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**THE IMPACT OF FEEDBACK TYPES-BASED INSTRUCTION ON IRANIAN
INTERMEDIATE EFL LEARNERS' LETTER WRITING PERFORMANCE**

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the impact of feedback types-based instruction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' letter writing performance. For these purpose 120 learners of English at SHOKUH language institute participated in the study. A TOEFL test was administered to the whole subjects out of whom 80 participants whose scores fell within the range of 407 to 427 were selected. They were randomly assigned into two groups, each group of 40. Then both groups sat for a pre-test of letter writing. The purpose of this test was to measure the learners' initial subject knowledge of letter writing performance. Then each group received seven sessions treatment based on the two types of feedback, 'explicit and implicit'. Finally, both groups sat for the post-test of letter writing performance. Then the statistical analysis was run through T-test. It was explored from the study that learners' writing ability improves when they are provided with feedback whether explicit or implicit. However, the learners performed better when they were provided with explicit feedback than implicit one. On the other hand, implicit feedback had a significant contribution to the performance of learners' with respect to content.

Key Words: *Explicit Feedback, Implicit Feedback, Letter Writing Application*

INTRODUCTION

Writing, as one of the productive language skills, is much more used than generally realized. Given the importance of writing in both daily and professional life, attempts have been made to teach this skill in an efficient way. As Silve (1990) believes, one way to understand the past trend of writing is looking back at the major trends in foreign language writing in the past in order to identify their developments, orientations, successes, failures, etc.

Historically, the writing, models identified include: product, process and genre writing model. According to Badger and White (2000) the main concern of product approach is the logical arrangement of discourse forms. As a result, paragraph is of primary concern and attention is paid not only to its elements (topic sentence, supporting sentences, conclusion sentences and translation), but also various options for the development of the paragraph (e.g. illustration, exemplification, comparison) are dealt with (Badger and White, 2000). In the, aptly named, product approach a student's attention focuses in adhering to and duplication of models and in particular on correct language. This implies that in this approach meaning and functions are not taken into account and writing is decontextualised. In the process approach, the instructor is expected to guide the learner through the composing process rather than controlling. "Process approach to teaching and learning of second language writing argue for teacher intervention and feedback at key points within the process" (Goldstein, 2004).

According to Holmes (1997), the genre approach is a more recent approach which takes into account the context and purpose of the writing. In fact the process and the product approaches fell short of an effective means to include the function of writing in a writing course (Holmes, 1997). Thus, given the fact that today genre is the focus of many writing classes in which learners are provided with rules of how to do writing in a special domain, the predictions from relevant body of research can have different types of error feedbacks in the context of genre. Thus, first the definition of genre, in general, and application letter as a kind of genre and a concern of this study are in order.

Hyland (2003) defines as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language". This definition implies that purpose is a necessity in any short of genre. Similarity, Swales (1990) refers to genre as "same set of communicative purpose" (p.58) which determine the structure of the discourse and influence and

Research Article

constrains choice of content and style. This study is also concerned with genre, an example of which, i.e. application letter, will be discussed and its ties with error correction will be investigated.

Henry and Roseberry (2001) characterize “letter of application” as “a kind of genre whose communicative aim is to obtain an interview for a job by highlighting the most relevant information in candidate’s curriculum vitae” (p.155). Thus, genre is combination of “Moves” seven kind of which Bhatia does suggest as constituting letter of application. Moves is a text segment made of a bundle of linguistic features which give the segment a uniform orientation and signal the content of discourse in it (Henry and Roseberry, 2001).

