

The Effect of Metalinguistic Clues on Iranian EFL Learners' Accuracy of Writing Performance

Parisa Maali

Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran
Email: parisa_maali@yahoo.com

*Mahnaz Saeidi **

Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran
Email: m_saeidi@iaut.ac.ir; mnsaeidi@yahoo.ca

Abstract

Accuracy in writing is one of the important characteristics of a good writer, which raises concerns about how to improve it and which type of feedback can effectively contribute to its development. This quasi-experimental study, within the theoretical framework of Focus on Form (FoF), investigated the effects of metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks on the accurate use of conditional sentences in writing discourse. Participants were 56 female EFL learners at the intermediate level, comprising two groups of experimental (N = 28) and comparison (N = 28) in a language institute in Tabriz. After checking the homogeneity of the participants by a proficiency test, they were pre-tested. In the experimental group, participants received metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks, while in the comparison group, participants received dictogloss tasks, without any meta-linguistic feedback. After the treatment, two groups were post-tested. ANCOVA data analysis revealed that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group in the accurate use of conditional sentences in their writing performance. The results of this study will be a valuable contribution in how to enhance students' accuracy in written discourse by giving feedback through metalinguistic clues.

Keywords: Accuracy, Conditional Sentences, Dictogloss, Meta-linguistic Clues, Writing Performance

1. Introduction

In the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, presenting grammar has always remained a controversial issue for both practitioners and researchers in terms of whether and how to include it in the classroom (Doughty & Williams, 1988a; Chakir & Kafa, 2014). Furthermore, particular characteristics of EFL settings make it apparent that why grammar instruction figures heavily in the EFL curriculum. However, learners of English as a foreign language are well aware of the fact that, despite years of study, they are still unable to use the English language communicatively (Fotos, 1998). Some teachers and researchers have been concerned about the issue of grammar for a long time (Hasannejad & Mollahosainy, 2011). Most of them have tried to find suitable methods and strategies in order to facilitate the acquisition of this challenging subject (Song & Suh, 2008).

It is generally agreed that paying attention to grammatical form is fruitful, perhaps necessary, but many issues related to the teaching of grammar still need further research and more treatment (Parvaz & Gorjian, 2013). In this regard, with the advent of form-focused instruction (FFI), as a modification of communicative language teaching, a shift occurred from implicit grammar teaching instruction to formal and meaningful grammar teaching syllabus (Ebrahimi, Rezvani & Kheirzadeh, 2015). According to Long (1991), there was a dichotomy between Focus on Form (FoF) and Focus on Forms (FoFs) in teaching grammatical structures of a language for many years. Taken these concerns into account, in recent years much has been written, on both theoretical and empirical aspects of the FFI in the second language learning and foreign language learning contexts.

Renewed interest in FoF has provided a major shift from the traditional teaching of grammar to treating grammatical errors in meaningful contexts while the primary focus remains on meaning (e.g., Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). In fact, FoF is in contrast with FoFs or the traditional grammar instruction in which teachers teach grammar out of context, based on its linguistic rules (Ollerhead & Oosthuizen, 2005). As Doughty and William (1998b) asserted, FoF approach, which has developed as a reaction to the inadequacy of purely communicative approaches to promote high levels of target language accuracy, has utilized Corrective Feedback (CF) (both explicit and implicit) to momentarily divert learners' attention to form while they are engaged in doing tasks.

Feedback, as one of the FoF techniques, has always been widely used in English language writing classes. Ur (1996) defines feedback as “information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of the learning task, usually with the objective of improving their performance” (p. 242). Swain (1998) claims that teachers can provide learners with feedback opportunity based on the content and grammar. Error correction is divided into six types: explicit correction, recast, clarification request, elicitation, repetition and metalinguistic clues correction (Heift, 2004). Implicit focus on form can be achieved by means of recast, repetition, clarification request, metalinguistic clues and comprehension check. Metalinguistic clues are raising learners’ Metalinguistic Awareness, which were defined by Tedick and De Gortari (1998), as the teacher’s questions, comments, or any other information that is in relation to the student’s utterance. They discussed also the direct delivery of the correct and that it is not in the metalinguistic clues correction.

