

The Effect of Oral Feedback on Writing Ability

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ABSTRACT

Different studies have had conflicting results during the last three decades regarding corrective feedback. Some are for corrective feedback and some others are against it. The present study, like all other studies carried out in this field, sought to find some evidence on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of providing students with corrective feedback. However, what makes this study stand out is the use of oral feedback as a form of feedback and exploring the effect of such an apparatus in teaching writing to the students of English as a foreign language. Two groups of participants were tested for their proficiency level. When found homogenous, they were pretested for their writing ability. A ten session instruction was given to both groups but with the treatment group receiving the oral feedback and critical thinking skills. In the last session, the two groups were post tested. The pre and posttest writing samples were given to 2 raters to be scored. They were supposed to give 3 scores to each sample; one as an overall score, and two for essay components identified by IELTS task 2 writing band descriptor including 'lexical resource' and 'grammatical range and accuracy'. The gain scores of the two groups were compared using multiple independent t-tests for the three scores. The treatment group was found significantly different and better.

Keywords: Oral feedback, writing ability, thinking skills

INTRODUCTION

Should teachers spend hours correcting their students' written productions? Corrective feedback has always been a fundamental issue in second language classes to develop fluency and accuracy of the students. As a lecturer I have experienced direct and indirect feedback, peer feedback, feedback on content and form explicitly and implicitly. I came up with different interpretations, some students benefited from corrective feedback while others found it threatening.

Research so far has not been able to prove that providing corrective feedback is a decisive factor in the attainment of language fluency and accuracy. Therefore, literature shows conflicting results regarding corrective feedback. Although some studies show no positive effect correcting the students' writing papers, students expect their teacher to correct their papers and comment on them. Hence this paradox is bothering both teachers and students alike.

Writing is a creative skill and creativity comes from having independence, choice, and autonomy. Correcting the students' work and giving them feedback makes the students depend on their teachers. This way they can never express themselves freely so they become less creative. As such they always think their teacher is the only authority. Critical thinking skills can be of great help here.

Critical thinking is, in short, self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and socio-centrism.

In writing classes an instructor has the opportunity to engage students in discussion and foster other cooperative interactions that facilitate critical thinking. The importance of social interaction and community is well established in Composition studies (Harris, 1989).

The interactivity in classes leads to higher level thinking. The relationship between what the authors identified as teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence continue to be studied, classes are designed and delivered in a way that facilitates authentic social interactions, they create the "conditions for inquiry" and lead to shared creation of meaning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2010).

The most important aspect while giving feedback is adopting a positive attitude to student writing. While marking mechanically we may not realize that we are showing the student only his mistakes – negative points. If the student receives only negative feedback, he may easily be discouraged from trying to form complex structures and using new vocabulary. However, feedback sessions can be a beneficial experience for the student if the teacher shows the strong points as well.

If the teacher tries to make comments and corrections on the final version of the student paper, the teacher would be exhausted and the student would be discouraged. One alternative can be giving feedback through the process of writing through discussions in which the students can improve their critical thinking skills. That is, while the student is planning and organizing his ideas, the teacher can comment and discuss on the unity and coherence of ideas. Or while the student is writing his draft, the teacher can proofread for word-order, subject-verb agreement, spelling mistakes. This gradual checking can minimize the exhaustive red marks on the student paper.

Another advantage of such correction is that the student sees these comments when the writing experience is still fresh in his mind. Therefore, it is a kind of encouragement which leads to creativity and critical thinking skills. The teacher should listen to students ideas attentively in order to minimize dictation and improve having choice. Generally, when people don't have choice in their lives they are not happy. The students have the right to enjoy learning; therefore, they should be given this choice. The following table shows the distinction between descriptive and critical writing clearly.

CRITICAL THINKING AND REFLECTION

The application of critical thinking skills leads to clear and flexible thinking and a better understanding of the subject at hand.

To be a critical thinker you not only have to have an informed opinion about the text but also a thoughtful response to it. There is no doubt that critical thinking is serious thinking.

Fundamentally, to demonstrate the analytical/critical thinking expected at the higher levels, you need to ask lots of questions. Some questions are fairly superficial, helping to identify the component parts of the situation, theory etc; others probe beneath the surface, looking for reasons, explanations, motives (Stella Cottrell, 2005).