Given the importance and prominence of genre in current EFL, the instruction of genre turns into a key issue. As a matter of fact, to day, as Kay and Dudgey (1998) states: “teaching genre aims to make the learner aware of the structure and purpose of the text of different genres – the significant features – and to empower him or her with strategies necessary to replicate these features” . Anyone who taught second language writing will probably agree with Cosnavances (2004) recent assertion that “perhaps the most confusing of all dilemmas for second language writing is how to best help their students improve their writing”. The role of feedback in writing instruction, particularly genre teaching, is an important issue. In trying to address the issue of feedback, many L₁ researchers determined that until they knew students actually did, as they wrote, in other words, what their writing process was, it would be useless to try and design an optimal feedback model (Emig, 1967). Parallel to error feedback and closely related to it error correction and its effect on student’s performance in writing have drawn the attention of many researchers in the past several decades (Lalande, 1982; Robb *et al.*, 1986; Kepner, 1991 and Ferris, 1999; to name just a few). As a matter of fact, the question surrounding the efficacy of error correction is a central issue for the theory and practice of writing instruction. However, as Ferris (2004) notes, “the efficacy of teacher error/grammar correction in second language writing classes has been the subject of much controversy”. “The efficacy of error correction is a central issue for the theory and practice of writing instruction” (Truscott, 2004). Research has compared and contrasted the importance of teacher feedback, either in error-triggered correction or content-based commentary, in helping students compose a better piece of writing based on comment on the first draft. However, not too many students have shown how teacher feedback has an impact on student error reduction in subsequent writings. The literature on error correction has highlighted several issues that are pertinent to the ways teacher’s correct error. As Ferris (2002) maintains, teachers have to decide whether (1) to correct or not errors, (2) to identify or not identify error types, (3) to locate errors directly or indirectly. Chandler (2004) gives three common manifestations of error identification that is, simple understanding and marginal description of type, and understanding with marginal description. In this study, error correction and its effect on the genre of application letter will be investigated.

Statement of the Problem

In many cases, the job advertisements addressing the qualified applicants favor the native speakers of the language of Ads in that such applicants, who already know the genre, outperform non-native speakers in terms of application letter writing. In a country like Iran, few if any instructional classes are held to teach the genre of application letter. Thus, many students of English courses in Iran fall short of the skill of writing a well-structured and convincing letter of application. Moreover, according to some researchers (Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1987 and Goldstein, 2004) feedback conducted by teachers on students writings often tends to be vague and unsystematic.

Truscott (1999) in a strong assertion claimed that error feedback has no effect but Ferris (2004) believes that the research base is far from complete to draw such conclusions. It is in an attempt to address these issues that the following study is being conducted.

Research Question

In order to tackle the problem of the research in a consolidated way, a research question has been formulated as follows:

Research Article

Q: Does direct error feedback have effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' letter writing performance?

Research Hypothesis

To answer the research question of the study, a research hypothesis has been formulated as follows:

H0: Direct error feedback has negative effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' letter writing performance.

Review of Literature

Writing, as one of the productive language skills, is much more used than generally realized. Given the importance of writing in both daily and professional life, attempts have been made to teach this skill in an effective way. As Silva (1990) believes, one way to understand the past trend of writing is looking back at the major trends in foreign language writing in the past in order to identify their developments, orientations, successes, failures, etc.

Historically, the writing models identified include: product, process and genre writing model. According to Badger and White (2000), the main concern of product approach is the logical arrangement of discourse forms. As a result, paragraph is of primary concern and attention is paid not only to its elements (topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentences and transition), but also various options for the development of the paragraph (e.g. illustration, exemplification, comparison) are dealt with (Badger and White, 2000). In the, aptly named, product approach a student's attention focuses on adhering to and duplicating models and in particular on correct language. This implies that in this approach meaning and functions are not taken into account and writing is decontextualized. In the process approach, the instructor is expected to guide the learner through the composing process rather than controlling. "Process approaches to the teaching and learning of second language writing argue for teacher intervention and feedback at key points within the process" (Goldstein, 2004). According to Holmes (1997), the genre approach is a more recent approach which takes into account the context and the purpose of the writing. In fact the process and the product approaches fell short of an effective means to include the functions of writing in a writing course (Holmes, 1997). Thus, given the fact that today genre is the focus of many writing classes, in which learners are provided with rules of how to do writing in a special domain, the predictions from relevant body of research can have a part to play in contributing to a better knowledge of the role of different types of error feedbacks in the context of genre. Thus, first the definition of genre, in general, and application letter as a kind of genre and a concern of this study are in order.

Hyland (2003) defines genre as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language". This definition implies that purpose is a necessity in any sort of genre. Similarly, Swales (1990) refers to genre as 'some set of communicative purposes' which determine the structure of the discourse and influence and constrain choice of content and style. This study is also concerned with genre, an example of which i.e. application letter will be discussed and its ties with error correction will be investigated.

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Given the importance and prominence of genre in current EFL, the instruction of genre turns into a key issue. As a matter of fact, today, as Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998:309) state "teaching genre aims to make the learner aware of the structure and purpose of the texts of different genres- the significant features- and to empower him or her with strategies necessary to replicate these features".

