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## **THE EFFECT OF ORAL AND WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON WRITING PERFORMANCE AND SELF-REGULATION OF EFL LEARNERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study set out to investigate which type of feedback (oral or written) is more effective in enhancing learners' grammatical knowledge. It also wished to find out whether or not self-regulation happens as the result of feedback provision. Finally, the study wanted to find out whether or not learners' attitude toward feedback changes or not after provision of feedback. In order to answer the above questions, 43 students studying English in one of language schools in Kermanshah, Iran at intermediate level participated in the study. The feedback provided was in the form of oral mode in Group 1 and written mode in Group 2. The pretest, attitude questionnaire, self-regulation questionnaire and posttest were administered at the first and last sessions with the treatment given in between. The results showed that the students in both groups demonstrated improvement in both G1 and G2 though the oral one performed better compared to the written mode. However, in terms of their attitude no special form of changing in their attitude was observed. Also no self-regulation was observed on the part of learners.

**Keywords:** *Oral Feedback; Written Feedback; Self-Regulation; EFL Learners*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The question of provision of feedback on the learners' written and oral production of language has been widely discussed and hotly debated. Regarding the provision of feedback two rather opposing views have developed. Located on the one end of the continuum are such scholars like (Cohen & Robbins, 1976; Hammond, 1988; Kepner, 1991; Krashen, 1982, Schwartz, 1993; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 2007). To this group of writers not only provision of feedback does not do anything to enhance learners' knowledge but also it is harmful for their language development. Not all scholars, however, do agree with this group of theorists.

According to the proponents of provision of feedback, who are located at the other end, teachers or native speakers or even more capable learners' language and feedback can contribute to the learners' L2 knowledge. Despite their general agreement on the beneficial effect of feedback, no consensus have they been reached on the best type of feedback. A wide range of feedback has been suggested and different theorists talk for the superiority of one over the others. Among these different types of feedback are implicit versus explicit feedback, direct versus indirect, focused and unfocused feedback and regarding the mode of feedback written and oral have been identified.

#### ***Theoretical Background***

##### ***Feedback: A Matter of Controversy***

The question of feedback like many other language related issues has been interpreted differently by different schools of thought. Behaviorism saw learners' errors as evidence of poor learning requiring more drill-like activities (Brown, 2001). When behaviorism fell out of favor and was replaced with cognitivism, the views toward error changed once again. Errors were not seen as cardinal sins rather they became to be seen as windows to the learners' interlanguage (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Having come to the understanding that learners' errors should not be avoided at all costs rather they should be welcomed and treated, professionals in the field set out a wave of studies to find the most efficient type of feedback.

According to a number of researchers like Truscott (2007) the best treatment was not treatment at all. According to him "Research evidence points to the conclusion that oral correction does not improve learners' ability to speak grammatically" (Truscott 2007).

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### *Studies Refuting the Efficacy of Feedback*

In his justification for abandoning of feedback, Truscott draws on a number of studies the results of which failed to demonstrate the efficacy of feedback. Sheppard (1992) investigated the effects of two types of corrective feedback on the development of L2 students' grammatical development. The two types of CF that he investigated were indirect error coding CF and holistic comments he provided the learners within the margins of students' papers. The results of the study revealed that the group whose papers were corrected by means of holistic comments outperformed the group that received direct CF. Kepner (1991) also in his study concluded that error correction does not necessarily lead to grammar development. In his study he compared two groups of American university learners in terms of their grammatical development. In one group the learners' essays errors were corrected directly. In this group learners' errors were identified and corrected by the researcher. In another group the learners' essays were not corrected grammatically, rather they received message-related comments. The results of his study revealed that grammar error correction did not lead to any significant improvement in grammar.