These resources were designed and developed by the University of Plymouth, 2010

Table 1. Descriptive versus critical / analytical (writing adapted from Moon, cited in Cottrell 1999:23)

<i>Descriptive Writing</i>	<i>Critical / Analytical Writing</i>
States what happened	Identifies the significance
States what something is like	Evaluates strengths and weaknesses
Gives the story so far	Weighs one piece of information against another
States the order in which things happened	Makes reasoned judgments
Says how to do something	Argues a case according to evidence
Explains what a theory says	Shows why something is relevant or suitable
Explains how something works	Indicates why something will work (best)
Notes the method used	Indicates whether something is appropriate
Says when something occurred	Identifies why the timing is important
States the different components	Weighs up the importance of component parts
States options	Gives reasons for the selection of each options
Lists details	Evaluates the relative significance of details
	Structures information in order of importance
States links between items	Shows the relevance of links between pieces of information
Gives information	Draws conclusions

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of critical thinking comes from Halpern (1999); she writes:

Critical thinking refers to the use of cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. Critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed. It is the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions. Critical thinkers use these skills appropriately, without prompting, and usually with conscious intent, in a variety of settings. That is, they are predisposed to think critically. When we think critically, we are evaluating the outcomes of our thought processes—how good a decision is or how well a problem is solved (p. 70).

Central to Halpern’s definition is the idea that the critical thinker must have not only the necessary analytical tools but also the inclination to use them.

Critical thinking may also involve the dialectical confrontation between two conflicting forces. The first is what we know and believe; the second is that which is different, new, or contrary to what we know or believe. Braman (1998) uses the phrase “disorienting dilemma” to describe the situation when one critically examines a well-formulated position that is directly at odds with a long held, and perhaps cherished, belief (p. 30). It is this dynamic process of exposure, exploration, and evaluation that is central to the liberal arts educator committed to the practice and to the instruction of critical thinking. However, the evaluation of differing perspectives is a necessary but not sufficient condition of critical thinking. Hatcher and Spencer (2000) address this concern in their succinct but compelling definition.

They write that critical thinking “attempts to arrive at a decision or judgment only after honestly evaluating alternatives with respect to available evidence and arguments” (p.1). This definition is particularly satisfying because it refers both to a process (the honest evaluation of alternatives) and to an advocacy-based result (a decision that is informed by the evidence and arguments). Therefore, elements of thought are of importance here. Paul and Elder have specified the following elements for thought.

The Elements of Thought (Paul & Elder)

Clarity: Could you elaborate further? Could you give me an example? Could you illustrate what you mean?

Accuracy: How could we check on that? How could we find out if that is true? How could we verify or test that?

Precision: Could you be more specific? Could you give me more details? Could you be more exact?

Relevance: How does that relate to the problem? How does that bear on the question? How does that help us with the issue?

Depth: What factors make this a difficult problem? What are some of the complexities of this question? What are some of the difficulties we need to deal with?

Breadth: Do we need to look at this from another perspective? Do we need to consider another point of view? Do we need to look at this in other ways?

Logic: Does all this make sense together? Does your first paragraph fit in with your last? Does what you say follow from the evidence?

Significance: Is this the most important problem to consider? Is this the central idea to focus on? Which of these facts are most important?

Fairness: Do I have any vested interest in this issue? Am I sympathetically representing the viewpoints of others?

Research evidence has shown that cognition and language development are closely related. It is through language that children come to know the world (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 1995). Such close relationships between language and thinking skills have long been recognized by theorists and educators (Piaget, 1971; Vygotsky, 1962). It is believed that developing students’ ability to reflect on their own learning process can help them progress in learning. Higher-order thinking skills promote higher order learning skills which in turn enable students to reach higher levels of language proficiency (Renner, 1996).

