The Primacy of Teacher Imperative Commentaries in the Improvement of Iranian English Majors' Writing Ability

Mojgan Rashtchi
Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch, Iran
m_rashtchi@iau-tnb.ac.ir

Shahriar Mirshahidi
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, USA
s.mirshahidi@okstate.edu

Abstract

In this study, the researchers investigated a critical aspect of EFL/ESL writing pedagogy-the impact of teacher written commentary on student writer's earlier drafts. Compositions of 80 Iranian undergraduate English majors were commented on using a trio of imperatives, statements, and questions on both content and form. Overall, the results indicated that the comments in the imperative form helped students improve their EFL/ESL writing ability more than the other two types. However, the difference between statements and questions was found not to be significant. The findings of this study, once again, emphasized the need for EFL/ESL writing instructors to communicate to learners with appropriate types of written comments. Moreover, employing imperative sentences can orient student writers towards a more accurate (i.e. form-focused) and appropriate (i.e. content-focused) composition writing.

Keywords: Imperative Comments, Multiple-draft Writing Class, Questions as Comments, Statement as Comments, Teacher Written Commentary

Received: September 2009; Accepted: August 2010

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that attributed roles to writing instructors such as coaches, judges, facilitators, evaluators, interested readers, and copy editors have always been emphasized in the literature on L2 writing pedagogy (Ferris, 1995). In the past, as Reid (1994) argues, teachers used to treat students' texts as finished products; recently, writing instructors usually intervene and respond at several points during the process.

In process-oriented settings where composing processes are central to the curriculum (Kroll, 2001), responding to L2 compositions is another key responsibility of writing instructors. Feedback provision is of utmost significance due to its interpersonal nature; it reflects the teacher's attitude toward the writing and initiates a dialogue with the learners. Feedback facilitates the improvement of the learners on their writing tasks. Moreover, not only is feedback provision pedagogically useful but it is also progressively facilitative (Ferris, 1999).

1.1. Research Background

With the advent of process-writing, studies on its various aspects stressed the need for ESL/EFL writing instruction to move to a process approach that would teach students not only how to edit but also to develop strategies to generate ideas, compose multiple drafts of their writing, deal with feedback whether received from the teacher or the peers, and revise their texts over the received feedback (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti 1997; Hyland, 1998; Hyland and Hyland; 2001; Kroll, 2001; Lee, 2008; Paulus, 1999; Rahimi, 2009; Rashtchi and Mirshahidi, 2011; Reid, 1994; Sugita, 2006; Shin, 2008).

Empirical studies in this domain mostly focus to explore the most viable methods of providing feedback to learners' compositions as they proceed through the stages of process writing. According to Ferris (1995), Hyland (1998), and Sugita (2006), for many teachers, handwritten commentary on students' earlier drafts is the fundamental method of response. In spite of the perceived importance of teacher feedback, the results often yield contradictory results and various classifications. Focus on the classification of commentaries based on the language points they address has led to different, mostly dichotomous, categorizations such as *local* versus *global* (Zamel, 1985), *high order* versus *low order* (Keh, 1990), *form* versus *content* (Ashwell, 2000; Kepner, 1991), and *direct* versus *indirect* (Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009), and a general typology of corrective feedback (Ellis, 2009). Moreover, Ashwell (2000) questions the belief that promotes the supremacy of teacher feedback on *content* in earlier drafts and postponing the feedback on *form* to later drafts.

Coupled with emphasizing again the value of teacher written feedback, the results of Ashwell's study yield no difference whether in earlier drafts the feedback is primarily on form or content or even both.

Nevertheless, most of these studies partly failed to answer the query about the best *type* of providing written feedback to student writers' texts. Among the research concentrating on the type of written feedback, Ferris (1997) coded the commentaries based on their function whether they make a request, ask for information, give information, make a positive comment or exclamation, and make a mechanics comment. Teacher commentary which guided student writers toward influential revisions were marginal requests for information, requests (regardless of syntactic form), and comments on mechanics. Furthermore, less influential were comments that provided information to the students, whereas positive comments almost never led to any changes at all.

Also, Sugita's (2006) study investigated the relationship between the changes in the students' revisions and the influence of teachers' three comment types: statements, imperatives, and questions. Sugita found that although teachers tended to avoid writing comments in the imperative form, imperatives were found to be more influential on revisions than questions or statements. Statements seemed to stay in the middle, while questions were unlikely to produce substantive changes; or rather they resulted in minimal changes. In addition to being a small scale study, his work suffered from other limitations as well. The commentaries used in the treatment only focused on content and even this content feedback only urged the participants to provide details, describe the problems, and add new ideas. Additionally, the feedback only appeared as marginal commentary, whereas end notes were not used. Revisions were analyzed dividing the changes into a dichotomy of substantial (i.e. total) and minimal (i.e. partial or unchanged), whereas the impact of the comment types could be investigated on the total composition writing ability of the participants.