### *Studies Confirming the Efficacy of Feedback*

DeKeyser (1993) along with other researchers criticizes Truscott for his drawing on those studies which showed the ineffective use of feedback on learners' grammatical knowledge. These studies, the opponent of the ineffectiveness provision of feedback claim, suffered from a number of severe deficiencies and the obtained findings are not generalizable due to their methodological problems. In contrast to Truscott and his followers, many researchers have talked in favor of feedback and its effective role in enhancing L2 knowledge. Sheen *et al.*, (2009) compared the efficacy of three types of treatment on enhancing learners' grammatical knowledge. In their study they wanted to find out which type of corrective feedback was more successful in developing learners' awareness of English article. The three types of treatment they investigated were direct focused CF, direct unfocused CF and writing practice without any feedback. The results of his study revealed that all three experimental groups gained in grammatical accuracy over time in all the post-tests. However, the three groups, direct focused CF group outperformed the other two groups.

In a similar study, Sun (2013) wanted to find out which type of feedback (focused written corrective feedback and unfocused written corrective feedback) was more successful in promoting the acquisition of the German case morphology. The findings of his study revealed that the group who received focused corrective feedback outperformed the group who received unfocused written corrective feedback and control group who did not receive any feedback at all. Ashwell (2000) was also able to show that learners who are provided with feedback are more successful than those who do not. In their study Bitchener and Knoch's (2010) showed the general efficacy of feedback in enhancing grammatical knowledge. Three groups of advanced ESL learners who received the feedback on the correct use of English article outperformed the control group in the correct use of this structure in both immediate posttest and delayed posttest.

### **Self-regulation and Writing**

Research on Self-Regulation Learning (SRL) began in 1988s to answer the question of how students become masters of their own learning processes (Zimmerman, 2008). SRL is viewed as *proactive* processes that students use to acquire academic skill, such as setting goals, selecting and deploying strategies, and self-monitoring one's effectiveness, rather than as a reactive event that happens to students due to impersonal forces. "Although SRL was viewed as especially important during personally directed forms of learning, such as discovery learning, self-selected reading, or seeking information from electronic sources, it was also deemed important in social forms of learning, such as seeking help from peers, parents, and teachers" (Zimmerman, 2008).

Orhan (2007) defines self-regulation in the following terms "the ways in which learners take control of their own learning" (p. 391). Also Zimmerman (1989) defines self-regulation as follows: "students can be described as self regulated to the degree that they are meta cognitively and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process" (p. 4). By reviewing the different definitions provided for self-regulation one can identify a number of features shared among the provided definitions of self-regulation:

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a) it is learners who set their goals, b) having set their goals, learners control their cognition, motivation, and behavior to achieve their goals (Pintrich, 2000).

Harris and Graham (1996) identify the following six critical strategies making up the construct of self-regulation: goal setting, self monitoring, self instructions, self evaluation, coping and self control and self reinforcement. Sanad (2014) elaborates on each critical feature. Elaborating on the relationship between self-regulation and writing, Zimmerman and Risenburg (1997) contend that self-regulation is the strategy that writers employ in order to preplan what they are going to write, and to review and edit output.

#### **Research on Self-regulation**

In their study, Talibenezhad and Negari (2007) investigated the effectiveness of concept mapping as a learning strategy on students' self-reregulation. The constituent elements of self-regulation in his study were defined as metacognitive self-regulation, time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning, and help asking. The study was carried out on sixty undergraduate students of English who were divided into control and experimental group. Motivated strategies for Learning Questionnaire developed by Printrich *et al.*, (1991) were the main device for collecting data on students' self-regulation. The findings of his study showed that the experimental group participants who were explicitly instructed concept mapping strategy outperformed their counterparts in the control group in writing tasks and also gained a higher degree of self-regulation.

#### **Research Questions**

The following three research questions guided the present piece of research:

1. Is there any change in the attitude of Iranian EFL learners toward the implementation of oral and written feedback in the process of writing?
2. Which feedback strategy, oral or written, is more effective in improving EFL learners' English writing as measured by writing performance?
3. Does feedback presentation to EFL learners in the process of writing result in self-regulation in this particular skill?

#### **Research Hypotheses**

The following research hypotheses were formulated on the basis of research questions:

H0<sub>1</sub>. Oral and/ or written feedback strategies are not effective in improving EFL learners' English writing as measured by writing performance.