Modern foreign language educators and institutes have also begun to emphasize the importance of thinking skills. For example, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2001-2002), a non-departmental organization sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills in the U.K., asserts that modern foreign language teaching must incorporate activities to help children reflect on their own thinking processes and language-learning strategies. It further outlines activities to include: (1) identifying and understanding the links between the target language and native language in lexis, syntax, and grammar; (2) drawing inferences from unfamiliar language and unexpected responses; (3) using their knowledge of grammar to deduce the meaning of new words and structures; (4) using language creatively to express their ideas, attitudes and opinions; (5) adapting and revising language for their own purposes; (6) identifying and using language patterns; and (7) devising their own language-learning strategies.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study attempts to explore the effectiveness of the use of oral corrective feedback, a form of feedback, on teaching writing skill. It attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Does the use of oral corrective feedback, make any difference in learners' writing ability defined by their gain score in IELTS mock writing test?
2. Does the use of oral corrective feedback, make any difference in learners' gain score in the 'lexical resources' part of IELTS writing scoring rubric?
3. Does the use of oral corrective feedback, make any difference in learners' gain score in the 'grammatical range and accuracy' part of IELTS writing scoring rubric?

For the purpose of the present study, four intact groups from two different English institutes in Tehran, including 34 female and 28 male participants, were used. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 36 all being Iranian students of differing majors studying English as a foreign language at a post-intermediate level.

In each institute, there were two classes, as such it did not seem plausible to randomly assign the four classes into treatment and control group because if each institute had received one treatment group (TG) and one control group (CG), the institutes were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, so that the control groups and the treatment groups were kept separate and unaware of the fact they were participating in the study. The two treatment groups included 33 participants, 18 female and 15 male participants, and the control group included 29 (16 female and 13 male) participants.

MATERIALS

The materials used included a TOEFL proficiency test, IELTS sample essays, and the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors (public version). The proficiency test was a real TOEFL PBT test selected from the official guide to the TOEFL test (third edition) published by ETS, and the IELTS sample essays were selected from IELTS CAMBRIDGE books (1-9). The TOEFL test and the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors are given in the Appendices C and D respectively.

PROCEDURE

A TOEFL proficiency test as well as a writing pretest was administered in the first session for both groups. The participants were given 40 minutes to plan and write a sample for an IELTS topic given to them. Since participants were required to write only one piece of writing in the posttest in the final session, and in order to avoid the 'fatigue' factor introduced to the program by participants' having a proficiency test in the first session, they were required to write the sample essay before taking the TOEFL test, so that participants' pre and post tests in writing could be regarded as of comparable nature.

In order to avoid the effects of handwriting on the raters, all the gathered samples were typed by the researcher. The researcher was cautious to type them as they were actually written by the participants, i.e., all misspellings, wrong punctuations and other types of mistakes were typed exactly as they had appeared in the scripts. All the participants' information was omitted from the samples and each sample was given only a code in order to be identified only by the researcher rather than the raters. The samples were then given to two experienced university faculty members to be rated. Before rating the samples, a meeting was arranged with both raters and the procedure and the type of scoring guide were explained to them. However, they were not clued in on the purpose of the study. The raters were required to

score the samples based on the IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptors on a scale of 1 to 9 at intervals of 0.5. The raters were required to score each sample individually and blind to the scores given by the other rater. For each sample, 5 scores were given; one for the whole essay (a holistic score) and one for each component specified in the rubric i.e., lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy.

In the second session, the IELTS writing rubric and the criteria based on which participants' writing samples were to be evaluated on the IELTS exam were explained to the students in both control and treatment groups. The IELTS band descriptor was copied and distributed among the students as the instructor (the researcher himself) was explaining each component. Then, different parts of an essay (introduction, body, & conclusion) and their subcomponents (e.g., topic sentence, stance, and preview in the introduction) were explained. During the first and second sessions in the treatment the students were taught critical thinking skills and creativity as well as the writing skills. The students in the treatment group discussed their writings with their teacher. They explained why they had written their outline in a way they had written. Discussing the content and outline of their writing, the students could understand the instructor's explanations. The rest of the sessions were spent explaining and discussing the components of an essay. During the second and third sessions students were not required to write complete essays. Instead they were asked to write different parts of an essay separately before being ready to write a complete essay. At the end of the third session, students in both groups were given a topic to write a complete essay for the fourth session.

