Feedback Diversity on Students' Written Assignments: A Local Investigation of Persian Speakers

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Abstract

The vitality of teacher response to students' writing is not only undeniable (Ferris, Pezone, Tade & Tini, 1997) but also as Coffin *et al.* (2003) believe, is a central pedagogic practice. Despite the existence of studies in the area of written teacher commentary (Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985; Cohen, 1987; Doff, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1985; Ferris, 2002; Frodesen, 2001; Rieken, 1991; Zamel, 1985), there are still doubts about the most effective types of teacher feedback. The purpose of this study is to investigate the efficacy of three most prevalent error treatment techniques directive (explicit), partial (researchers' terminology), and general feedback. To accomplish the expected goal, three groups of female students with intermediate level of proficiency were selected and the written errors of each group were treated according to one of the feedback techniques during the course of study. The analysis of the students' scores revealed that students receiving the directive feedback, improved significantly in comparison with those in the other two groups.

Keywords: feedback, directive feedback, partial feedback, general feedback, intermediate

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Introduction

The role of feedback in second language learning has been the subject of debate in recent years, with some scholars like Krashen (1982) and Terrell (1977) arguing that error correction does very little to encourage lasting positive change in learners' production, either in speech or in writing. Other scholars like Lightbown and Spada (cited in Hadley, 2003), however, argue that feedback can have positive impact on second language acquisition.

With so much writing in foreign language classes over so many years, one would expect the existence of a unique method of treating students' errors. Still we do not have a clear-cut method for error correction. Should peers in the class correct errors or the teachers are to shoulder this responsibility? Should the teacher correct all errors, or selectively treat some frequent errors? These are just few, among many other probable questions, about error treatment.

One of the most recent approaches to error correction proposed by Ferris (2002) refers to correcting grammatical, lexical, and mechanical errors before submitting the final product. Frodesen (2001) believes that teachers should codify the errors, for instance, *wf* for word formation, *vt* for verb tense, etc. He also believes that teachers should not provide feedback on all errors. They should focus on errors that need more attention. He adds that those errors which are more frequent or block communication are to be corrected.

Error correction techniques are viewed widely and differently by scholars and researchers. Walz (1982) divided error-correction procedures into three basic elements: 1) Self correction with teacher help, 2) peer correction, and 3) teacher correction. In self correction, the teacher helps students to correct their own errors.

Doff (1990) has suggested three techniques for correcting written works: (1) the teacher could correct only the most important errors, (2) the teacher could reduce the amount of underlying and write correction in the margin, and (3) the teacher could simply indicate where the student has made important errors, and ask him/her to correct them. This would encourage the student to look again at what he/she has written and think about possible errors. In this technique, teachers can utilize some abbreviation forms to indicate a special type of error, e.g. SP= spelling, WO= word order, GR= grammar, etc.

Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty (1985) divide error correction into three approaches: quality, quantity, and middle. With the *quality* approach, they mean that all errors should be strictly corrected. The teacher looks at the language as a perfectible grammar system. The *quantity* approach in which the followers believe that the amount of practice is more important than error treatment, students will be asked to write frequently and their writings may not be corrected. The teacher just gives a general feedback, for instance, excellent, very good, fair, weak, etc.

All the above-mentioned techniques are widely accepted. Nevertheless, it's really hard to say which one is the most proper way. Shall we, teachers, use the traditional red-pen correction technique to spot mistakes, or shall we just orally inform our learners where they have made mistakes.

In a study, Zacharias (2007) investigated teacher and student attitudes toward teacher feedback. One hundred students filled a questionnaire and twenty-one were interviewed. Furthermore, 30 teachers were either interviewed or filled the questionnaire and shred their attitudes and techniques of error treatments.

We are not going to delve into his study and discuss what he found, However, what is relevant to the present study is that, we could infer three common error treatment techniques among the teacher participants of the study. Some of the teachers gave directive feedback and corrected all types of errors. Some others just pinpointed the parts that needed amendments while there were teachers who just gave general feedback such as "revise your ideas" or "many mistakes on grammar" (Zacharias, 2007). After all, he concludes that both teachers and students believe that teacher feedback is of utmost importance to improve students' writing.