H0<sub>2</sub>. Feedback presentation to EFL learners in the process of writing does not result in self-regulation in this particular skill.

H0<sub>3</sub>. Feedback presentation to EFL learners in the process of writing does not result in self-regulation in this particular skill?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Method**

#### **Setting and Participants**

The data of the current study were collected from 47 EFL learners at intermediate level in one of Kermanshah, Iran, language institute. They were male learners who were selected from two intact classes. Their ages ranged from 15-19. They had been studying English about one year and were perceived as pre-intermediate by the curriculum of the institute. They came from different L1 backgrounds; 41 were Kurdish L1 speaker and the rest (i.e. six) were L1 Farsi speaker. These participants were studying Top Notch textbook series Fundamental B and some of them had completed preliminary textbook series and Fundamental A. However, a few of them after their entrance and after the placement test were assigned to this level. A detailed description of the participants' demographic features is provided below:

A total number of 21 participants constituted Experimental Group 1 (EG1). Their mean age was 17.57 years old and their age ranged from 16-19. The average months of language learning in this group was eight months. 26 participants constituted Experimental Group 2 (EG2). Their mean age was 13.68 years old and their age ranged from 15-27. The average months of language learning in this group was 11 months.

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### **Operationalization**

Focused written CF was operationalized as the provision of the correct form in the students' written text by underlying the students' errors and writing the correct form above it. Only preselected grammatical points received the correct form (in this study, definite and indefinite article). That is the researcher identified the article errors and provided the correct form in students' papers. Focused oral CF was operationalized as the provision of the correct form in the students' written production in oral mode in individualized consultation with the students.

### **Design**

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-treatment–posttest design, using two intact EFL classes; Experimental Group 1 (EG1) and Experimental Group 2 (EG2). At the first session of the study, the researcher attended both classes and gave some explanations regarding the general purpose of the research (without revealing the details of the study) and ensured students that the results obtained from the study would remain confidential. After the researcher's introduction about the research and a brief description about it he administered a proficiency test (Oxford Placement Test) in both classes. Out of the initial 47 participants who participated in the study 13 participants were identified as either too above or too below from the majority of students. That is, 33 students were identified as homogenous as far as their language proficiency was concerned. Among these 33 participants, 18 participants belonged to EG1 and 15 participants belonged to EG2.

After having administered a proficiency test, the researcher administered a pretest (Appendix B) in EG1 and EG2. The pretest was in the form of a dictogloss (see Ellis 2003 for a detailed description of dictogloss). It was a short story enriched with definite and indefinite articles. The researcher read out the text two times. During the first reading students were required to listen carefully to get the general theme of the story. During the second one, they were allowed to jot down the key words to help them remember the text, however, they were not allowed to write the whole sentence. After researcher's reading they were asked to reproduce a text as similar to the original one as possible.

After the test, the researcher distributed an attitude questionnaire developed by Hamouda (2011) which consisted of 50 prompts (Appendix C). The administration of this questionnaire aimed to investigate the students' attitude toward feedback before and after the treatment. It aimed to find out whether learners' attitude toward feedback changes or not. Considering the fact that students were pre-intermediate learners and they were assumed to have difficulty comprehending the text, they were provided with the translated form of the questionnaire (Appendix D).

**3.3.1 Treatment in EG2:** The researcher attended the second session in EG2 and distributed a short passage based on Aesop's fable titled *'The fox and the crow'* (adopted from Sheen, 2009). The researcher handed out the text (i.e. the fox and the crow) with an empty sheet attached to it in EG2. He told the students that they were required to read the text and rewrite it. They were reminded that it is necessary to produce a text as close to the original text as possible. Then the researcher asked students to read the story silently. When he made sure that everyone had read the story he explained the difficult words and phrases which might have hindered students' comprehension. The teacher also told the moral of the story to the class. He, then, asked the students to tear off the text from the empty sheet and give the story to the teacher and keep the empty sheet with them. Having collected all the texts, the researcher read out the story again to refresh students' memories. Then they were required to reproduce the text as closely to the original one as possible. Finally, the students returned their reproduced texts to the researcher.