To sum up, the existing gaps in the literature on this topic calls for more research in multiple-draft classes to concentrate on studying the effects of teacher written feedback on students' earlier drafts, assessing whether revisions made in response to that feedback lead to improvements in the students' written products, and the type of the written feedback given.

The present study aimed to extend the horizons of the literature on the effectiveness of EFL/ESL writing instructors' written comments on Iranian EFL learners' texts in a university-level, multiple-draft writing class. It also set out to explore the most influential written feedback types which lead to the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. The researchers modeled the commentary types to a trio of *questions*, *statements*, and *imperatives* based

on the Sugita's (2006) classification. The rationale behind using these comment types was the dialectic nature of the way they convey teacher feedback. Each of these types represents a way we converse in our daily interactions due to interpersonal essence of this type of written feedback. To further fill the gap in the previous investigations concerning the impact of feedback on the revisions (mostly the gaps in Sugita's study), this study tried to gather and analyze student writers' perceptions and preferences towards the type of commentary they were given on their texts.

Based on the issues discussed above, this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Does instructor's written commentary as a means of feedback provision have any apparent impact on Iranian student writers' texts?
2. Which of the three comment types (questions, statements, and imperatives) lead to the most influential changes in Iranian students' writing?
3. What are Iranian student writers' perceptions and preferences of the type of commentaries they receive?

2. This Study

2.1. Participants and Context of the Study

Initially, a sample of 97 Persian-speaking English Translation and English Literature majors (20 males and 77 females) within the age range of 20 and 27 participated in this study. These were undergraduate students of a university in Tehran, Iran. After administering the general proficiency test, 17 students were excluded from the study; hence, 80 students (16 males and 64 females) received the treatment.

The participants were enrolled in four classes (20 students in each class) of the Essay Writing course with four different instructors. To control the impact of instructor variable, each class was divided into four groups, each group having five students. As a result, the students were assigned into four groups within each class through simple random sampling; thus five students in each class received one type of the three commentary feedback types (*imperative* comments, *statements*, and *questions*) and one group called the control group in each class received no written feedback from the teacher.

The classes were held once a week at a ninety-minute duration for 15 sessions. The students were supposed to pass the Paragraph Development course as a pre-requisite to the Essay Writing course. The instructors were experienced university lecturers of English and had taught many Essay Writing courses prior to conducting the present study. All four classes were at the same level of instruction and they shared the same textbook which was utilized for teaching text structure, paragraph unity, and types of essays. In and out of the class, students were engaged in several activities and assignments. They were to work on the exercises from the text book, analyze and review the essay writing features, write in-class compositions, and discuss the compositions written as home assignments. Students were also briefed on common lexical and grammatical errors and mistakes English students make in writing five-paragraph essays, and, on a regular basis, they analyzed some students' writing performance in the class. After being briefed by the researchers in separate individual conferences, instructors were supposed to explain the content and purpose of the commentaries that the experimental groups had received during the investigation at the time the commented drafts were returned to the students for the revision while the control group was asked to do other course-related tasks.

2.2. Instrumentation and Data Collection

The first instrument utilized was the reading and writing subtests of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) to measure general proficiency of the participants and to insure that they all belonged to the same population. The test is mostly used for intermediate-level learners (cambridgeesol.org, 2009), and therefore, it was compatible with most of the Iranian undergraduate English majors' level of proficiency (Rahimi, 2009). Originally the test comprises of four sections including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (including a paraphrasing section, letter writing, and story writing). The first two sections were removed from the test due to being beyond the main concern of the study. To verify that the test was a well-formulated test, the reading and writing sections were piloted with 30 intermediate level students studying at the same university prior to the actual administration.

The second instrument used in this study was the Analytic Scale for Rating Composition Tasks to rate the pretest and posttest compositions of the students (Brown and Bailey, 1984; Brown, 2005). The analytic scoring procedure for composition tasks in this study helped the researchers rate participants' writing performance as precisely and as objectively as possible. The rubric had categorically worked out the definition of the written language within an essay task through subtle descriptors of the expected language behavior. The categories of the rating scale included organization, content, grammar, mechanics, as well as style and quality of expression (Appendix A).

