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THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER'S WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNER'S WRITING ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effects of teacher's handwritten comment on Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learner's revision in a multidraft writing class. A total of 120 male and female participants were selected from the pool of students at Islamic Azad Universities, Amol & Mahmoodabad branch. They were homogenized on their language proficiency as well as their writing ability and were randomly assigned into experimental and control groups, each group is later divided in two language proficiency levels (high & low). In this study, 600 EFL learner's composition draft received imperative written commentaries on the content of essay. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for EFL instructors to provide feedback to their student writers with elaborate and clear written comments. The conclusion is that written feedback is still the primary method of response to EFL texts.

Key Words: *Written Feedback, Student's Writing, Language Proficiency, Writing Improvement, Imperative Comment*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered as one of the important skills due to its application in every course. Students need to write for different purposes. Despite the necessity of this skill many students feel they are not good at writing. Teachers and syllabus designers attempted to motivate students by tapping different ways. One important attempt is by providing feedback. In fact, Coffin *et al.*, (2003) maintains that "the provision of feedback on student's writing is a central pedagogic practice". Despite the fact that research on the impact of teacher written feedback on student's texts has been surprisingly scarce, most of the findings yield the significance of the impact of this type of feedback leaves on student's abilities (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener and Knoch, 2009; Sugita, 2006). Mc Donough (2002) utilizes the terms feedback and correction interchangeably and views feedback as strong feature of pedagogical language. He believes that learner's errors are indispensable part of language development in spite of the role of errors in language instruction.

In Ferri's (1995) investigation, the subjects were surveyed on their reactions to teacher's comments on their preliminary and final drafts in terms of their degree of paying attention to their teacher's feedback. The finding of her research although being tentative in some areas, suggests that students reread their papers more often and pay more attention to teacher feedback on earlier drafts than on final drafts. Moreover, majority of the subjects (93.5%) felt their teacher's feedback had helped them to improve their writing.

Sugita (2006) research attempts to examine the relationship between the changes in the student's revisions and the influence of teacher's three common types of statement, imperative and question. Sugita (2006) small scale study concludes that although teachers tend to avoid comments in their imperative form, imperatives are found to be more influential on revisions.

Many teachers complain students repeat the same mistake despite providing feedback. This makes the researcher to see if students take the advantage of written feedback through imperative comments. Specifically, the present study investigates the impact of effectiveness of teacher's handwritten comments on Iranian EFL learner's revisions in a multidraft writing class. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

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1. Does teacher written commentary as means of feedback provision affect EFL learner's writing ability?
2. Does teacher's written feedback vary across different language proficiency levels?

Background

A growing body of research has questioned the effectiveness of CWF (Lalande, 1982; Robb *et al.*, 1986; Semke, 1984) while several other researches found CF as a useful tool in an EFL classroom (Cathcart and Olsen, 1976; Dulay and Burt, 1977; Krashen and Selinger, 1975). In so doing, different types of WCF were scrutinized in different studies namely error identification, direct error correction, indirect error correction, comments on errors with no correction, metalinguistic feedback, comments on content (Chandler, 2003; Clark and Ouellette, 2008; Hartshorn, 2008; Sheen, 2007). Some researchers provide evidence that teachers often change student's language according to what they think learners want to or should say, but there is a mismatch between the idea that a student wants to express and that which a teacher assumes is correct (Ferris, 1995; Gass and Selinker, 1994; Zamel, 1985).

This problem roots in a misunderstanding between students and teachers. Ferris (1995) and Hyland (1998) have also provided evidence that students often do not understand the meaning of the WCF on their papers and also do not know what they are expected to do with the WCF. They found incongruity between student's use of feedback and the teacher's intentions regarding CWF. Some other researchers provide preferences for some types of WCF. Other, preferring explicit WCF on their structural errors studies, has provided evidence that students prefer commentary WCF on content rather than on structural errors (Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985; Ferris, 1995; Ashwell, 2000; Lee, 2005).

One of the major problem in WCF study concern mismatches between student's and teacher's perceptions. For instance, a teacher might find certain type of WCF useful while student may not agree with it. Therefore both teacher and students must come to this conclusion that WCF is still a primary response to EFL texts. The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not teacher's handwritten comment on EFL learner's revision in a multidraft writing class can affect learner's writing ability. A secondary goal is to determine if such method of response to EFL text can vary across different language proficiency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

In this study, a sum of 120 male and female participants were selected from the total population of the available senior students at Islamic Azad University of Amol and Mahmodabad University (N=159), Iran. The participants were divided into high and low proficiency level as they were screened on their TOEFL test performance. To ascertain the homogeneity of the subgroups (high & low proficiency groups) a one-way ANOVA was run on the scores of pre-test. The results confirmed the homogeneity of the subgroups, i.e. the high proficiency group differed significantly from the low proficiency group but the written feedback (WF) group didn't differ significantly from non-written feedback (NWF) group, before the treatment.