The followed procedures in EG2 at Session Two are reproduced here in simple words:

Session One

The researcher ...

- a) administered an Oxford Placement Test (OPT)
- b) distributed the attitude questionnaire
- c) administered the pretest

Session Two

The researcher ...

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- a) distributed ‘*the fox and the crow*’ text among participants.
- b) explained the difficult words and phrases.
- c) collected the ‘*the fox and the crow*’ text.
- d) read the story once more to refresh their memory.
- e) asked the students to reproduce a text as similar to the original one as possible.

At Session Three the researcher gave back the corrected papers to the students. He had corrected their erroneous use of articles and provided a short explanation for each mistake on their paper. For example, if a student had written “A cheese fell down and a fox ate it” while it was the second mention of *the cheese* and *the fox*, the researcher would underline a cheese and a fox and write *the cheese* and *the fox* respectively and wrote a short explanation like this in front of it: use indefinite article *a* when referring to something for the first time and use definite article *the* when you refer to something for the second time. At the same session, the researcher once again distributed the same ‘*The fox and the crow*’ text among the students. They were required to read it and again reproduce a similar text. When everyone wrote the text again the researcher collected them, corrected them at home, and brought them with him to the class the following session and distributed them among the students to learn about their mistakes. The same procedures were followed in Session Four; the students received their corrected papers from the preceding session. Then they were given ‘*The fox and the crow*’ text with an empty sheet attached to it again. They read it and attempted to produce a passage similar to the origin text.

At the last session of the research (i.e. Session Five), the researcher distributed two questionnaires: the translated version of the attitude questionnaire (Appendix D) and the translated version of the self regulation questionnaire (Appendix G). The aim of the former was to examine learners’ attitude and compare them with students’ attitude at the beginning of the research. It aimed to find out whether students’ attitude toward feedback has changed or not. The latter questionnaire consisted of 32 items that tapped into learners’ strategies in the process of writing. They had to mark their preferences in one of the following items: *Not at all true of myself* which received score 1, *Slightly true of myself*, which received scored 2, *About halfway true of myself* which scored 3, *Mostly true of myself* which scored 4 and finally, *True of myself* which scored 5. The aim of the latter was to examine the level of self-regulation that might have happened as the result of provision of feedback. Also, the researcher administered the posttest. The function of the post test was to make the comparison of the pretest and posttest possible in two groups. The posttest was the dictogloss task administered at the first session as the pretest.

3.3.2 *Treatment in EG1*: All the procedures which were followed in EG2 were administered in EG1 too; all learners took OPT and pretest and filled out the feedback questionnaire. However, the type of treatment they received regarding their grammatical errors (definite and indefinite article) was different from the one that their counterparts in EG2 received. Instead of receiving their feedback in written form they received it in oral form. Each session the researcher brought with him the learners’ corrected papers and called students one by one to go to his desks where he explained their erroneous use of articles. At Session 5, like the participants of EG2, learners in EG1 took the post test and filled out the attitude and self-regulation questionnaire.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Results**

*Data Analysis*

In order to find out whether students’ attitude in two groups (i.e. EG1 and EG2) toward oral feedback and written feedback respectively changed or a Wilcoxon test was employed whose result is displayed in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: The result of Wilcoxon test related to the attributes of students in two groups**

| Variable         | EG1 Attitude Towards Feedback | EG2 Attitude Towards Feedback |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Z                | -0.912                        | -2.59                         |
| Meaningful Level | 0.362                         | 0.009                         |

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According to the results of the above table, there is a meaningful difference between the first administration of attitude questionnaire and the second one in EG2 because obtained meaningful level is 0.009 which is slightly less than 0.05. However, no meaningful difference was observed in the EG1 (the group which received feedback in the oral mode). In this group the probability level is 0.362 which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, it can be said that there is not a meaningful difference between the first administration of the attitude questionnaire and the second one in the group in which the provision of feedback was in the oral mode.

