

Peer-Review, Teacher Feedback and EFL Learners' Writing Development

Golnaz Mazdayasna

University of Yazd

&

Mohammad Hossein Tahririan

University of Isfahan

Abstract

This study was undertaken to examine the effectiveness of feedback in the development of EFL learners' writing ability. Peer-reviews in the form of comments and suggestions given by the students on one another's drafts proved beneficial. Revision based on such feedback reinforced the idea that the students were writing for a real audience other than the teacher. The most valuable feedback came from the teacher in the form of comments, suggestions, and conferences, which were very significant because the students usually checked their second drafts before writing a third draft to avoid repeating the same errors. Reader feedback on the various drafts enhanced the writer's performances through the writing process on to the eventual final product. Finally, feedback promoted self-esteem and built important communication bridges between learners and the teacher who worked with them.

Key words: Peer-review, feedback, writing skill.

Introduction

Many language teachers are of the opinion that teaching writing skills especially to EFL students is more difficult than teaching other language skills. Writing is a complex skill comprising language, feeling, personal experience, and the communication of personal thoughts. In college composition classes, both for native and non-native students, those who teach freshman composition have always observed signs of frustration and discontent among students who have trouble communicating their thoughts and ideas on paper. Writing in a foreign language creates stress and tension (Spratt & Leung, 2000).

Traditionally oriented methods of writing emphasize usage, form, and mechanics. For example, the students are given a model paragraph to read, the overall paragraph organization is explained, finally the students are told to write a similar paragraph about a different topic with the intention that the students will use the newly taught discursal and grammatical structures in writing tasks. The teachers read the compositions and correct the errors. Feedback in the writing class commonly means the correction of students' language errors. The graded papers are returned to the students, hoping that they would study the corrections in order to avoid repeating those errors in future compositions (Chastain, 1990). As a matter of fact what usually impresses a student most is not how the teacher has corrected or revised his paper, but merely the mark he has been awarded. Seldom do the students approach the teacher to solve their writing problems or ask a question. As a result the students rarely understand how or why they have made errors and consequently the same errors and problems will appear on the next assignment. How can we as teachers of writing encourage and motivate our students to develop and improve their writing skill?

In recent years suggestions have been offered to improve students' writing. According to Paige Way, Joiner, and Seaman (2000) expecting students to submit grammatically perfect papers only results in frustration among students who find it difficult to express their ideas effectively on paper. They suggest that instead of praising and blaming the students the teacher should focus on the process of writing the task. Some researchers assert that the student as well as the teacher must view the writing process as one of prewriting, writing, and rewriting, through which none of the stages can be hurried (Muncie, 2000). Some methodologists agree that students should be given sufficient time to write and rewrite, in order to communicate their thoughts and feelings effectively on paper, and at the same time receive feedback from the teacher and classmates (Frankenberg-Garcia, 1999).

Recent research on the process of writing emphasizes its cyclical and recursive nature. For example, De Guerrero and Villamil (2000)

suggest that “writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write).” Creswell (2000) states that students should be asked to exchange their written tasks so that they become active readers of each other’s work. This is an important part of the writing experience because it is by responding as readers that the student will develop an awareness of the fact that a writer is producing something to be read by someone else. And through analyzing and commenting on their classmates’ work, they will develop the ability to read their own writing critically (Makino, 1993).

Several ESL composition researchers have noted that feedback is an important element in the process of writing. Keh (1990) defines feedback as the comments, and suggestions which are provided to the writer for revising his/her drafts. After receiving feedback from the teacher and his/her classmates, the writer comes to know where he or she has committed such errors as using inappropriate words, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or has not given sufficient information. The teachers’ primary responsibility is to see that students are given helpful responses to their written tasks (Ferris, 1995).

A few recent investigations have shown favorable results of focusing on the process of writing. Hyland (1990) reported that by providing productive feedback through ‘minimal marking’, students were successful to correct their own errors and the experience seemed to help them avoid repeating the same errors in their later performances. Also, Vincent (1990) conducted a project where EFL students were encouraged to work in pair and groups. The topics selected were appropriate to their needs and interests and helped them to correct their mistakes through comments, class discussions and teacher conferences. Students were given sufficient time to write and rewrite, and in this way the project which was student-centered proved successful in developing and improving their writing skills. Likewise Mangelsdorfin (1992) noticed that peer-reviews helped most of the students to see their topics from different perspectives and encouraged them to develop and clarify their ideas in the ESL composition classroom. Finally, the findings of Kumari Dheram (1995) revealed

that students improved their writing when they were given opportunities to share what they wrote with peers as well as when they received feedback in the form of comments and suggestions from the teacher.