Rassaei, Moinzadeh, and Youhanaee (2012) have defined metalinguistic clues as “providing the learner with the type of error he/she made implicitly” (p. 60). This means; the teacher helps the learner, at least not completely, to determine the type of the error he made. In metalinguistic clues, the learner is the only one who will work to detect and correct the error. The role of the teacher is a guide and information producer not a corrector of the error. Error correction is defined as a response to learner’s mistake by making the students be aware of where the error has occurred, or by providing the correction to the error, or by providing the metalinguistic information of this error, or a mixture of all these (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006).

Dictogloss has been the subject of a number of studies, which have, for the most part, supported its use (Kooshafar, Youhanaee, & Amirian, 2012; Lim & Jacobs, 2001). The supporters of the method pointed out that dictogloss is a multiple skills and system activity (Vasiljevic, 2010). The dictogloss task can be used to focus equally on form and meaning as learners reconstruct the texts and produce complex syntactic structures (Lapkin & Swain, 2001).

Although there have been numerous studies regarding the comparative examination of the effect of different types and techniques of focus on form and feedback (e.g., Afshari & Oroujlou, 2012; Doughty & Varela, 1998; Nguyen, Pham, & Pham, 2012), there have been few studies, if any, implementing metalinguistic clues within dictogloss tasks in error

treatment of conditional sentences in written discourse. In other words, almost no study focused on error treatment of conditional sentences through metalinguistic clues in order to find out whether it is the best candidate in focus on form approach. As Harley (1993, as cited in Williams & Evan, 1998) states, some forms are the best candidate to focus on form. Therefore, conditional sentences have been chosen based on the assumption that conditional structures are not salient because they are irregular or infrequent in the input; as a result, they are the best candidates for Focus on Form (FoF) approach (Harley, 1993, as cited in Williams & Evans, 1998) to investigate the efficacy of FoF in terms of grammatical structures. Thus, the purpose of this study was to focus on more innovative grammar instruction within FoF approach to enhance the accuracy of the target grammatical structure (i.e., conditional sentences) within meaningful FoF tasks (i.e., dictogloss).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Grammar and Approaches to Grammar Teaching

Defining grammar is the starting point from which the discussion can start. When pronouncing the word grammar, the first thing that comes to mind is rules of structure. Different theories exist in the literature regarding grammar. Radford (2004) mentioned that “grammar is classified into two interconnected areas which are syntax and morphology. Morphology studies how smaller units are combined to form words and Syntax studies how sentences are built out of words” (p. 2). Having defined what is meant by grammar, Savage, Gretchen, and Band (2010) additionally noted that in the long history of second language instruction, grammar is known as memorizing a group of rules.

Furthermore, there has been a different definition towards the grammar. For example, according to Cook (1994), grammar is seen as the set of rules, which describes how we can put words or groups of words together to form sentences in a language. Cook (1994) further states that, “...grammar is not a constraining imposition but a liberating force: it frees us from a dependency on context and a purely lexical categorization of reality” (p. 36). According to Thornbury (1999), “grammar is a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account of the meanings that these forms convey” (p. 13).

Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps the learners either to

understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production, so that they can internalize it (Ellis, 2006). Ellis (2006) further mentioned that, the study of how learners acquire a second language has helped us shape thinking about how to teach the grammar of a second language. There are many answers to this question, which could be placed along a continuum with extremes at either end. At one end, there are highly explicit approaches to grammar teaching, and at the other end, the implicit approaches that avoid treating form explicitly. Ellis (2005) also pointed out that traditional grammar teaching is viewed as the presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures.

