

Teaching Academic Writing in Iranian EFL Classrooms: Teacher-initiated Comments or Peer-Provided Feedback?

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Abstract

This research study aimed at investigating whether using peer-provided feedbacks rather than teacher-provided comments would result in any significance difference in Iranian English undergraduate students' ability in writing. In so doing, based on a pretest (an OPT & a writing exam), 40 subjects were assigned to two homogeneous groups of equal number; the subjects in the control group received more traditional form of feedback; i.e., Teacher's Written Comments (TW) and those in the experimental group who received the alternative: Peers' Written Comments (PW). The students were required to write ten paragraphs, five pairs, on each topic, one before receiving feedback and another, the revised version, after the feedback. The analyses of the data revealed that peer feedback--in its general sense--affects students' writing performances, which in turn means that the students do incorporate suggestions made by their teacher and/or peers while revising their drafts. In sum, Peer-reviews in the form of comments and suggestions given by the students on one another's drafts proved beneficial.

Keywords: English Writing, Peer-provided feedbacks, Teacher-provided comments, Iranian EFL learners

1. Introduction

For a long time, the unique benefits language learners could contribute to each other and to the instruction were totally disregarded in L2 writing classes. Such a lack of recognizing the contributions that L2 learners can make has given way to an active effort to tap the potential of learners as teachers in L2 writing processes. This idea has given rise to peer response as part of the process approach to teaching L2 writing. Peer response activities, where

students work together to provide feedback on one another's writing in both written and oral formats through active engagement with each other's progress over multiple drafts, have become a common characteristic of recent L2 writing instruction. In fact, research and practice in teaching writing in English (such as White & Arndt, 1991) tends to focus on teaching and facilitating the development of what have been shown to be "good" writing practices, rather than on instructing students about the

characteristics of a “good” piece of writing. Central to such practice is a process of writing, revising, and rewriting in response to such considerations as the way in which the ideas generated by the act of writing relate to the purpose of the text and audience who will receive it. In order for this process of writing, revising, and rewriting to be developmental, however, some form of constructive feedback to successive pieces of writing is usually desirable and often necessary.

As Muncie (2000) argues, in recent years, the mainstream orthodoxy in EFL composition classes shows a great shift from product-oriented approaches to teaching writing to the more process-oriented ones. The advocates of such orientation seek to shift emphasis away from an endless stream of compositions assigned by the teacher, written by the learners, handed in for marking by the teacher. They may feel instinctively that only a better writer--or a native speaker--is qualified to judge or comment on their written work. They may feel that feedback received from classmates whose English level is more or less the same as theirs is a poor alternative to the ‘real need’--that is, the teacher’s periodic red-penned notations. (p. 23)

teacher, handed back to the learners, and promptly forgotten by them as they start on the next assignment. Instead, the emphasis is on the process of writing itself, and involves pre-writing work to generate ideas, and the writing of multiple drafts to revise and extend those ideas.

Good writing requires revision; writers need to write for a specific audience; writing should involve multiple drafts with intervention response at the various draft stages; peers can provide useful feedback at various levels; training students in peer response leads to better revisions and overall improvements in writing quality; and teacher and peer feedback is best seen as complementary. (p. 24)

According to Liu and Hansen (2002), from both cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives, the four theoretical stances which support the use of peer response activities in the writing classroom are “process writing theory, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and interaction and second language acquisition” (p. 2). Research based on these theoretical stances has provided substantial evidence that peer response activities, in fact, help second language learners develop their L2 writing abilities.