In the light of the above findings, the main objective of the present study was to examine issues related to peer reviews and teacher feedback in the EFL composition classroom, and to what extent both these types of feedback helped in the development of students' writing skill. The main research questions included:

1. *Are peer reviews effective for improving EFL students' writing skill?*
2. *Does teacher feedback help students to write better and improve their writing skill.*
3. *To what extent are students successful in correcting their own errors, when responsibility is shifted from the teacher to the learner.*

Method

Subjects

Forty university students who had enrolled in Advanced Writing at Yazd University participated in this study which was an action research, in which the instructor and the investigator were the same person.

Procedure

The procedure consisted of two phases:

Phase One

At the beginning of the third semester the students were given instruction on such matters as topic sentence, narrowing down a broad subject into a topic sentence, analyzing relevant points and developing supporting ideas (examples, details, anecdotes, and statistics) related to the topic sentence, and creating unity within a paragraph. Then the students were introduced to rhetorical patterns, such as enumeration, description, cause-effect, and comparison-contrast, which are most

commonly found in expository writing. Each paragraph type was introduced with a model, followed by graphic analysis and controlled exercises which ultimately led to a free writing assignment.

The paraphrasing exercises in each method of paragraph organization provided the students with the opportunity to practice sentences typical of each pattern before incorporating these patterns into free writing assignments. Charts and diagrams were used to illustrate relationships within paragraphs and finally within longer pieces of discourse. As a kind of written homework, students had to link words and phrases from the model paragraph they had studied to develop a new paragraph.

By using linking words and cohesive devices the students were given practice on how to achieve paragraph coherence and unity. In this way they learned how to transfer and communicate their thoughts and ideas into written form using the pattern being studied. For the purpose of this study three topics based on descriptive, cause-effect, and comparison-contrast were assigned, which were within the competence and interest, of the students:

1. Describe your last vacation trip
2. Give reasons why people learn a foreign language
3. Compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of city living and country living.

Phase Two

The procedure and techniques employed for writing each task consisted of the following stages:

Stage 1: Pre-writing

After writing the first topic namely 'Describe your last Vacation Trip' on the chalkboard, the teacher underlined the key words of the topic and asked the students to construct and write down at least ten sentences about the topic. They were told to write down any ideas that struck their minds paying attention to the key words stated in the topic sentence. This activity is referred to here as 'pre-writing'. After ten

minutes the students were asked to express their ideas aloud. The students produced their sentences, and the teacher wrote them on the chalkboard. This activity, which is called 'brainstorming', not only helped the students with oral practice, but also helped them to begin writing and become familiar with some key vocabulary and sentences that they might tend to use. Also, the students were recommended to use their own ideas and thoughts and make new sentences, rather than copying or writing the same sentences that were written on the chalkboard. Finally, the students were asked to write the first draft for the first topic at home and bring it to class the next session.

Stage 2: Peer-Review

At the beginning of the next session, the writing tasks were collected and distributed randomly for peer-review. A few guidelines in the form of questions like the following were written on the chalkboard which were helpful guides for the students.

1. Is the topic sentence clearly stated?
2. Do the supporting sentences develop the main idea stated in the topic sentence?
3. Are there any surface grammatical errors related to verb form, tense, preposition, article, pluralization, word order, and diction? If so underline them and state the kind of error.

The teacher explained that the aim of correcting a classmate's writing was to make helpful suggestions such as pointing out ideas that were not developed completely, and commenting about grammar, diction, organization, content, and mechanics. The students were pleased because the activity was student-centered and helped to reinforce the idea that the aim of writing was communication; i.e., writing for a real audience. In some cases when the students needed help or advice, they approached the teacher. A few low-proficiency level students' papers were given to more competent students for peer correction so that the low-proficiency level students could gain experience from the high-proficiency level students. This activity helped students not only to organize their ideas successfully, but also to become better readers of their own writing.

- - - - -

Stage 3: Writing the second draft

After peer-review, the papers were once again returned to their writers. The students were expected to correct their errors and revise their writing, taking into consideration the suggestions and comments made on their first drafts. The students were free to accept or reject peer comments. Besides they were free to ask questions as well as clarify their doubts and problems if they had any. The students were trained to go back and revise their tasks, and write the second draft at home.

Stage 4: Teacher-feedback to second drafts.