Due to the problems presented by traditional structure-based grammar teaching, Long (1991) offered the FoF distinguishing it from FoFs approach to teaching grammar (Long & Robinson, 1998). Whereas FoFs involves discrete grammatical forms selected and presented in an isolated manner, FoF includes the teacher's attempts to draw the student's attention to grammatical forms in the context of communication (Long, 2000).

2.2. Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback (CF), targeting the erroneous linguistic features, is the information the learner receives about his or her performance (Ur, 1996). CF has been categorized based on its degree of implicitness and explicitness (ranging from implicit to explicit). Implicit types of corrective feedback are those which do not overtly indicate errors and thus do not disrupt the flow of communication. Explicit corrective feedback, on the other hand, overtly indicates the erroneous features in students' output and thus is likely to impinge on communication (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Rassaei, Moinszadeh, & Youhanaee, 2012).

Lyster and Ranta's (1997) classification of CF includes recasts, clarification requests, repetition, elicitation, metalinguistic, and explicit correction, which are along an implicit/explicit continuum feedback types. Recasts, clarification requests, repetition, and elicitation fall under the category of implicit feedback, whereas metalinguistic and explicit correction can be grouped under the category of explicit feedback (Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006). In Metalinguistic feedback, the teacher does not explicitly provide the correct form, rather s/he asks questions like "What's the past form of go?" to indicate that the utterance is erroneous (Lightbown & Spada, 2007).

The findings of the research studies regarding feedback strategies and the effect they bear on language learning have always been different, and sometimes despairingly controversial, to the extent that some researchers have even cast doubt on their effectiveness, applicability and reliability (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Kim, 2004; Long, 2006).

A number of studies show that indirect feedback results in either greater or similar levels of accuracy over time (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2000; Lalande, 1982). Lalande (1982) carried out a study among 60 intermediate students for one semester. The study used a pre-test essay and two draft essays. Direct and indirect feedback treatments were used. The direct group had their errors corrected directly and rewrote their work while the indirect group had correction codes, rewrote their work and had an error awareness sheet. The study found that the students who received indirect correction made significantly fewer errors compared to the direct correction. Guenette (2007) criticizes Lalande's pretest results that showed significant differences in the students' writing abilities in that it is not clear how these results were arrived at. Lalande's study also lacked a true control group that did not receive any feedback at all. This could have made comparison easier as to whether some feedback was superior to no feedback. In this study, the control group received direct error correction since this is the most commonly adopted strategy in Iranian ELT practices.

2.3. Dictogloss

Dictogloss, as one of the FoF techniques (Doughty & Williams, 1998b), is an alternative method of grammar instruction (Ruth Wajnryb, 1990). In a dictogloss task, the teacher reads a text three times with normal speed and students listen, take notes, and check their notes to reconstruct the text, respectively; the text includes the target structure (Vasiljevic, 2010). According to Swain (1998), a dictogloss task is based on the condition of task-essentialness; that is, a learner attends to a particular linguistic form to complete the task. In addition, it combines dictation and paraphrase (Newman, 2012). Thus, in a dictogloss task, learners reconstruct the original text relying on their semantic and syntactic knowledge of the target language; they complete the task with the focus remaining on grammatical competence (Vasiljevic, 2010). Furthermore, it can be used both individually and collaboratively (Mehdiabadi & Arabmofrad, 2014). According to Lim and Jacobs

(2001), dictogloss has been the subject of a number of studies, which have, for the most part, supported its use.

