

The Efficacy of Peer vs. Teacher Response in Enhancing Grammatical Accuracy & General Writing Quality of Advanced vs. Elementary proficiency EFL Learners

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Abstract. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of two kinds of feedback (teacher vs. peer) on grammatical accuracy and overall writing improvement of High vs. low-proficiency Iranian EFL learners.

In order to determine which type of feedback leads to more accuracy and overall writing improvement, 126 English learners in a language school did six narrative tasks during seven weeks of study. The participants of the study were divided into two groups (low vs. high proficiency level) based on a proficiency test (Nelson). They were further divided into four groups according to the kind of feedback (peer vs. teacher) they would receive on their initial writing tasks. All participants performed a new writing task each week using either feedback types. After they finished the sixth narrative, writing performance at the beginning (pre-test) and end of the study (post-test), was measured and compared with each other to determine the short-term effect of peer vs. teacher corrective feedback. The secondary purpose is to investigate students' attitudes toward these two feedback types.

The results revealed that peer feedback did not affect grammatical accuracy improvement for both high and low-proficient students, but teacher feedback was found to be effective for grammatical accuracy especially for low proficient learners. In terms of overall writing performance, both feedback types were significantly effective, irrespective of the proficiency level. The study also showed that learners favored teacher feedback and saw the teacher as a figure of authority that guaranteed quality.

The research findings, though inconclusive, have raised several significant issues for writing teachers to consider. The possible implications of the findings of this study for the writing teachers were also discussed.

Keywords: Teacher Feedback; Peer Feedback; Writing proficiency; Accuracy; Proficiency level; Correction

1. Introduction

Second language writing became an important instructional issue in the mid-20th century since writing would enable learners to plan and rethink the communication process (Celce- Murcia, 2001). Due to the fact that writing involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way, it is often considered to be the hardest of the skills, even for native speakers of a language. Ferris (1999) claimed that students do not become more proficient writers just by reading and writing, but they need some form of feedback to see how others think of their writing. Indeed, responding to students' writing is one of the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of the writing instructor's duties. Writing instructors themselves are often uncertain of the best way to provide feedback to their students (Paulus, 1999). Many questions and issues underlie the processes of reading students' papers and providing effective feedback.

Ferris (1997) noted that response to writing is arguably the teacher's most crucial task. It allows for a level of individualized attention and one-to-one communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of a class, and it plays an important role in motivating and encouraging students.

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2. Review of Literature

Writing is an important skill in L2 language learning. According to Kroll (1991) second language writing research is a rapidly growing area in SLA. In the last decade, a solid body of literature has been created in this field.

In real life people often have to communicate with each other in writing. Widdowson (1984) viewed writing as a communicative activity. He claimed that written discourse like spoken discourse needs an interactive process of negotiation. Student writers need a sense of audience to have interest in what they are writing. Therefore, there is a purpose in writing and that is communication with a participant, who is a reader. He also pointed out that communication must be as important in the writing classroom as in the conversation classroom.

Writing helps learners learn. It reinforces the language structures and vocabulary that learners acquire (Celce- Murcia, 2001). Writing is a basic skill for educated people. It becomes even more important for the EFL / ESL students when they start studying at a university in which the medium of education is English, as students are required to produce academic texts like essays or term projects. Now, it can be concluded that writing in English is crucial for EFL/ESL students.

However, in the past, it had been the neglected skill in the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. One of the reason for putting writing aside especially in FL teaching was due to the dominance of audio lingual method in which writing has been largely neglected (Celce- Murcia, 2001).