This study aims to find out suitable clues such as whether the teachers should correct all errors in a composition explicitly (directive feedback)? Locate some errors selectively without correcting them (partial feedback), or just inform the learners on the existence of erroneous parts (general feedback), even without spotting where the error has occurred (Zacharias, 2007).

Methodology

Participants

To investigate the efficacy of each commentary technique categorized by Zacharias (2007), three female classes were selected. They were students of intermediate level in Zabansara Institute located in Rey City, Tehran. The three classes were studying the book "Headway 3." After the administration of the Nelson quick-check test to ascertain the students' language proficiency, and a pre-writing test to make sure that the students are in the same level of writing ability, some students were named outliers so were crossed out from the research group. Table 1 illustrates the number of students in each group.

Table 1
Number of Students in Each Group

Group	N
A	13
B	11
C	11

Instrument

In order to homogenize the students in the groups, a proficiency test was administered. Then a composition test was administered to find out about their level of English writing ability. Finally a different writing test was administered to discover the amount of gain according to the treatment method.

Design and Procedure

To ascertain the proficiency level of the students, the Nelson quick-check test was administered. This test with the reliability of 0.9 of Cronbach alpha is a one-hundred, vocabulary and grammar, item test. There are 80 grammar and twenty vocabulary questions. All of the questions are in a multiple choice format.

Two raters were asked to rate the students' compositions, both pre-writing test and the post-writing ones. The two raters were post-graduate students who were doing their thesis at the University of Tehran. The correlation reported for inter-rater reliability is 0.77. Intra-rater reliability of the first rater is reported to be 0.81 and the second rater 0.77. So they both had acceptable consistency in their rating procedures.

The main instrument in this study is the students' written assignments in the form of either a letter or a composition. Students wrote 12 compositions on various topics. In the first and second session students took the two tests: Nelson-quick check test and a composition writing which was called pre-writing. The purpose of

these two types of tests was to cross out the outliers and have three homogenous classes both in language proficiency and writing ability. The third session was allocated to mechanics, and the fourth session to organization (content) of writing all based on the Bailey and Powell's (1979) and Arnaudet and Barrett's (1990) books. After that, in twelve consequent sessions, students wrote twelve in-home compositions. In the last session, students wrote another composition (post-writing). Therefore, the whole process of the research was done in an intensive 17 sessions.

In several training meetings, during which the raters went over some sample papers and discussed how to score the compositions, the raters were familiarized with rating the items of importance. Afterwards, each composition was copied four times and each rater was given two copies of a composition. The raters were asked to rate each copy in two separate weeks, so we could get both inter-rater and intra-rater reliability. After the rating was done, the mean score of the three groups was calculated to see if there is any significant difference between the three groups. Which group had a better mean and improved? To do so, One-way ANOVA was used to compare the three means.

In group A (directive feedback), each composition was corrected sentence by sentence. In group B (partial feedback), just some errors were selected and underlined, or a circle was drawn around them. The error was not corrected. In group C (general feedback), no error was located; students were just informed that there had been some spelling, grammatical, etc. inaccuracies existing in their compositions. Each session, students were given a topic to write. The topics were all the same in the three classes.

Results

The data analysis procedure is divided into two parts: pre-test results since we tried to have three homogenous classes both in language proficiency and writing ability and post-test results to check the efficacy of each treatment technique and their effects on students' writing ability.

To make sure if the subjects were all at the same level of language proficiency or not, the Nelson quick-check test was administered. After the scoring process, outliers of each class were put aside.

Table 2
Descriptive Information of the Nelson Quick-Check Test in the Pre-Test Stage

Group	N	Mean	SD
A	13	51.230	3.811
B	14	51.785	2.516
C	12	51	3.884

Table 2 here suggests that the means of the three groups i.e. 52.2, 51.8 and 51 respectively were almost the same and the variability of the participants, that is 3.8, 2.5 and 3.9 in each group was not significant enough to consider them too different.

Table 3
The Mean Comparison of the Three Groups Related to the Nelson Quick-Check Test in Pre-Test Stage

	Sum of the Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.310	2	2.155	.184	.833
Within Groups	422.665	36	11.741		
Total	426.974	38			

In order to find out whether there is any difference among the groups, a one-way ANOVA was employed. The ANOVA did not show any significant difference (p<.05), therefore, suggesting that there is no significant difference among them. This is presented in the Table 3 above.