There have been enormous studies regarding investigating the effect of different types and techniques of FoF (Afshari & Oroujlou, 2012; Nguyen, Pham, & Pham, 2012; Saeidi, 2009). Furthermore, many researchers investigated the efficacy of dictogloss in L2 learning, such as dyadic interaction (Lim & Jacobs, 2001), formal aspect of language (Al-sibai, 2008), listening skill (Vasiljevic, 2010), and writing performance (Kooshafar, Youhanaee, & Amirian, 2012). In addition, several recent studies investigated different types of CF, focusing on the degree of explicitness in recasts and elicitations (Nassaji, 2009), prompts, recasts, and peer-interaction (Sato & Lyster, 2012), recast, direct feedback and elicitations coupled with metalinguistic clues (Pawlak, 2013). They reported either superiority of CF groups to control and comparison groups or outperformance of the groups receiving explicit types of CF, including the degree of explicitness and coupling with metalinguistic clues. Moreover, several studies within Iranian EFL context, such as Rassaei et al. (2012) reported the efficacy of metalinguistic feedback in comparison with recast in task-based interaction in enhancing both explicit and implicit L2 knowledge. Within Iranian EFL context, Akbarzadeh, Saeidi, and Chehreh (2014), comparing oral interactive feedback, elicitation, and metalinguistic clues with explicit correction, and also reported superiority of oral interactive feedback in both revised compositions and accuracy and complexity in the post-test. Furthermore, Naeimi, Saeidi, & Behnam (2017) examined the degree of explicitness in recast and elicitation and reported supreme position for both explicit recast and elicitation in comparison with no explicit recast and elicitation in uptake and outperformance of explicit elicitation in retention.

However, there have been few studies, if any, on using metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks to investigate the accurate use of conditionals in written discourse. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of conditional sentences in written discourse. To this end, this study tries to answer the following questions:

Do meta-linguistic clues within dictogloss tasks affect the accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

This study was conducted in an Iranian language institute in Tabriz, Iran. The design was a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test and post-test. There were two groups of experimental and comparison in this study. The independent variable was the corrective feedback type of metalinguistic clues and the dependent variable was the accurate use of conditional sentences in the written discourse.

3.2. Participants

The initial participants of this study comprised 70 female EFL language learners with an age range of 16 to 20 at the intermediate level. Their first language is Turkish. By administering a proficiency test, Preliminary English Test (PET), 56 students, meeting the criterion of one standard deviation minus and plus the mean score were selected and 14 of them were excluded from the study. They were in two intact classes: one class as the experimental group (N = 28) and another class as the comparison group (N= 28).

3.3. Instruments

Three data collection instruments were utilized in this study: a proficiency test, a pre-test, and a post-test. Reading and writing sections of PET, with a total score of 40, were used in this study. Speaking and listening sections of this test were not administered due to practical problems. The second instrument was a pre-test, free writing based on two topics. The third instrument was the post-test, based on another two topics. The topics elicited the target structures; for example, for conditionals, one of the topics was: If you could change one thing about your past, what would it be?

In addition, in terms of materials, for teaching conditional sentences types 1 and 2, the dictogloss tasks were adapted from English language books such as *American File 4* (Oxenden & Latham-Koenig, 2014), *American Cutting Edge 3* (Cunningham & Moor, 2007) and *Interchange 2* (Richards, Hull, & Protector, 2005).

Conditional sentences were the target structure in the present study due to its syntactic and semantic complexities, as stated by Chou (2000). The existence of two clauses (main clauses and subordinate clauses) contributes to the syntactic complexity (Lord, 2002). Mindt (1996) also asserted that the learning/acquisition of conditional sentences both in first and second language is problematic.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

First of all, the researchers selected 56 participants (out of initial 70 participants) using PET. Then, the researchers assigned the two classes as one experimental group and another as a comparison group. After that, a pre-test, which was four free writings, were given to the students of both groups to check their knowledge of the intended grammar before the treatment started. Oller (1979) states that “free writing tasks may be scored by a deduction for errors from a maximum permissible score” (p. 32); however, specified passage length needs to be considered since if the length of the passages is not specified, some examinees may write longer passages, which may lead to more errors. Therefore, in this study, the length was considered to be less than 300 words and scoring was based on the deduction for errors from a maximum permissible score. Furthermore, inter-rater reliability was used to ensure the reliability of the obtained scores. The reliability of the pre-test and the post-test in the main group was .92 and .83, respectively, and they were determined by coefficient alpha (Cronbach).