After the students had submitted their second drafts, the teacher read them and wrote suggestions on how to improve the tasks. Errors related to inappropriate word choice, tense, article, verb form, pluralization, word order, mechanics, etc., were underlined or marked by using symbols written in the margin, or above the error, but the errors were not corrected. This method encouraged the students to take responsibility and activated their common sense, linguistic competence, and logic to correct their errors.

Stage 5: Writing the third draft

At the beginning of the following class period the second drafts were returned to the students with the purpose of writing the third drafts in the classroom. At this stage students were given directions to read the teacher's comments and suggestions carefully in order to identify their errors and correct them. While writing the third draft, the students were assisted by the teacher if they needed guidance. The teacher gave suggestions and discussed the problems of the students individually. A very important point noticed by the teacher was that when the students were revising and editing their drafts, new ideas occurred to them, which they could use while writing their third drafts. This interaction between the teacher and students was very beneficial; the teacher's role was perceived as a participant rather than as an 'error hunter' in the writing process.

Data Analysis

The students' first, second, and third drafts of the three tasks i.e. (1) Describe your last Vacation Trip, (2) Give Reasons Why People Learn a Foreign Language, (3) Compare and Contrast the Advantages and Disadvantages of City Living and Country Living were collected, and the changes and corrections they had made while revising the first, second, and third drafts were examined. In order to examine the linear development of the students in the course of instruction for practical purposes, the students' performances related to use and manipulation of articles, prepositions, and tense were examined. The data collected for each student's first, second, and third drafts on all the three tasks were as follows:

1. Total number of correct use of articles.
2. Total number of incorrect use of articles.
3. Total number of correct use of prepositions.
4. Total number of incorrect use of prepositions.
5. Total number of correct use of tense.
6. Total number of incorrect use of tense.
7. The ratio of correct use of articles to the total number of articles used.
8. The ratio of correct use of prepositions to the total number of prepositions.
9. The ratio of correct use of tense to the total number of tense cases used.

In order to make the study of the learners' linear development in terms of the intended variables quantitatively measurable the computed ratios for each student were taken as raw scores, then the means of these scores were compared across the three drafts for each task and across the three tasks for each variable.

The coded data were transferred on to data sheets and then given to the computer using the SPSS package for statistical calculations. In order to perform the time-series statistical operation on the

performances on the three different tasks, ANOVA, and t-tests were utilized.

Step 1:

The first computation was to compare the performances on the first task in terms of errors. Table 1 reveals that there was a significant decrease ($p<.000$) of occurrence of errors, specially those of preposition type. Changes related to errors of tense and article were not as significant, however, ($p<.071$) and ($p<.108$) respectively.

Table 1
Comparison Results of Draft
Performances on the First Task in terms of Three Error types

Error type	F-value	Sig. Level
Preposition	13.210	.000
Tense	3.447	.071
Article	2.366	.108

Step 2:

A comparison was also made on the first, second, and third drafts on the third task with the intention to see the linear development of the students' ability to write during the instructional program. The investigators intended to see whether the students benefited from peer reviews, teacher feedback, and the development of students' writing ability through the process of writing, rewriting, and post writing. Therefore, t-tests were applied for comparing the means of each and all error types across the tasks. For practical purposes and for the sake of brevity, the results of the reviews and corrections on one of error categories (articles) on one of the tasks are presented in Table 2. The results showed statistically significant changes in the course of the study in the use of articles and preposition errors. The difference was statistically significant ($p<.023$); however, not much difference was noticed in terms of errors related to tense ($p<.669$).

Table 2
Comparison of Draft Performances
of the Third Task in terms of Article Errors

Task	t-value	Sig. Level
Three Drafts of Task 3	12.437	.000
First Draft of Task 3	1.456	.154
Second Draft of Task 3	6.287	.000

Step 3:

Finally, the performances on the three tasks were studied by comparing the means of performance ratios of the students across the tasks. The statistical operation applied here was ANOVA. The results indicated statistically significant decrease in the frequency of occurrence of preposition errors ($p < .019$). With respect to article and tense, the improvement was noticed on each task but not as statistically significant ($p < .171$) and ($p < .508$) respectively.

Table 3
Comparison of Errors between
Draft Performances on the Third Task

Error type	F-value	Sig. Level
Preposition	4.189	.023
Tense	.407	.669
Article	1.855	.171

Results and Discussion

We can infer from the data that for most of the students in this study peer review was perceived as a beneficial technique that helped students revise their writing tasks by receiving comments and suggestions throughout the process of writing. Peer reviews helped them in revising the content and organization of their first drafts while writing the second drafts of each task. Students were able to think and

develop their ideas from different perspectives. Moreover by receiving feedback from the teacher on the second drafts, the students were able to correct a good number of their errors concerning grammar, organization, word choice, usage, and mechanics. The results presented in Tables (4) and (5) indicate a significant improvement in the students' development of their writing skills during the course of this study. Therefore we can conclude that writing multiple drafts, and receiving feedback from the teacher and classmates led to positive improvement in the revised drafts.