Instrumentation

The reading and writing subsets of TOEFL (Longman, 2001) as a general language proficiency measure were used as the first instrument to screen the subjects in two language proficiency level, high and low. The test comprised 150 multiple choice items in reading comprehension structure and written expression.

The second instrument was the analytic scale of rating composition tasks based on Holly *et al.*, (1981) composition profile (See appendix A). The categories of the rating scale of the study were:

- Organization: introduction, body and conclusion

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- Content: Logical development of the idea
- Language use : (i.e., Structure)
- Mechanics: Punctuation and spelling
- Vocabulary

In order to reach a partial consistency in rating of the participants pretest and posttest compositions, two raters compiled their expected behaviors in the form of rater protocol to increase the conformity of the ratings.

Procedures

To tap the possible effects of teacher's handwritten comments on Iranian EFL learner's revision in a multiple draft writing class, participants were divided into two proficiency levels according to their performance on TOEFL test to insure their homogeneity. Grouping was done based on the dispersion of the TOEFL scores around the mean. Each proficiency group was randomly classified into two WF and NWF group, namely, high WF group, low WF group, high NWF, and low NWF group. Then, the participants were to write a five paragraph essay on an IELTS based topic which was common to all four groups. The topic of the present composition was: The differences between old and new generation.

The students were encouraged to preferably type their essays. The collected compositions were then rated by two experienced raters based on Holly *et al.*, (1981) composition rating rubrics. To ascertain the homogeneity of the subgroups (high & low proficiency groups) a one-way ANOVA was run on the scores of pre-test. The results indicate that student's ability in L2 writing was almost at the same level prior to receiving feedback.

Up to this stage the subjects had learned the basic elements in essay writing like how to write a thesis statement and blueprint, introductory body, and conclusion. Students were assigned to write an essay at the end of the class. They were required to type the assignment and hand it to their teacher. They were asked to write on different topics including how to rear a child, the impact of discipline in your life, If you had an authority to change the educational system in Iran, what would be your change about it?, Describe the characteristics of good teacher/good learner, and what are the role of culture in language learning. The collected drafts then were commented on. These comments were only on the content of the essay. The comments on the content comprised text organization, choice of word and style of writing. Both praise and criticism were central to the comments. The process of commenting to the draft took 10 minutes for each composition. Some of the teacher's written feedback provided in front of each student after the class time to foster teacher-student interaction.

Subsequently, the participants had to revise their draft on a week later. However the teacher did not explain the erroneous point or provide the students with the correct alternative. Students in the control group were encouraged by the instructor to revise their draft based on their classmate comments, their textbook or other sources.

After the end of treatment the subjects were being asked to write another expository composition on a different topic as the posttest to tap their improvement on writing ability. After computing the inter-rater reliability of the two rater a two way ANOVA was run to seek whether the difference between the scores at the pretest and posttest in expository writing were significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, the subject's performances on the TOEFL test and expository writing employed in this study were tabulated and subjected to the conventional descriptive analyses. The inter-rater reliability of the

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expository writing for the pre-test was computed to be (.87). The following tables (1&2) illustrate the corresponding descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for all measures involved in the study

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
TOEFL	120	550.92	5.18	56.694	3214.228	-.026
PRETEST	120	15.09	.27	2.965	8.790	-.008
POSTTES	120	20.21	.53	5.798	33.612	.077
T						
Valid N (listwise)	120					

Table 2: Correlation Coefficient for pre test of writing

		RATER1	RATER2
RATER1	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.871**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	120	120
RATER2	Pearson Correlation	.871**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	120	120

As it was mentioned earlier, subjects in the written feedback received teacher's commentary feedback. These comments were imperative sentences. The subjects in the non-written feedback groups, control group, used a more traditional approach. They did not receive feedback. They were encouraged by the instructor to revise their draft based on their classmate comments. At the end of the treatment, the post-test expository writing was administered to tap their writing performance. In addition, the probable differences in all groups were examined after the treatment. The inter-rater reliability of all groups as indicated in table 3 was relatively high (.82).