According to Hatch and Farhady (1981), content validity is defined as “the extent to which a test measures a representative sample of the subject matter content” (p. 250). The focus of the content validity is on the adequacy of the sample and not simply on the appearance of the test. For the purpose of content validity of the test, four topics of writing in consultation with two supervisors of Tandis-E-No institute who had several years of experience in teaching English and preparing writing tests in schools and institutions were prepared.

The whole study lasted for 9 sessions; each session lasted for one hour and a half. Forty-five minutes of each session was spent for the treatment (teaching target structures): one session for administering PET, one session for the pre-test, one session for the post-test and 6 sessions for the treatment.

In the experimental group, the target structures were taught through using metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks, which means that the teacher read a reading passage in pre-reading stage three times which was based on the reading passages out of their text books. In addition, the students needed to listen to it and rewrite the original text by using the dictogloss task. This type of task included three steps: First, the students were asked to just listen to the text, which was read by the teacher. Second, the teacher reads the same text, students were asked to take notes and finally, when for the third time the teacher

read the text, students were asked to check their notes. Afterwards, each learner individually reconstructed the original text according to her notes. Then, the teacher collected students' papers (i.e., reconstructed texts) to correct them at home. She underlined the errors considering target structure (conditional sentences), to give metalinguistic clues (i.e., writing the relevant rules beside the errors). She returned the corrected papers to the students during the next session, so that students correct them by themselves at home and return them to the teacher in the next session.

On the other hand, the comparison group received dictogloss tasks without metalinguistic clues. That is, the teacher commented subjectively on their degree of success for reconstructing the original text without giving metalinguistic clues to the errors on the target structures in their writing performance.

Finally, we administered the post-test in both groups. The scoring in both the pre-test and post-test was based on the deduction for errors from a maximum permissible score, which was used for scoring writing tasks by Oller (1979, as cited in Henning, 1987, p. 32).

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Having collected the data from the experimental and comparison groups' PET, pre-test, and post-test, the researchers used Independent Samples t-test to analyze PET scores and ANCOVA to test the hypothesis.

4. Results

To examine the homogeneity of the participants in terms of language proficiency in both groups, first we needed to analyze the scores of the preliminary English test (PET) and then compare the two groups.

4.1. The Preliminary English Test (PET)

First, the researcher administered the proficiency test of the Preliminary English Test (PET) and gathered the scores. To analyze the normality of the distribution of PET scores, the researcher used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (Table 1). If the significant level of the test is more than .05, the null hypothesis (H₀) is not rejected and the distribution of scores is considered normal.

Table 1.

Results of One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Normal Distribution of the PET Scores

	PET
N	70
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.851
P-value	.463

Table 1 shows that the initial number of students was 70. As the results in Table 1 indicate, the P-value of PET scores is more than alpha level (.05), so there is not enough evidence to reject H₀. Thus, the assumption of normality is met for this variable; it means that the scores are normally distributed. Therefore, the researcher chose the participants who got the score within the criterion of Mean \pm 1SD. As a result, the number of participants decreased to 56, in each group 28.

To ensure the homogeneity of participants, the researchers ran Independent Samples t-test for comparing PET scores in both groups (Table 2).

Table 2.

Independent Samples t-test for Comparing PET Scores in Two Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Independent t-test	
						T	p-value
Comparison	28	29.107	3.86	24	39	.032	.970
Experimental	28	29.071	4.56	25	40		

According to the results extracted from Independent Samples t-test in Table 2, mean value of the comparison group and the experimental group is 29.10 and 29.07, respectively. The standard deviation for the comparison and experimental groups are 3.86 and 4.56, respectively. The P-value is more than alpha level, so there is not enough evidence to reject H₀, and groups are homogeneous.