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Introduction

This part introduces the method of the study. More specifically it details the designs of the study, the subjects who participated in the experiment, the instrumentation, procedures and statistical analysis.

Design of the Study

The design of the study was quasi experimental design which is a pre-post test design.

Participants

At the first stage, about 120 learners of English at SHOKUH Language Institute participated in the study. These students had already taken the TOEFL test (Longman). This test consists of 50 listening items, 40 grammar items and 50 reading items. Students with scores of 1 standard deviation below and above the mean were selected. The participants were varied in terms of age and the field of study. That is all students at SHOKUH classes, irrespective of their major and ages were selected on the basis of selection tests.

Materials

The following materials were employed throughout the course of this study. A Longman's TOEFL test was used for the purpose of homogenizing the proficiency of the learners. Another type of the test which was used for the purpose of the study was writing a letter application. This type of test was used as a pre-test to measure the learners' initial subject knowledge in two groups and finally a letter writing test was used as a post-test based on which the efficacy of types feedback was determined.

Procedure

As it was already noted, the participants were being homogenized by a TOEFL test and randomly assigned into two groups. Each group embraced 40 students. Then a pre-test of letter writing application was run in order to check the learners' initial subject knowledge of letter writing performance. Next, two types of feedback, explicit and implicit feedback were presented to the learners in each group. The whole research project took place in almost 10 sessions. During the project, learners were instructed based on different types of feedback. One group received instruction based on explicit feedback and another group received instruction based on implicit feedback. At the end of the sessions, letter writing development of the learners in both groups was tested using the post-test which the learners were supposed to write a

Research Article

letter application. Then on the basis of this test efficacy of letter writing development and improvement of learners in each group in two methods of application was determined.

Statistical Analysis

In this study data was analyzed based on computer assisted program software. So the collected data was computed through T-test.

RESULT AND DISSCUSSION

Introduction

This part discusses the results of this study and presents a discussion on the basis of these results.

Restatement of Hypotheses

The present study was carried out to investigate the effect of the types of feedback instruction that is explicit and implicit feedback on writing performance of Iranian intermediate EFL students with respect to letter writing application, and whether there is any significant difference between the effects of these two types of feedback.

Initially, based on the normal curve of TOEFL scores (N=120) and the respective histogram, 80 subjects whose scores fell within the range of 407-425 were selected. (Figure 1)

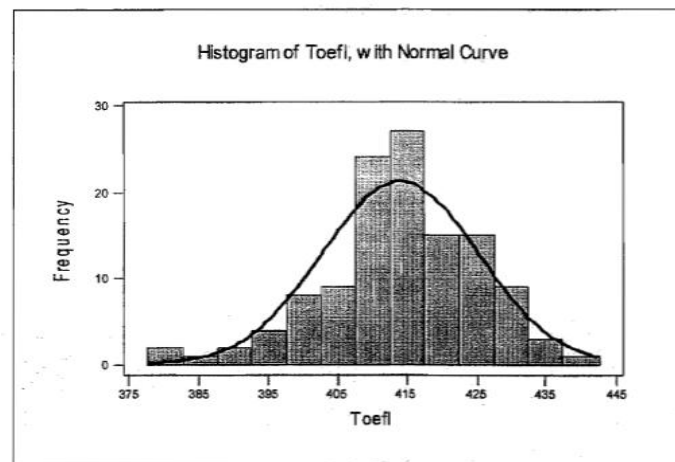


Figure 1: Histogram of TOEFL with the normal Distribution Curve

The subjects scoring below and above the range of 407-425 were excluded from the subject pool. These eighty subjects were randomly assigned to two 40-member groups (Explicit feedback group and implicit feedback group).

The Descriptive Statistics of Computing Pre-Treatment Scores of the Two Groups

To compare the pre-treatment scores of two groups for the purpose of assuring homogeneity in terms of application letter writing, an independent T-Test was run. Table 4.1 indicates the descriptive statistics for this test including the number of subjects, standard deviation, standard error, and means as well as the mean differences of two groups. As it can be seen, P-value equals 0.406 which is higher than the significant level of 0.05. Thus, it can be concluded that the two groups weren't significantly different in terms of application letter writing prior to the treatment at the confidence level of 0.95.