Table 4
The Descriptive Information of the Subjects in Writing Pre-Test

Group	N	Mean	SD
A	13	1.076	.321
B	11	.994	.291
C	11	1.045	.227

We have three classes with the same language proficiency. To have three homogenous classes, subjects were to have equal writing ability, too. Therefore, the subjects were asked to write a composition which was called "pre-writing" composition. The analysis of the scores in this step is presented below in table 4.

The analysis of the inter-rater reliability was reported to be 0.77. The correlation analysis between the raters indicated a high correlation in intra-rater reliability of 0.81 for the first rater and 0.77 for the second one.

Thus, the scores of the two raters were consistent in two weeks. This is proved by the statistics presented above. The mean comparison between the three groups, one-way ANOVA, showed no significant difference between them ($\rho< .05$). Therefore, we have three homogenous classes, both in language proficiency and writing ability. Then students underwent a four-week treatment.

In four weeks, students wrote twelve compositions. After the four-week treatment, students were asked to write another composition. This composition was

the comparison base with that of the pre-writing stage. Table 5 represents the

descriptive analysis of the three groups.

Table 5
The Descriptive Statistics of the Post-Writing Test

Group	N	Mean	SD
A	13	4.706	172
B	11	3.755	.292
C	11	3.551	.183

Like the pre-test, each composition was copied four times. Each rater received

two copies. They were both asked to rate each copy in two separate weeks. The

correlation of inter-rater reliability is reported to be 0.82. Also the correlation

analysis indicated that the intra-rater reliability of the first rater was 0.93 and the

intra-rater reliability of the second rater 0.96.

Table 6
The One-Way ANOVA of the Writing Post-Test

Post – test ANOVA	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	9.296	2	4.648	8.377	.001
Within Groups	17.755	32	.555		
Total	27.051	34			

After assuring that the scores of the two raters are of an acceptable reliability,

a one-way ANOVA was utilized to compare the three means. This was done to

investigate the probable existence of a significant difference between the three

groups after receiving the various feedbacks on their compositions. The one way

ANOVA showed a significant difference between the means. This is presented in the

Table 6.

As we see in the above table, the F value of 8.377 at .001 level of significance suggests there is a significant difference between the means. Therefore, the variety in feedback has diverse effects on students' writing ability. To find out where this difference exists, we used Post Hoc Test—LSD.

Table 7
The Post Hoc, LSD, Analysis in Post-Writing Test Stage

Dependent Variable (I) group (J) group		Mean difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
A	B	.95105	.305158	.004
	C	1.15559	.305158	.001
B	A	-.95105	.305158	.004
	C	.20455	.317618	.525
C	A	- 1.15559	.305158	.001
	B	-.20455	.317618	.524

As Table 7 illustrates, group A has a significant difference with both groups, B and C. There is no significant difference between groups B and C. This means, it makes no difference to give partial feedback or almost no feedback on students' compositions. As the above table illustrates, the mean difference of A/B and A/C is positive (0.95 and 1.15) which means students in group A, receiving the directive feedback, performed better in post-writing than those of group B and C. The second group performed better on the post-writing stage but not better than the first group. Students in the third group who received general feedback did not have a good performance on post-writing stage in comparison with the other two groups.

Discussion and Conclusions

Opinions about how and when to evaluate students' written assignments differ widely. While some researchers believe that content is of crucial importance to be checked not the form, others suggest that we respond to both form and content. Some scholars also recommend that we should have form correction in the final draft and others prefer to respond to form features throughout the process.

Empirical studies on the effects of feedback and evaluation in second and foreign language writing have yield contradictory results. Some studies indicate that corrective feedback on form was not helpful (Cohen, 1987; Semke, 1984; Terrell, 1985; Zamel, 1985). In Semke's study, German students who were given no corrective feedback on form and were graded only on amount of communication responded more favorably to that type of treatment based on which the students were graded on accuracy alone.