4.2. Testing the Hypothesis

In order to test the research hypothesis, metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks affect Iranian EFL learners' accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse, the

experimental group receiving metalinguistic clues within dictogloss tasks outperforms the comparison group who does not receive any feedback within dictogloss tasks in accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse; the researchers conducted ANCOVA, which is usually used in pretest-posttest designs in which the pre-test is the co-variable. ANCOVA enables the researcher to eliminate the effect of the intervening variable or the pre-test; this reduces the measurement error to a great extent. However, before conducting ANCOVA, some assumptions on the normal distribution of the scores, homogeneity of regression, and equivalence of the variances need to be met. Therefore, the mentioned tests were applied to the research hypothesis.

The first assumption refers to the normal distribution of the data for which the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used (Table 3).

Table 3.

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Normal Distribution of the Scores in the Experimental Group and Comparison Group in Pre-test and Post-test

	Pre-test	Post-test
N	56	56
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	1.079	.833
P-value	.194	.491

As Table 3 displays, the number of participants is 56 and the significance level in both pre-test and post-test is .19 and .49 respectively, and it is higher than the p-value of .05, indicating the normal distribution of the scores.

Moreover, Leven's Test of Equality of Error variance for both groups was carried out to examine the equality of variances (Table 4).

Table 4.

Leven's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Scores of Post-test in Experimental Group and Comparison Group

F	df1	df2	P-value
.050	1	54	.823

As Table 4 indicates, the P-value is .82 and this is more than alpha level, so the equivalence of the variances across post-test is confirmed, meeting the assumption of equal distribution of the scores in both groups.

Finally, regression analysis was conducted in order to examine the slope of regression for the scores in post-test, which yielded the results given in Table 5.

Table 5.
Covariance to Examine the Slope of the Regression for Scores of Post-test in Experimental Group and Comparison Group

Source	Type III Sum of			F	P-value
	Squares	Df	Mean Square		
Group * Pre-test score	.062	1	.062	.030	.864
Error	107.887	52	2.075		

As Table 5 shows, the mean square for group \times pre-test score is .062, the degree of freedom (df) is 1 and also F is .03. The interaction of group \times pre-test score in predicting the dependent variable or post-test score indicated that the interaction effect is not meaningful because P-value is .864 and it is more than alpha level. In other words, there is not a meaningful interaction between the independent variable and the intervening variable, and ANCOVA can be conducted with the assumption of the homogeneity of the slopes (Table 6).

Table 6.
Analysis of Covariance for Comparing the Means in Post-test Scores in Experimental group and Comparison Group

Source	Type III Sum		Mean Square	F	P-value	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
	of Squares	df					
Group	101.228	1	101.228	49.70	.000	.484	1.00
Pre-test	22.265	1	22.265	10.93	.002	.171	.901
Error	107.949	53	2.037				

As the results in Table 6 show, the degree of freedom (df) for the group is 1, the mean square is 101.22 and F is 49.70. The P-value for the group is .000 and this is less than alpha level, so the group effect is significant. Eta squared is .48 and the observed power is 1.0; this means that the analysis is 100% correct in exploring the significant differences.

Moreover, Table 7 shows that the pre-test scores have been controlled. In other words, the effect of pre-test scores has been eliminated from post-test scores, and both groups are compared with each other based on the residual variances.

Table 7.

Descriptive Statistics for Scores in Experimental Group and Comparison Group in the Pre-test, Post-test and Final Estimate (post-test) after Controlling Pre-test

	Pre-test		Post-test		Post-test (Final estimate)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Error
Comparison	15.10	1.61	15.03	1.62	15.05	0.270
Experimental group)	15.17	2.05	17.75	1.74	17.73	0.270

As shown in Table 7, the mean of the pre-test scores for the comparison group is 15.10 and experimental group is 15.17. The mean of the post-test scores for the comparison group is 15.03 and experimental group is 17.75. The mean scores, after controlling the intervening variable is 15.05 for the comparison group and 17.73 for the experimental group ($F = 49.7$, $P < .05$) (see Table 6). Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. That is, the experimental group receiving metalinguistic clues within dictogloss tasks outperformed the comparison group who did not receive any feedback within dictogloss tasks in accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse.