Although in recent years the use of peer feedback in ESL writing classrooms has been generally supported in the literature as a potentially valuable aid for its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits (Mendonca & Johnson, Villamil & DeGuerrero, 1996), doubts on the part of many ESL teachers and students are not uncommon. According to Rollinson (2005), teachers may question peer feedback’s value within their particular context, or wonder how such a time-consuming activity can be reconciled with course or examination constraints. Rollinson further maintains that students may have even more doubts: However, some of the more significant insights that have emerged from a substantial amount of research over the last two decades into the value of different kinds of response offered to student writers are summarized by Rollinson (2005) in no particular order as the following:

It is worth mentioning that it is true that less than profitable interactions have also been found within peer groups sometimes because of the participants’ lack of trust in the accuracy, sincerity, and specificity of the comments of their peers (Zhang, 1995). In the light of the above issues, both advantages and disadvantages of peer response activities, it seems that applying peer feedbacks instead of teacher comments in teaching writing in EFL contexts,

including in Iran, still needs more investigations. This research study, therefore, aimed at investigating whether using peer-provided feedbacks rather than teacher-provided comments would result in any significance difference in students' ability in writing or not.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

At first, a group of 120 EFL Iranian students, 18 males and 102 females, participated in the pretest phase prior to the main phase of the experiment. They were all Persian native speakers aged between 20 and 26. They were English Translation sophomores taking Advanced Writing course at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch. The pretest consisted of two sub-parts: first, a standard English proficiency test--Oxford Placement Test (OPT)--and second, a writing exam consisting of one-paragraph on the given topic: Which family member do you get along with best? Why? After the completion of the pretests, 40 students whose scores on the OPT and the writing test were within the Upper Intermediate domain were selected. Then, the 40 subjects were assigned to two homogeneous groups of equal number (N=20). In practice, the subjects in the control group received more traditional form of feedback; i.e., Teacher's Written Comments (TW) and those in the experimental group who received the alternative: Peers' Written Comments (PW).

2.2. Instrumentation

The instruments employed in this study were a 2000 version of a 100 multiple-choice items standard proficiency test (OPT), a 60-minute writing pretest on the given topic, a peer response sheet for a one-paragraph composition, and both teacher and student guidelines for preparing EFL students for peer response. The 40 students participating in this study, in addition to their course book Paragraph Writing

Simplified written by Ostrom and Cook (1993), received a handout including the necessary information about paragraph development. The handout composed of seven units covering the topics pertinent to the advanced writing course such as the elements of writing and the process of writing, paragraph structure, characteristics of a good paragraph, hints for revising the paragraphs, avoiding jargon, and the conventions of punctuations, collected by the researchers from different writing books written by Bailey and Powell (1989), Messenger and Taylor (1989), Fitzgerald (1993), and Nezhad Ansari (2002). The content validity of the handout was approved by the three colleagues of the researchers who were all experienced writing instructors.

As a matter of fact, peer review involves sharing one's writing with a group of readers who offer feedback and suggestions for improvement. To approach peer critique task in this study, separate worksheets with some focus questions were used. Just as journal editors provide criteria lists to guide readers' comments and evaluations for a professional review, the researchers led the students' feedback on each other's drafts by providing them with a list of characteristics that were important to their success on the paragraph writing assignment. Petty (1998), advocating the idea of using worksheets, states that worksheets require students to develop carefully the skills of reading and attending to details. These worksheets offered a systematically organized format that students could follow to analyze the written work of their classmates.

The students were required to write ten paragraphs, five pairs, on each topic, one before receiving feedback and another, the revised version, after the feedback. The five expository topics that the students were required to write on during the 15-week semester were chosen from the book *Talk Your Head Off and Write Too* written by

Your Head Off and Write Too written by West (1997). The students were asked to write their paragraphs on special worksheets to be unified all through the process of writing. On top of this worksheet students had to write the required information on author's name, respondent's name, practice number, and the date. The paragraphs were written during the span of 15 weeks in the Fall-Winter semester, 2008. To moderate the effect of text genre, following what Roebuck (2001, p. 211) suggests, in this study all the topics of the written paragraphs were limited to one single genre; i. e., exposition.

The second phase of this study utilized seven sources of data based on the seven groups carrying out the five tasks, i.e. writing and revising the five paragraphs in the span of 15 sessions. Each task took three weeks to be done fully. In the first sessions of all tasks, the students were required to write the first drafts during the class hour, under the supervision of the teacher. Then the papers were collected by the researchers. Depending on the group division, the researchers either commented on the papers themselves or distributed them among the students to comment on, but before this, the teacher deleted the students' names and assigned a coded number to each paper. The process of name deletion was implemented by the researchers due to the fact that the nature of sharing writing with others could produce anxiety for many students.