A detailed investigation of the data regarding the error types namely (1) preposition, (2) article, and (3) tense revealed that the students were successful in correcting their own errors when responsibility was shifted from the teacher to them and teacher-student interaction in the form of class discussions, and conferences proved fruitful. According to the results, as shown in the tables, a considerable reduction of errors was noticed in the second drafts. The quantitative decrease was statistically significant ($p < .000$), ($p < .023$), and ($p < .019$) for article, preposition, and tense errors respectively. The third drafts did not indicate radical changes, however. Most changes were of stylistic type. Also, a decrease in the frequency of occurrence of error types related to articles was observed. The results indicated that the reduction of article errors was statistically significant, especially in the first two tasks. However, with respect to tense the changes were not statistically significant. Qualitatively, the students had made considerable improvement while performing the third task, that is why the differences between the drafts were in some cases not statistically significant.

Conclusion

In this study the classroom activities were designed such that the students became familiar with the most common types of paragraph organization, and the students were encouraged to see writing as a process of self discovery. The topics which were chosen as writing tasks were interesting and within the interests of the students. The

approach utilized in this study could be best described as interactive and student centered.

The students in this study found peer reviews to be very useful. Peer-reviews and teacher feedback not only helped the students to revise their writing tasks by considering different points of view on their written drafts, but also motivated them to discover new ideas, new sentences, and new words throughout the process of writing, rewriting, and post-writing. Consequently, self-correction and writing multiple drafts provided them with an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Nearly all the students admitted that as far as content and organization were concerned peer reviews helped them to read their own writing critically and gave them opportunities to think of different ideas at the rewriting stage. In some cases the instructor noticed that the students would ask their friends' opinion and were encouraged to participate in class discussions.

Teacher feedback was fundamental because the students usually checked their second drafts before writing a third draft to avoid repeating the same errors. The students were of the opinion that reading the teacher's comments and suggestions about their written tasks activated their common sense, linguistic competence, and logic to correct their own errors. In some cases the students discussed their problems individually with the instructor. In this way they were motivated to write freely without stress. In the process of writing, the interaction between the student and teacher played an important role.

On the whole the writing course which was tailored to the needs of the students helped them to improve their writing ability. The findings of this study revealed that by writing three drafts for each task, and receiving feedback from their classmates and teacher on their written tasks, students could gradually gain experience to improve their writing skill and develop the ability to revise and proof-read their own writing tasks effectively. Finally, the students realized that writing is not an activity which can be learned overnight; they have to write and rewrite in order to improve and revise their previous drafts, and eventually become skilled writers.

References

- Chastain, K. (1990). Characteristics of graded and ungraded compositions. *Modern Language Journal*. 74/1.
- Cresswell, A. (2000). Self-monitoring in student writing: developing learner responsibility. *ELT Journal*. 54/3.
- De Guerrero, M. and Villamil, O. (2000). Activating the ZPD: Mutual Scaffolding in L2 peer revision. *Modern Language Journal*. 84/1.
- Ferris, D. R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*. 29/1.
- Frankenberg-Garcia, A. (1999). Providing student writers with pre-text feedback. *ELT Journal*. 53/2.
- Hyland, K. (1990). Providing productive feedback. *ELT Journal*. 44/4.
- Keh, C. L. (1990). Feedback in writing process: A model and methods for implementation. *ELT Journal*. 44/4.
- Kumari Dheram, P. (1995). Feedback as a two-bullock cart: A study of teaching writing. *ELT Journal*. 49/2.
- Makino, T. Y. (1993). Learner self-correction in ESL written composition. *ELT Journal*. 47/4.
- Mangelsdorfin, K. (1992). Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: What do the students think? *ELT Journal*. 46/3.
- Muncie, J. (2000). Using written teacher feedback in EFL composition classes. *ELT Journal*. 54/1.
- Paige Way, D., Joiner, E., and Seaman, M. (2000). Writing in the secondary foreign language classroom: The effects of prompts and tasks on novice learners of French. *Modern Language Journal*. 84/2.
- Spratt, M. and Leung, B. (2000). Peer teaching and peer learning revisited. *ELT Journal*. 54/3.
- Vincent S. (1990). Motivating the advanced learner in developing writing skills: a project. *ELT Journal*. 44/4.