It is possible for a student to have many years of exposure to English, to get a high score on a proficiency test but still be an "unskilled" writer. These "unskilled" writers are unwilling to write, because they have to use their mental and emotional resources which involves considering overall text structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure (syntax) and word structure (Kroll, 1991). Considering all these factors while writing, involves a good deal of intelligence and energy. That's why writing is considered to be a demanding task to learn, both in EFL and ESL situations even for native speakers of a language.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants were 137 Iranian EFL students between the ages of 18 and 50. They were selected from Iran Language Institute in Yazd, and were all males. All participants were native speakers of Persian. None of them had stayed in English speaking countries for more than a week. All had studied English in senior and/ junior high school as compulsory foreign language for 6-7 years before starting their extra English classes. As noted by Ferris (2001) when giving feedback to students' errors, teachers need to take into account their students' backgrounds, especially their previous English language instruction. Educational backgrounds ranged from completion of high school to completion of a Post-graduate degree, but none of them majored in English. The participants of the study were divided into two groups (low vs. high proficiency level) based on a proficiency test (Nelson, section 300D). Those who scored below the mean were assigned to elementary classes, and those who scored above the mean were regarded as intermediate. The term elementary and intermediate here are used only for classification purposes and as a means for separating the two proficiency groups. The participants were divided into four groups according to the kind of feedback (peer vs. teacher) they would receive on their in-class writing assignments. In other words, the participants in our experiment were divided into four groups which vary as to what kind of feedback they would receive and based on their proficiency level. In two out of four contexts, students were given teacher feedback and in the other two contexts they received peer feedback. The participants were randomly assigned to peer/teacher feedback conditions. Approximately there were equal numbers of students in each of the four groups.

All participants took a pre-test, followed by the treatment and the post-test. Only those students who completed all six tasks were included in the data analysis. Due to this requirement, 4 students were later excluded from the study. In addition, 7 other students were not included in the study due to an exceptionally high error rate on Narrative 1, and achieving poor score on their proficiency test. The final number of subjects who took part in the treatment was 126. All the participants had to write 6 in-class narrative essays

within 30 minutes time limit. All of the classes were taught by the researcher. The classes met for 6 hours in a week for seven weeks. It is worth noting that the classes were not writing-oriented, all skills were taught and practiced with especial attention to writing skill. Since the typical writing classroom in Iran is product-oriented, and it is dominated by the teaching of grammar, in our study we chose our participants from a general English classroom. Students were informed at the beginning of the term that their writing products would be analyzed and used for research and teaching improvement purposes.

3.2. Instrumentation

The following tests and tasks were used to address the questions in the present study. Three testing instruments were used in this study to answer the research questions and control some variables which might affect the reliability and validity of the study. The Nelson Test, Writing Assignments and A One Way Survey.

3.3. Procedure

The procedure employed in this study can be discussed under four topics: First the procedures of test administration, second the procedure of writing assignments, third the procedure of scoring the composition test and finally the procedure of the one-item survey administration.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

In order to answer the research questions posed in this study and analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, variances, etc. were used in the study. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was applied to see whether or not the data are normally distributed. Independent samples t-test was used to ensure that there was no significant difference between the groups of same proficiency level. Paired sample T-test was applied to find the significance of difference between the pre-test and post-test for each independent variable. To analyze participants' preference for either teacher feedback or peer feedback, the Chi-square test was used.

4. Findings and Discussion

The results of data analysis rejected the first null hypothesis. Concerning the first null hypothesis high the comparison of error rate in narrative six with that of narrative one showed that the effect of teacher feedback was statistically significant on the grammatical accuracy improvement of high and low proficiency learners, but peer feedback had no significant effect. Not only the study found a greater accuracy improvement for teacher correction, but it also found that at low proficiency learners made more progress in their post-test compared to high proficiency ones. It indicates that teacher feedback was more beneficial to low proficiency learners than high proficiency learners that after treatment, there was no significant difference between groups LT's post-test and group HT's post-test.

Regarding the first null hypothesis, as far as accuracy is concerned, we would recommend that teachers offer their feedback themselves. These findings are in line with what Fathman & Whalley, (1990) hypothesized regarding teacher correction. They maintained that students made significant improvement in grammatical accuracy in revisions only when teachers provided feedback on grammar errors. Ferris (2001) also proposed that most studies on error correction in L2 writing classes have provided evidence that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time. However, Truscott (2007) suggested that correcting local errors leads learners making even more errors on subsequent drafts. He concluded that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately. Jacobs & Zhang (1989) also found that teacher feedback was not significantly more effective than peer feedback. They said that it was not certain whether teacher correction was more beneficial than peer feedback in correcting grammatical mistakes.