Table 1: The Descriptive Statistics for comparing pre-treatment scores of the two groups

| | N | Mean | St Dev | SE Mean |
|-------------------|--------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Implicit G | 40 | 55.59 | 6.68 | 1.1 |
| Explicit G | 40 | 56.81 | 6.30 | 1.0 |
| T-TEST Difference | P-value=0.46 | | | |

Research Article

The Descriptive Statistics of Post-Treatment Scores of the Two Groups

To compare the post-treatment scores of two groups with respect to content, an independent T-Test was run; Table 2 indicates the descriptive statistics of the two groups with respect to content scores after the administration of treatment.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of post-treatment scores of the two groups

| | N | Mean | St Dev | SE Mean |
|-------------------|--------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Explicit G | 40 | 62.25 | 1.10 | 0.17 |
| Implicit G | 40 | 52.25 | 1.08 | 0.17 |
| T-TEST Difference | P-value=0.00 | | | |

Table 2 shows that p-value equals 0.00 which is lower than the significant level of .05, as a result, it can be concluded that the post- treatment means of two groups in terms of content are significantly different at the confidence level of 95.0n the other hand, the explicit group has obtained a higher mean (62.25) which indicates that explicit feedback is more effective.

In order to compare the pre-treatment scores of group 1 with the post-treatment scores of the same group (with respect to content); the pre- treatment scores of group 2 with the post-treatment scores of group 2 (with respect to content), two Paired T-Tests were run (one for each group). This test is used to compare the means of paired observations (the scores not obtained from independent samples).Table 3 indicates the results of paired T-Test for implicit feedback.

Table 3: The results of paired T-Test for content scores (G1 i.e. implicit feedback)

| | N | Mean | St Dev | SE Mean |
|-------------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Implicit G | 40 | 55.59 | 6.68 | 1.06 |
| Implicit G | 40 | 76.45 | 9.21 | 1.46 |
| T-TEST Difference | P-value=0.000 | | | |

As this table shows, the mean score on content has improved after the administration of the treatment. That is, P-value equals 0.00 which is lower than the significant level of 0.05. Thus, it can be concluded that implicit feedback has a significant effect on the content of application letter writing. Similarly, table 4 indicates the results of paired T-Test for group 2 in terms of content scores (explicit feedback).

Table 4: The results of paired T-Test for content (G2 i.e. explicit feedback)

| | N | Mean | St Dev | SE Mean |
|-------------------|---------------|-------|--------|---------|
| Explicit G | 40 | 56.81 | 6.30 | 1.00 |
| Explicit G | 40 | 62.59 | 7.87 | 1.24 |
| T-TEST Difference | P-value=0.002 | | | |

Based on this table, the mean score has increased alter the administration of the treatment. That is, P-value equals 0.00 which is lower than the significant level of 0.05. Thus, it can be concluded that explicit has also a significant effect on the application letter writing with respect to content.

The results of paired T-Test parametric test indicated that giving explicit feedback in the course of writing letters of application may lead to a better performance in writing application letters in terms of both content and generic performance. As pointed out earlier this type of feedback includes giving explicit comments concerning the quality of content and the functions of moves. In giving such feedback, teachers give suggestions with respect to the structure, mechanics, rhetoric etc. In terms of moves, teachers provide the missing move and give the correct order for moves.

On the other hand, the results of this study showed that implicit feedback can also have a positive effect on students' writing performance of application letter only in terms of content.

Research Article

Implication

Present study has several implications regarding teacher's feedback on students' writing one of which is to provide students with feedback which facilitate process of acquiring new genre rather than the product. According to the findings of this study and others', explicit and implicit feedback has a positive effect on improving learners' letter writing performance.

Teacher trainers may devise and plan course through which teacher trainees become familiar with how to provide feedback that best helps students improve their writing. This is especially helpful because some researchers remind us that very often the comments tend to be vague and unsystematic (Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1987 and Goldstein, 2004). However, teachers may attend feedback more in the classroom because most of the students don't really know what comprises a good piece of writing and what can be done to improve their performance. The findings of this study and many others point to the usefulness of feedback (Fathamanand Whaley, 1990).

Hence, students should receive explanations about benefits of writing process and error treatment to become good process-oriented writers. This can be done and supported by referring to the results of research.

On the other hand, error treatment makes both students and teachers aware of the writing process. The result of this awareness is familiarity of students with their own learning and makes them more responsible learners.

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