Through his studying, Zamel (1985) displayed that teachers' feedback on ESL compositions was often inconsistent and that might render error correction ineffective. Cohen (1987) studied various students' responses to feedback on their compositions, and found that teachers' comments were often confusing, vague, and inconsistent. Interestingly enough most students were confused exclusively on *form*.

On the other hand studies by Fathman and Whalley (1985) have shown beneficial results from teachers' corrective feedback on compositions of second and foreign language learner.

Fathman and Whalley (1985) found that when teachers underlined grammatical errors in their students' texts, students made fewer grammatical errors in writing their compositions than when no such feedback was provided. Their study

also indicated that grammatical and content feedback can beneficially be provided at the same time without overburdening the students.

Fathman and Whaley's (1985) findings are in contrast with what Terrell (1985) states. He gives three reasons for not correcting students' errors directly: 1) it does not lead to more correct language usage in the future, 2) it may result in negative affective feelings that interfere with learning, and 3) it will probably cause students to focus their attention on language rather than meaning.

The results of this study revealed that diversity in correction methods has direct influence on students' writing improvement. In the first group, receiving directive feedback, all errors (grammatical, word choice, content, spelling, etc.) were commented. Students wrote more accurate compositions in this group. This is in line with what Ferris (2002) suggested. He declared that teachers should treat students' errors on the level of grammar, lexis, and mechanical errors even before submitting the final draft.

Implications of this study can be divided into two main categories: theoretical and pedagogical. Discussion theoretically, findings of this study are congruence with findings of Fathman and Whalley (1985), and Rieken (1991). Fathman and Whalley (1985) found that when teachers underlined grammatical errors in their students' texts, students made fewer grammatical errors in writing their compositions than when no such feedback was provided. Based on their study, they suggest that grammatical and content feedback can be very beneficial when they are provided at the same time.

Rieken (1991) examined the effects of (1) no corrective feedback, (2) indirect correction through substantive comments in which corrections were embedded, (3)

direct correction of frequent errors. She found that students that had explicit corrections were significantly more accurate.

In the present study, in comparison with that of group B and C, the treatment that the first group received (full feedback) made a remarkable difference on students' composition writing.

Findings of this study are discussable pedagogically. The upshot of this very research is applicable in many places, for instance, Public schools and English schools (institutes). Writing is not paid enough attention neither in junior high schools nor high schools. The very first time (and the only time!) that students are encountered with a letter is in grade three of junior high school. There is not a separate part allocated for writing tasks. Students can be asked to write earlier a letter to a friend who is living in another city and explain their daily activities. The same task can be performed as a request. Students can be assigned to write a letter to a teacher, manager, a friend, etc. and ask for something. This can be a very good tense and word choice practice.

Students can be invited to prepare an outline individually, in pairs, or even in groups and then write the draft. After revising, they can write the final draft. The teacher can give comment on both draft and final remark. This can be a very good grammar exercise. In addition to grammatical practices, students will master the spelling of the words since dictation is important at schools, especially in junior high schools. Furthermore, students can enjoy the variety of the tasks offered in the class.

There are some common books which are being taught at English schools like the series of Interchange, Headway, East West, etc. Almost each unit has a writing task. Teachers are to teach the task and explain about the writing style of each letter

(composition) in each unit and students are asked to submit a sample letter. But how to correct the letters is the controversial issue. Teachers mostly do not know if they should correct all errors, some errors, or even none of the errors. Should they correct word misspelling? What about word selection? The very present study suggests that teachers should correct mechanical errors along side with organizational mismatches.

There were a few things that have not been touched upon this study or could not be investigated due to hindrances that came in the research process. The present study is not the ultimate and climax of a research in this area.

The focus of this study was just on three error correction techniques: directive feedback, partial feedback, and general feedback. A similar study can be conducted with more error correction techniques. For instance, comments solely on word choice and grammar in one group, mechanics in another group, content comments in the third group, and so on and so forth. A similar study can be conducted, comparing peer-correction, self correction, and teacher's correction.

In this study, age was not considered. A similar study can be conducted with age factor: teenagers, middle-aged, and adults. In each group we can observe students improvements with various correction techniques.

We hope this study and similar studies help English teachers, especially the naïve ones to perform better in their classes and help students to write more accurately.

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