one complete semester, a similar test of writing was administered. The results of this post-test have been summarized in the following sections.

3.4.3. The Results of the Post-test Study

The results of the post-test are brought in the following sections. The test of writing which was administered at the end of the semester was the same for both groups. Both the experimental and control groups participated in a test of writing the results of which is summarized in the following parts.

3.4.4. The Results of the Post-test Study

The forty participants of the study who were experimented under two different conditions and were divided into two independent groups took the same test of writing.
Table 4. The Results of the Post-test Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-tests Control</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.5250</td>
<td>.83469</td>
<td>.18664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.8750</td>
<td>1.16839</td>
<td>.26126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that the participants of the two groups differed in their writing ability. As it is clear, the means for control and experimental groups are 14.52 and 15.87 respectively. The standard deviations of the mentioned groups are also .18 and .26. In order to see whether the differences between the two groups are significant or not, the researchers ran an independent samples study the results of which are brought in Table 5.

Table 5. The Results of the Independent Samples T-test for the Post-test Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-tests Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>1.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>-4.205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A careful study of the above table reveals that the p-value of the study is .001 which is less than .05. Thus it can be inferred that the control and experimental groups are highly different as far as their mean differences are concerned. The interpretation of this statement is that the hypothesis of the study can be safely rejected. The following graph confirms this important finding too.

Figure 1. The Difference between the Two Groups of the Study in the Post-test Phase
The graph in the figure 1 also confirms the fact that the experimental group performed much better than the control group in the post-test phase of the study. As it can be seen, the distribution of the scores and the normal curve of the graph show the priority of the experimental group to the control one.

4. CONCLUSION

The study aimed at investigating of the effect of corrective feedback on the accuracy of writings produced by Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level. The researchers of the present study focused on the accuracy of writings and other aspects of writing such as fluency and accuracy were not considered in measuring the writing ability of the participants.

The results of the study showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group of the study. The experimental group had received corrective feedback while writing. The control group, on the contrary, did not receive any feedback on the accuracy of their writings. In fact, the treatment of the study which had caused the difference between those two groups was corrective feedback which was mainly focused on the accuracy of writings.

REFERENCES