The second research question was set to find out which form of feedback (i.e. oral or written) is more effective in enhancing learners’ grammatical knowledge (here definite and indefinite article). Before the administration of T-test, as a prerequisite for making sure about the stability and accuracy of the obtained results, we had to examine whether or not the variances are equal. Therefore, we employed the Levene test to examine the distribution of frequency in two groups. The results of the test are shown below.

**Table 4.2: Levene Test: The investigation of distribution of frequency**

| The value of probability | f value |
|--------------------------|---------|
| 0.304                    | 1.095   |

Since the obtained value from the Levene test is 0.304, we can reasonably accept the equal distributions. Having made sure about the variances are equal we proceeded to administer T-test the results of which are shown below.

**Table 4.3: Independent T-test for comparing the performance of EG1 with EG2 in post-test**

|     | Frequency | Average | Degree of Freedom | T value | Meaningful level |
|-----|-----------|---------|-------------------|---------|------------------|
| EG1 | 16        | 4.750   |                   |         |                  |
| EG2 | 16        | 3.81    | 30                | -1.03   | 0.307            |

According to Table 4.3, there is not a meaningful difference between the results of EG1 (i.e. the group who received feedback in oral mode) and EG2 (i.e. the group who received feedback in the written mode). Based on the T-test, the obtained probability level is 0.307 which is greater than 0.05. Finally, in order to see whether or not self-regulation has happened as the result of the treatment, a Mann-Whitney U test was employed. The results of this analysis are shown in the below table.

**Table 4.4: Mann-Whitney U test for determining self-regulation**

|     | Frequency | Average | Mann-Whitney U | Z     | Probability value |
|-----|-----------|---------|----------------|-------|-------------------|
| EG1 | 16        | 15.09   | 105.500        | 0.869 | 0.402             |
| EG2 | 16        | 17.91   |                |       |                   |

According to the above table, since the probability value is greater than 0.05 it can be concluded that there is not a meaningful difference between two groups in terms of the degree of self-regulation.

**Answers to the Research Questions**

For the first research question the results of the research showed that no meaningful difference was observed in the attitude of the learners in the EG1 (oral feedback group) in the first and second administration of the questionnaire. Therefore, the null hypothesis for the EG1 is accepted. However, the EG2 showed a difference in their attitude towards feedback from the first administration to the second one. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected for the latter group.

The second research question sought to find out which type of feedback is more effective in heightening learners’ grammatical knowledge. The results showed that no meaningful difference was observed

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between two groups. In other words although both groups were able to perform better in the posttest, no group showed significant superiority over the other in terms of grammatical awareness. For this research question the null hypothesis is accepted.

And finally the third research question wished to find out whether self-regulation happens at the end of the experiment or not. The results revealed that no particular and significant self-regulation happened at the end of the study. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that students did not show any degree of improvement regarding self-regulation.

### **Discussion**

The general results of the study confirmed the proposition of those scholars who champion the use of feedback in the course of language teaching. According to the results of the study, learners in both groups showed improvement in their performance in the posttest a. A comparison of the performance of two groups revealed that participants in EG1, that is the group who received their feedback in the oral mode outperformed their counterparts in EG2 (the group who received their feedback in the written form).

This result is not surprising. Given that that the feedback provided to learners in the oral form takes much more time than the written form does, the outperformance of the learners in the oral group may be more related to the variable of time it took rather than the mode of feedback presentation itself. While the provision of feedback in the written mode was limited to the correction of the learners' errors on their papers and turning it back to the participants without any follow up activity, the oral group participants involved in a two or three individual conferences with the teacher. Therefore, it can be said that time has played an unpredictable intervening function in the process of the research.

Another explanation that can be put forward for the outperformance of the oral group compared to the written group is that learners in the former group engaged in an individual conference with their teacher. This individual conference might have led to a better understanding on the part of the learners. The teacher in this group has been able to analyze learners' understanding of the presented metalanguage explanation immediately. In this group the teacher has been able, in those cases where comprehension did not take place on the part of the learners, to embark on providing more concrete examples so that the efficacy of teaching enhanced.