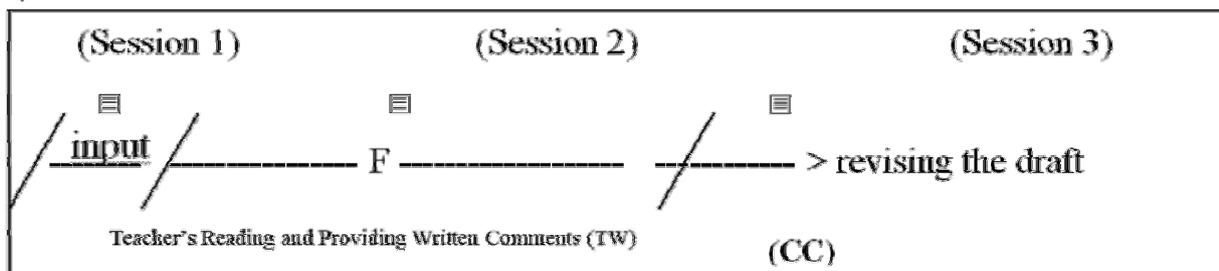
2.2.1. Group (1): Teacher's Written Comments (TW)

The teacher asked the students participating in this group to write a paragraph on the first topic given to them (the 1st session). After collecting the papers, the teacher wrote her comments on students' first drafts which were then given directly to the writers of the papers. The corrective feedback given by the teacher involved coded error correction in which both the type and location of each error were indicated in writing on the paper. After receiving this written feedback, the students were given time to read the comments and ask any questions or seek clarification about what their teacher had written (the 2nd session). The students were then asked to rewrite their paragraphs based on the received written comments from their teacher and bring them back to the class (the 3rd session). Then the papers were collected by the teacher and put in an archive for later analysis. The whole writing process consisting of drafting, commenting, and revising can be shown as the following in Figure 1.

2.2.2. Group (2) Peers' Written Comments (PW)

The students in this group were asked to write their paragraphs on the first topic. Next, the teacher collected the papers, deleted the students' names, and assigned a coded number to each paper to prevent any prejudgments in evaluating the papers and giving comments by the respondent(s).