Figure 1 indicates the chart of mean scores in comparison and experimental groups in pre-test and post-test.

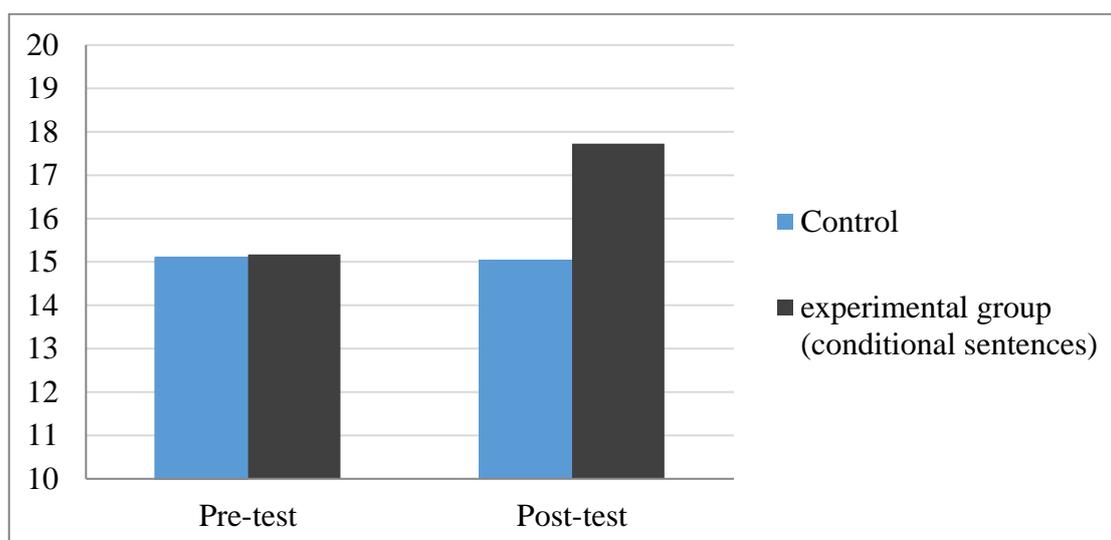


Figure 1. Comparison and experimental groups in pre-test and post-test after controlling the effect of the pre-test as the covariance

As the results in Figure 1 shows, the mean value of the pre-test score for the comparison group and experimental group are 15.1 and 15.17, respectively, and the post-test scores are 15.05 and 17.73, respectively. Therefore, Figure 1 indicates that there is a significant increase in the mean value of post-test in the experimental group after the treatment. Consequently, this shows that the treatment used was effective. That is the experimental group outperformed the comparison group in terms of accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse.

5. Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the experimental group, receiving metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks, outperformed the comparison group, who received no metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks, in accurate use of conditional sentences in written discourse. This result lend supports to Lord (2002) who concluded that although learning conditional sentences are somehow difficult for students, giving metalinguistic clues in dictogloss tasks may have an influence on learning conditional sentences. The superiority of the experimental group is due to giving metalinguistic feedback within a meaningful context provided by dictogloss tasks. This result is consistent with Parrott (2000) who states that we need to encourage students to use grammatical structures in appropriate contexts in order to understand when and why we use it.

According to Harley (1993), conditional sentences are irregular or infrequent in the input so that they are not salient, but while providing implicit feedback (such as metalinguistic clue) it is learned easier. From the FoF perspective, the result in this study is in line with an experimental study, which was done by Jafarigohar, Nourbakhsh, and Hemmati (2013) who compared the effectiveness of FoF instruction with FoFs instruction on learning of conditional sentences. The findings indicated that FoF group performed better than the FoFs group. Finally, this study suggests that FoF instruction might lead to higher accuracy in developing grammatical knowledge in comparison to FoFs.