Regarding the second hypothesis which investigated the effect of teacher feedback vs. peer feedback on the overall writing improvement of high vs. low proficiency learners, it was found that teacher feedback and peer feedback both led to overall writing improvement of participants regardless of proficiency level. It can also be claimed that teacher feedback was not significantly more effective than peer feedback in promoting the overall writing performance of the learner. It seems that peer response served more pragmatic functions than linguistic function. As the analyses showed, the second hypothesis was accepted.

These findings confirm the findings of previous studies like (Chaudron, 1984) which found that there was not a significant difference between the amount of overall writing improvement resulting from peer feedback and that resulting from teacher feedback. According to (Yang, 2006) teacher feedback and peer feedback improved students' writing quality in similar ways. Also Berg (1999) confirms the effectiveness of peer feedback for meaning level changes and thus better writing quality, though it was beyond the scope of his study to compare the impact of peer and teacher feedback.

Villamil & Guerrero (1998) found that peer feedback had a beneficial effect on the quality of writing, though they again made no comparison with teacher feedback. They explicitly stated that "peer revision should be seen as an important complementary source of feedback in the ESL classroom.

However, the findings of this study in this case reject (Paulus, 1999) finding. He found that teacher feedback was more likely to have an impact on overall writing quality than peer feedback. He carried out his study in a SL situation, while the current research was carried out in a FL setting. It is obvious that the participant's competence and performance may not be the same in these two settings. It has been argued that because EFL and ESL students may have both different motivations for L2 writing and different experiences with learning English, the types of grammar feedback which is appropriate for EFL students may be different from what is helpful for ESL student writers, who are primarily "ear learners" and whose knowledge of English comes primarily from unconscious acquisition processes rather than from formal grammar teaching (Ferris, 1999). Paulus (1999) found that peer feedback group received higher overall writing scores than teacher feedback groups. Some other studies report that peer feedback is more effective than teacher feedback (Urzua, 1987) & (Keh, 1990). Of course it has been for a long time that similar studies produce controversial results. One reason for these controversies is related to the number of factors involved in the study and the way they are manipulated or controlled by the researcher.

5. Conclusion

We draw five main conclusions from this study. The basic findings of the experiment may be summed up as follows: Firstly, feedback plays an important role for Iranian EFL writing proficiency. The present study found that teacher feedback had a significant effect on accuracy and helps students reduce their errors.

Secondly, this study offers some evidence that teacher feedback used within a process approach to instruction as a means of helping students to edit their writing in order to improve the formal accuracy of the final product is effective, whereas peer feedback is not effective in dealing with grammatical accuracy. We can partly relate the ineffectiveness of peer feedback to the participants' inadequate grammar knowledge. So for grammatical errors, it's up to the teacher to give feedback. It was also found that across the two levels of EFL proficiency, teacher feedback seemed to be more beneficial for low proficiency learners than high proficiency ones in correcting grammatical mistakes, that after treatment, there was no significant difference between group LT's accuracy post-test and group HT's accuracy post-test, with low proficiency learners improving on average 3.6426 points and high-proficient ones improving on average 0.938 points.

Thirdly, peer feedback though in comparison to teacher feedback does not affect grammatical accuracy to any significant degree, was found to be significantly useful in improving the overall writing quality of Iranian EFL student writers. Also, it was found that not only high-proficient students but also low-proficient students appreciated the benefits of peer response. Many studies that examine the effects of peer feedback in L2 have presented conflicting results. This may result from an insufficient understanding of differences between ESL and EFL. Naturally, the EFL and ESL contexts would influence the effects of peer reviews on student writing.

Fourthly, there is not a significant difference between teacher feedback and peer feedback in promoting overall writing performance of the participants. So type of feedback provided did not produce a significant effect upon participants' overall writing scores. From this finding we conclude that peer feedback and teacher feedback can complement each other in promoting overall writing quality, but the study produced no evidence that peer feedback is superior to teacher feedback and therefore should replace the traditional teacher feedback in L2 writing classes.

Lastly, our students value teacher feedback more highly than peer feedback.

6. References

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