The last possible explanation that can be put forward for the outperformance of the oral group compared to written group may refer to the presence of the teacher. People generally do not like to be evaluated by others negatively. Therefore, it happens frequently for a learner not to reveal his/her lack of comprehension in the classroom because he/she is unwilling to be judged negatively. In the oral group the teacher explained the grammatical points to the learners and learners probably put forth a greater amount of effort and concentration to learn the grammatical points. This extra amount of attention exercised by the learners was because of the fact that they knew that their understanding would be investigated after the teachers' explanation. However, this was not the case for the written group. The learners in the written group received their paper corrected by the teacher. They did not possess the amount of motivation that their counterparts did to learn the problematic areas. Their motivation was limited to their own curiosity to see how well they were able to reproduce a similar text to the original one and not more than that.

Regarding the second research question of the study interesting results were observed. The second research question probed learners' attitude toward receiving feedback. Particularly, it wished to find out whether students' attitude toward feedback changes from the first administration of the feedback questionnaire to the second one. Between the first administration of the questionnaire and the second one they received a great deal of feedback so it was expected that they become familiar with feedback and report their opinion in the second administration.

The results of the study showed that the students did not reveal any significant change in their attitude toward feedback. In both of its administrations students generally believed in the beneficial effect of the feedback. The most interesting results of this part were observed in the EG1 where they received oral feedback. While only 20 per cent of student had scored 1 (strongly disagree) to item No. 1 of the questionnaire (*The provision of feedback is of little value in enhancing knowledge of L2 learners'*), in the second administration of the questionnaire this percentage of the students who chose strongly disagree

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rose to 70 per cent. Another interesting observation of the study refers to item No. 2 of the questionnaire where the prompt was: *Teachers' feedback only makes learners' more worried rather than aid them.* While the number of students who had chosen the *strongly agree* item was 68 per cent, this rate declined to only 15 per cent indicating that students did not perceive the teacher's presence and his oral feedback as threatening. This observation may be said to oppose the explanation that we proposed as a possible explanation of the outperformance of the oral group compared to the written group. There, we suggested that one reason that oral group performed better was because of the fact that they perceived the teacher's presence as a threat.

### **Conclusion**

The first and most important implication of the study is that both the results of the learners' performance in the posttest and the survey about their attitude toward feedback showed the overall efficacy of feedback; participants in both groups performed better in their posttest compared with the pretest. Students in the context of the classroom have primary the teacher as the source of L2 language. They expect their teachers to help them diagnose their problematic areas in L2 and through appropriate measures aid them to solve them. One way of diagnosing and addressing learners' problem is the provision of feedback through which teachers draw their students' attention to these areas. By identifying the source of the students' errors for example, an incorrect transfer of L1 knowledge to L2 rules or an overgeneralization which has happened due to lack of complete internalization of L2 rules and so on students will be in a better position to become aware of the source of their mistakes and take appropriate measures to tackle them.

The role of teacher as the source of L2 knowledge takes on more significance when L2 learning takes place in an EFL context including our country. In these situations learners have little if any access to native L2 speakers. When they step out of the classroom context they have little opportunity to put their acquired knowledge in the classroom into more authentic unrehearsed situations. Therefore, it is the one of the teacher's responsibility to provide appropriate feedback to the students. In so doing, however, he/she should be careful not to go to the extreme blocking every student's attempt to communicate for every trivial mistake. Too many error corrections may discourage students from taking risks to put into practice new language.

The results of the study showed that students in the oral group performed slightly better in the posttest from the written group. Implication of this finding is that from time to time teachers should involve in individual conference with each student. This individual face-to-face metalanguage communication could help learners better comprehend teachers' explanation. Teachers are also in a better position to diagnose students' weak areas and in their course of instruction elaborate on those areas in later situations. Not only does this individualized form of feedback lead to more learning but also it has the potentiality to cater to students' affective factors too. In the course of instruction students feel they are so removed from the teacher they always have seen themselves as sitting on one side and the teacher standing on the other side. This form of face-to-face oral feedback may temporarily removes this boundary and students feel closer to the students.

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