After rating the post-test, the scores were subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. To check the null hypotheses corresponding to research questions, a Two-way ANOVA was conducted on subject's performances on the Post-test writing ability. The results are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficient for pre test of writing

		RATER1	RATER2
RATER1	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.824**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	120	120
RATER2	Pearson Correlation	.824**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	120	120

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Table 4: Two-way ANOVA for post-test

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	3695.492(a)	3	1231.831	469.577	.000
Intercept	49005.208	1	49005.208	18680.921	.000
PROF	2832.408	1	2832.408	1079.722	.000
WF	858.675	1	858.675	327.329	.000
PROF *WF	4.408	1	4.408	1.680	.197
Error	304.300	116	2.623		
Total	53005.000	120			
Corrected Total	3999.792	119			

a R Squared = .924 (Adjusted R Squared =.922)

WF= Written feedback group

As Table 4 indicates, there are significant main effects for both the PROF and the written feedback (WF) factors: the effects of both factors are significant beyond the .01 level. Despite the main effects of both factors, there is not a significant interaction. The P-value is given as .197, which means that it is more than .05. As indicated in table 4, there is a significant difference between WF and NWF groups. The findings confirm the effect of written feedback on the EFL learner’s writing performance. Despite the difference between high and low proficiency groups, there was not a significant interaction between written feedback and proficiency levels of the subjects. Consequently, the second null hypothesis, stating written feedback activities does not vary across different language proficiency levels, is supported. In order to locate the exact differences between pairs of groups, a Post Hoc Scheffe test was run the results of which are summarized in table5 below. Inspection of the P-values shows that there are significant and meaningful differences among all four groups (P<.05).

Table 5: Post Hoc Scheffe Test for Post-test

(I) 4	(J) 4	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
High WF	high NWF	5.73(*)	.418	.000	4.55	6.92
	low WF	10.10(*)	.418	.000	8.91	11.29
	low NWF	15.07(*)	.418	.000	13.88	16.25
High NWF	high WF	-5.73(*)	.418	.000	-6.92	-4.55
	low WF	4.37(*)	.418	.000	3.18	5.55
	low NWF	9.33(*)	.418	.000	8.15	10.52
Low WF	high WF	-10.10(*)	.418	.000	-11.29	-8.91
	high NWF	-4.37(*)	.418	.000	-5.55	-3.18
	low NWF	4.97(*)	.418	.000	3.78	6.15
Low NWF	high WF	-15.07(*)	.418	.000	-16.25	-13.88
	high NWF	-9.33(*)	.418	.000	-10.52	-8.15
	low WF	-4.97(*)	.418	.000	-6.15	-3.78

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

WF= Written feedback group NWF= None-written feedback group

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The significant differences among all four groups are more clearly shown in table6 in which the groups are divided into homogeneous subsets, thus showing the true differences among the means of the four groups. Here, all four groups are significantly different from each other. Both main factors, i.e. written feedback & Proficiency, are positively influential. As table 5 shows written feedback and high proficiency groups are performing better than non-written feedback and low proficiency groups.

Table 6: Homogeneous Subsets for Post-test Scheffe

4	N	Subset for alpha = .05			
		1	2	3	4
Low NWF	30	12.87			
Low WF	30		17.83		
High NWF	30			22.20	
High WF	30				27.93
Sig.		1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

*Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
a Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 30.000.*

Regarding the effect of teacher’s written feedback on the improvement Iranian EFL learner’s writing ability, the result of data analyses has revealed that teacher written commentary as a means of feedback provision as well as proficiency levels have significant and meaningful effect on the EFL learner’s writing ability but there is no meaningful interaction between these two factors. As indicated in the findings, the effect of written feedback is the same for both the low and high proficiency groups. In other word, as the results of two-way ANOVA illustrates WF and NWF groups are significantly different. These results reject the first null hypothesis and confirm the effect of teacher written feedback on the EFL learner’s writing performance. There is also a significant difference between high and low proficiency groups. However, there is not significant interaction between written feedback and proficiency levels. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating written feedback does not vary across different language proficiency levels is supported.