At the beginning of the fourth session, students in the treatment group were required to brainstorm their ideas and discuss them with their classmates and teacher for the topic they were supposed to write. Different parts of their writings such as the topic sentence, writer's stance, the use of transition words, different parts of the body paragraphs and conclusion were identified and discussed with the participants in the treatment group. Then, they were asked to read their essays part by part as they explained how and why they had chosen to do so. For the control group, the students were asked to read their essays and the instructor commented on them and simply explained why they were acceptable or not without any discussion. They got written feedback. Both groups were given a topic to write about for session 5. Note that the topic given to both groups were the same.

The fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and the ninth sessions were carried out as the previous sessions with an exception. During these sessions the students had learned the critical thinking skills. They could easily defend their writings, express their ideas and they understood that teachers' ideas are not always the best ones. They learned to be creative because they had the chance to discuss and express their ideas as valuable ones. They faced with problematic areas in their writings and they were asked about their reasons for what they had written. The eleventh session was the posttest session, in which students in both groups were required to write an essay for the same IELTS topic in 40 minutes. The samples gathered were typed and then given to be scored as in the case of pre test samples. During the whole study, it was tried to keep everything the same and equal for both control and treatment groups but for the use of oral feedback, it was tried to avoid introducing any source of bias to the study

RESULTS

Due to practical issues, the inter and intra rater reliability indices were calculated only for the holistic scores given by raters to the pretest and post tests in the study and the results were taken as representative of the raters' performance in scoring the four elements of an essay identified by the IELTS writing task 2 rubric.

Using SPSS to calculate the inter-rater and intra-rater reliability through the use of Pearson product-moment correlation, the following results were obtained: In the case of inter rater reliability, an estimate of .92 for the pretest and .89 for the post test was obtained. Also, after having raters rate 25% of the randomly selected samples, the researcher calculated the correlation coefficient between the scores given by the two raters in their first and second attempts for both pretest and posttest. The obtained results for rater 1 were a correlation coefficient of .97 in the pretest and an estimate of .94 for the posttest. Also, rater 2 was observed gaining an estimate of .87 in the pretest and a correlation coefficient of .91 in the posttest. The test results showed no significant difference between the two groups ($T = 1.431$, $P = .158$). Moreover, the independent t-tests conducted between the two groups' writing pretests showed no significant difference between the treatment and control groups in terms of their overall score and their scores for the two elements. Gender was also checked and appeared not to affect the results.

Examining the Null Hypotheses

Through the use of independent t-tests in SPSS, all the null hypotheses were examined in terms of the existence of any statistically significant difference between the performance of the participants in the treatment group receiving oral feedback as a form of feedback and that of the participants in the control group receiving no oral feedback.

The first null hypothesis states that the use of oral feedback makes no difference in learners' writing ability defined by their gain score in IELTS mock writing test. To test that hypothesis, first participants' pretest and posttest writing samples were rated and then the gain scores for each group was calculated by subtracting participants' scores in pretest from theirs in posttest. After that, the two lists of gain scores for the treatment and control groups were compared using an independent t-test. The results showed that there existed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = 3.671$, $P = .001$).

The second null hypothesis states that the use of oral feedback makes no difference in learners' gain score in the 'lexical resource' part of IELTS writing scoring rubric. To test that hypothesis the gain scores for the 'lexical resource' component of the scoring rubric were calculated for each group, as in the case of the first hypothesis, and were then compared with each other using an independent t-test. The results showed a significant difference between the gain scores of the treatment and control groups ($t = 9.975$, $P = .000$).

The third null hypothesis indicates that the use of oral feedback makes no difference in learners' gain scores in the 'grammatical range and accuracy' part of IELTS writing scoring rubric. The same procedure was followed as in the case of the previous hypotheses and the results again indicated the existence of a statistically significant difference between the two sets of scores ($t = 2.576$, $P = .013$).

CONCLUSION

The results showed that the participants who had received oral feedback as a form of feedback during their instruction outperformed the control group who had received the same instruction but for the use of oral feedback. Also, checking the two components specified in the IELTS writing task two band descriptor, i.e., lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy, it was revealed that the difference in learners' performance did lie in the case of the two components. The treatment group had a larger gain score in case of the two components, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy.

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