In contrast to the present study, however, Ebrahimi, Rezvani, and Kheirzadeh (2015) investigated the effectiveness of FoF and FoFs techniques of teaching conditional sentences. The results revealed that using FoFs technique was significantly more effective than using FoF technique in teaching and subsequent learning of conditionals. It seems that this finding might be because of the lack of providing feedback in the FoF group.

Regarding the role of feedback, the result of the current study is in line with the study carried out by Lightbown and Spada (1990, as cited in Long & Robinson, 1998). They have checked the accuracy of the learners in using progressive *-ing* and possessive determiners *his* and *her*, who had received corrective feedback. The findings indicated that those who had received corrective feedback 20% of the time in one class performed more accurately on picture description task in comparison with other classes of learners who had received corrective feedback 10% and 13% of the time. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that those learners whose teachers had focused on a particular grammatical point, performed better on those grammatical points. The findings suggest that corrective feedback have a positive effect on students' learning.

Li (2017) and Rahimi (2009) also emphasize the importance of providing feedback on formal aspects of language, and the results of these studies revealed that it was beneficial to L2 learning. In addition, Chandler (2003) studied the impact of direct and indirect error feedback on two ESL undergraduate groups for a 14-week semester. The results indicated that students who received indirect corrective feedback and were required to self-edit themselves gained more accuracy than those who were provided with direct corrective feedback. Similarly, Lalande (1982) carried out a study among 60 intermediate students for one semester in order to check the effect of direct and indirect feedback. The

study found that the students who received indirect correction made significantly fewer errors compared to the direct correction.

Furthermore, most of the studies in French/English acquisition in Canada by White (1991), Harley (1989), and Day and Shapson (1991) have shown that groups of learners who received feedback initially performed better than groups of learners who received no feedback. Purnawarman (2011) claims that providing teacher written corrective feedback on students' writings is the most effective type of corrective feedback since it provides a long-term effect in terms of improving writing accuracy. A research by Carless (2006) lent support to the position that students who receive feedback during the writing process have a clearer sense of how well they are performing and what they need to do to improve.

Moreover, feedback that students receive in reconstructing the text in dictogloss tasks is within a meaningful context, which draws their primary attention to meaning, which, in turn, is the underlying basis of FoF. Thus, as Lapkin and Swain (2001) state, students attend to both form and meaning equally in dictogloss tasks. Shak (2006) similarly states that dictogloss is a type of FoF task, which provides a meaning-focused context to raise learners' awareness of the discursial use of the target linguistic features.

According to the results of this study, metalinguistic clues are recommended as a procedure for error correction since the procedure neither imposes nor provides the direct answer to the students. The error is mentioned in an indirect way, then the chance and the necessary time are given to the student to correct. So, the student has the opportunity for self-correction.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the results of the current quasi-experimental study demonstrated that in FoF instruction the use of dictogloss tasks accompanied by metalinguistic clues leads to higher accuracy in the written discourse. As Ashwell (2000) mentions, feedback increases attention, which can lead to a gain in accuracy in both form and content of the writing. Thus, the results of this study may shed more lights on the efficacy of metalinguistic clues, implemented in dictogloss tasks, in improving students' grammatical accuracy in written discourse.

Since the present study focused on conditional sentences, additional research on other grammatical forms differing on their complexity can contribute to the field,

especially if different proficiency levels and different feedback types are employed. The results of this study can be used to inform ESL/EFL teachers and researchers who are interested in applying or investigating various types of teachers' corrective feedback strategies, including implicit types of feedback, such as metalinguistic clues, as used in this study.

Moreover, the gained results from the current study can help teachers to decide better, when they face dilemma choosing implicit or explicit feedback in error treatment in written discourse to improve the accurate use of certain grammatical structures, such as conditional sentences, in the Iranian EFL context.

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