The findings of this study can be compared and contrasted with those of other researchers. The present study is in congruity with the study done by Ferris (1997). Regarding the effectiveness of teacher's written commentary both studies emphasize that students pay great tribute to their teacher's commentary. In fact, the feedback helps them revise their final draft substantially and effectively. The result is along with the finding of similar studies such as (Ashwell, 2000; Zacharias, 2007; Bitcherler and Knock, 2009) reemphasizes the need for EFL teachers to consider written comments as an effective technique for improving students writing ability. Ellis (2008) suggests a typology of different techniques to provide feedback to students composition including (direct, indirect, metalinguistic, electronic and reformulation). Berg (1999); Zhu (2001); and Shin (2003) suggest peer response group, teacher student’s conferences and adioucometary respectively. Still for many writing teachers hand written commentary on students draft is the primary of method of response (Ferris, 1997). This study being in line with the previous study argues that teacher handwritten commentary is helpful in developing student’s writing ability.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher investigated the impact of the effectiveness of teacher's handwritten comments on learner’s revision in a multidraft writing classroom. The comments were imperative sentences on the content of the essay. The positive response on the first research question draws the following conclusions and implications for English teaching: Firstly, the imperative instructions seem to be direct instructions which have a feeling of authority so that students pay great tribute to teacher feedback, and follow the instructions and revise the drafts. We must take it into consideration in writing between draft comments. Secondly, teachers need to allocate some time during the composing processes

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to negotiate feedback issues in face to face discussion with individual students. This assists the students not to misinterpret the commentaries and clarifies the ambiguous points in the feedback. Finally, since writing is practiced at all language education levels, teachers can turn into the writing skill needs of their learners and recognize the linguistic boundaries to which there are entitle to respond. Teacher's written feedback is an effective medium as the only applicable sources for the students to improve their EFL writing ability. This study also concerns language proficiency as the learner variable which was not a significant factor. In fact the comparison of the mean indicated that for all language skill levels teacher's written commentary dosed not vary across different language proficiency levels.

By and large, this study concludes that we need further investigation and more insight to probe in issue proposed in the research question. In other word, one may examine the influence of different comment types such as statement, questions, imperative, direct or indirect within written or via electronic comment.

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Appendix: ESL COMPOSITION PROFILE

Holly L Jacobs, Faye Hartfiel V, Jane B Hughey and Deanna R Wormuth (1981)

Student:	Date:	Topic:		
CONTENT	Score	Range	Criteria	Comments
		30-27	<u>EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD:</u> knowledgeable • substantive • through development of thesis • relevant to assigned topic	
		26-22	<u>GOOD TO AVERAGE:</u> knowledge of subject • adequate range • limited development of thesis • mostly relevant to topic, but lacks detail	
		21-17	<u>FAIR TO POOR:</u> limited knowledge of subject • little substance • inadequate development of topic	
	16-13	<u>VERY POOR:</u> doesn't show knowledge of subject • non-substantive • not pertinent • OR not enough to evaluate		
ORGANIZATION	Score	Range	Criteria	Comments
		20-18	<u>EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD:</u> fluent expression • ideas clearly stated/supported • succinct • well-organized • logical sequencing • cohesive	
		17-14	<u>GOOD TO AVERAGE:</u> somewhat choppy • loosely organized but main ideas stand out • limited support • logical but incomplete sequencing	
		13-10	<u>FAIR TO POOR:</u> non-fluent • ideas confused or disconnected • lacks logical sequencing and development	
	9-7	<u>VERY POOR:</u>		

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doesn't communicate • no organization or not enough to evaluate

	Score	Range	Criteria	Comments
VOCABULARY		20-18	<u>EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD:</u> sophisticated range • effective word/idiom choice and usage • word form mastery • appropriate register	
		17-14	<u>GOOD TO AVERAGE:</u> adequate range • occasional errors of word/idiom form, usage but meaning not obscured	
		13-10	<u>FAIR TO POOR:</u> limited range • frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage • meaning confused or obscured	
		9-7	<u>VERY POOR:</u> essentially translation • little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form OR not enough to evaluate	

	Score	Range	Criteria	Comments
LANGUAGE USE		25-22	<u>EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD:</u> effective complex construction • few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions	
		21-18	<u>GOOD TO AVERAGE:</u> effective but simple constructions • minor problems in complex constructions • several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured	
		17-11	<u>FAIR TO POOR:</u> Major problems in simple/complex constructions • frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/or fragments, run-ons,	

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Score	Range	Criteria	Comments
	10-5	deletions • meaning confused or obscured <u>VERY POOR:</u> Virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules • dominated by errors • doesn't communicate OR not enough to evaluate	
	5	<u>EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD:</u> demonstrates mastery of conventions • few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing	
	4	<u>GOOD TO AVERAGE:</u> occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing but meaning not obscured	
	3	<u>FAIR TO POOR:</u> frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • poor handwriting • meaning confused or obscured	
	2	<u>VERY POOR:</u> No mastery of conventions • dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing • handwriting illegible • OR not enough to evaluate	

Total Score	Reader	Comments
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(Courtesy Holly L Jacobs, Faye Hartfiel V, Jane B Hughey, and Deanna R Wormuth. Newbury House Publisher)