Figure 1. Implementation of TW on Students' Drafts of Writing



F. Feedback
 ■ :Draft

TW: Teacher's Written Comments
 CC: Comments Corrections

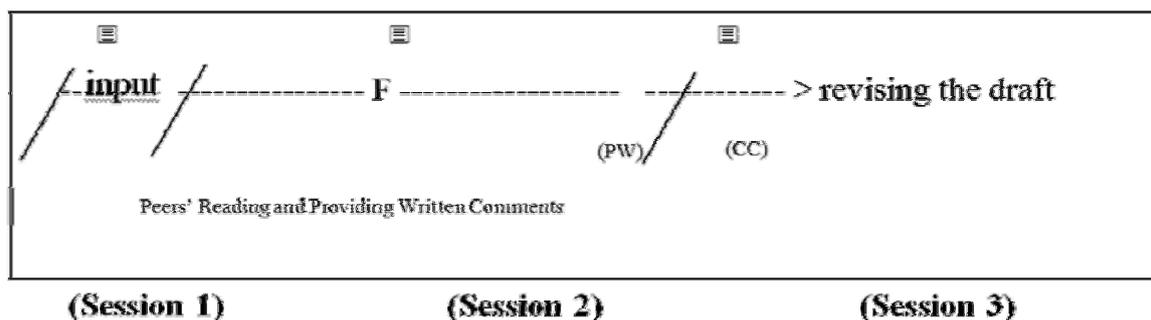


Figure 2. Implementation of PW on Students' Drafts of Writing

Feedback TW: Teacher's Written Comments
 : Draft CC: Comments Corrections

Then, she distributed them among the students and asked them to write their comments (the 1st session). Then as an out-of-class activity, each student read the other student's paper and prepared his/her response to that, using the focus questions provided by the researchers on a worksheet. In the next class time, all the students brought the papers and the written comments on each back to the class and handed them in to the teacher. The teacher attached the deleted names to the papers on the basis of the coded numbers, gave them back to the writers, and asked them to revise their drafts (the 2nd session). And finally, each student used this feedback to rewrite his/her paper and gave it back to the teacher (the 3rd session). The papers were collected by the teacher in a separate file. The writing process of this group can be shown graphically in Figure 2.

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The assessment of each draft was made by two raters marking independently. They were the researchers themselves, and one of their experienced colleagues. The second rater had ten years of experience in teaching advanced writing and essay writing courses and was well-accustomed to setting and marking writing assignments. The raters scored the papers holistically. Nevertheless, to eliminate any prejudgments in the process of scoring, the co-rater attended a briefing session and was given detailed instructions as well as sample writing with a discussion of the marking of the papers. This session was held to ensure consistent grading between the raters. After scoring

the compositions, the inter-rater reliability was calculated and it turned out to be 0.916 which was significant at 0.001 level. Moreover, the researchers calculated the intra-rater reliability for each rater to make sure that the raters were consistent all throughout their ratings. The results were 0.9614 for the first rater and 0.9726 for the second rater which were both significant at 0.001 level.

3. Findings

As it was stated earlier, there were two sources of feedbacks, teacher-provided versus peer-provided. Therefore, the students' scores on these two types of feedbacks were separately calculated. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the two feedback sources.

It can be seen in Table 1 that the means of the two sources of feedback are different. In order to find out if the difference was statistically significant or not, the researchers applied a two-tailed t-test to the results. The amount of the t-observed ($t=4.645$, $p=0.001$) tells us that the difference between the means of the teacher-provided versus peer-provided feedbacks is statistically significant. Therefore, the research null hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between the two sources of feedbacks can be rejected safely.

4. Discussion

Generally speaking, this study reveals that peer feedback--in its general sense--affects students' writing performances, which in turn means that the students do incorporate suggestions made by their teacher and/or

peers while revising their drafts. In the process of editing the drafts, each feedback type has its own special effect on improving students' writing performances. The findings of this study are in line with those of other similar studies on the nature of peer feedback and its influence on revision (Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Tahririan & Mazdayasna, 2001), and that not only students find peer response experience beneficial and see numerous advantages of working in groups, but its social dimension can also enhance the participant's attitudes towards writing (Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994). Peer response activities also aid students' writing by making them more aware of their audience and give them a sense of text ownership by presenting their work to others besides their instructors.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of feedback in the development of EFL learners' writing ability. Peer-reviews in the form of comments and suggestions given by the students on one another's drafts proved beneficial. Revision based on such feedback reinforced the idea that the students were writing for real audience other than the teacher. The most valuable feedback came from the peers in the form of comments, suggestions, and conferences, which were very significant because the students usually checked their second drafts before writing a third draft to avoid repeating the same errors. Peer feedback on the various drafts enhanced the writer's

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Two Sources of Feedbacks: Teacher versus Peer

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
TW	20	53.67	11.78	2.63	29.00	70.50
PW	20	70.37	10.94	2.44	52.00	89.50

performances through the writing process to the eventual final product. Finally, feedback promoted self-esteem and built important communication bridges between learners and the teacher who worked with them. According to Byrd (2003), “writing, regardless of where it is found in today’s curriculum, has become more interactive in nature; peer editing reflects this shift” (p. 434). Still, a number of foreign language teachers are at a loss as to where to begin such activities. This study presents ideas on how to design and carry out a peer editing response activity and demonstrates several methods that can fit most writing task situations. These methods may help students to gain vital editing skills that not only will improve a peer’s paper, but in time also increase their own confidence in writing, improve the content and conventions of their written work, and enhance their thinking skills.

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