Furthermore, to reach a consistency in scoring the participants' pretest and posttest compositions, the raters (i.e. the researchers) compiled their expected rating behaviors in a *raters' protocol* to increase the conformity of their criteria. Taking the categories and score levels specified in the analytic scale into

account, the purpose of the protocol was to elucidate the overall focus of the rating procedure (Appendix B).

The other instrument was a set of questions the researchers used to interview some volunteers from the experimental groups in order to triangulate the collected data. Student writers were interviewed to give complementary information on their perceptions and preferences of the type of commentaries they had received (Appendix C).

2.3. Procedure

Pretest: After administering the proficiency test to insure the homogeneity of the participants, the remaining participants (excluding the outliers and those who withdrew from the research) entered the research process in the four study groups as discussed above. With a one-week interval, they were asked to write a five-paragraph composition on this topic which was the same for all four classes: "*If you were the mayor of your town, what would you do in order to solve the transportation problems?"*

The collected compositions were scored twice in order to guarantee significant inter-rater consistency. The students' texts were rated by the researchers and based on the rating rubric. The average of the two raters' scores was considered as the final score of each composition.

Treatment: As mentioned earlier, the classes were held once a week. The process of providing written feedback to student writers' compositions began one week after administering the pretest. So far, in each of the classes in which the students were divided to four groups mentioned earlier, the students were taught some of the key elements of an essay such as, introductory, concluding, and body paragraphs, blueprints and thesis statement, and a few points on mechanics and structure of English formal writing. To produce the drafts,

students were asked to write on seven different topics every other week including *ways of escaping stress, the problems of living in big cities, the advantages of living in an apartment, the Internet: a necessity or luxury, the disadvantages of watching television, the factors which contribute to job satisfaction, and the advantages of being a member of a social community*. The collected compositions were, accordingly, commented by one of the researchers. These commentaries were not only on the content but also on the form of the essays. Coupled with points in grammar, feedback on form also included points in mechanics. Feedback on content consisted of text organization, choice of words, and the style of writing. The process of commenting on the drafts took at least 8 minutes for every composition and the average number of commentaries on each was 10 sentences.

As mentioned earlier five students in each of the classes received one type of corrective feedback. The students who received one type of feedback were considered as one group in this study. Hence, one group received *imperative* sentences as the teacher commentary on their drafts. From now on, this experimental group will be addressed as Imperative Experimental Group (IEG); the second Experimental group was provided with questions as the commentaries on their texts (Statement Experimental Group or SEG), while the third group received *statements* as the teacher written feedback (Question Experimental Group or QES). Table 1 shows examples of the type of commentary each group received:

Table 1. Three commentary types on students' compositions

Type of commentary	Example
Imperative on form	Add the auxiliary (am, is, are …) to make your sentence correct. Check the spelling here.
Imperative on content	Explain more about this idea. Change this word with a more formal one to fit your formal writing.
Statement on form	This preposition (*from*) is extra here. A word is missing here. Your sentence is ungrammatical.
Statement on content	Every paragraph needs to be indented. Your introduction lacks a clear thesis statement.
Question on form	What is the usage of *yet* here? Don't you think this is the correct conjunction?
Question on content	What do you mean by the last sentence of your concluding paragraph? Are you sure this phrase exists in English (*health aspects*)?!

The control group (CG), however, received no written commentary from the teachers. Simple error detection by underlying or circling the errors was the only activity done on the control group's drafts by the instructors in addition to peer correction and use of outside sources such as writing books and manuals.

As the next step to receiving comments on the first drafts, the participants were asked to revise over the comments in the subsequent week. They could discuss the content of the comments or intelligibility of the handwriting with the instructors in teacher-student oral conferences at the end of each session while others were working on textbook exercises. However, the teachers were not supposed to directly explain the erroneous points and/or give corrections to the student writers. The participants in the control group were encouraged by the instructors to consult their classmates, their textbook, or other outside sources to write the revised draft. Subsequently, the revised compositions were discussed and interpreted by the instructors in each class as a separate activity. Although the revisions were collected by the researchers, they were not

analyzed like the posttest since the focus of the study was to investigate the impact of these commentaries on the composition writing of the learners in general.

Posttest: Once the treatment was over, the participants were asked to write a composition on the same topic of the pretest in order for the researchers to examine whether there had been any improvement in the students' EFL writing ability. The collected posttest compositions were scored according to Brown and Bailey's (1984) analytic scale. Like the pretest, compositions were scored by the researchers. Inter-rater reliability of the two ratings was computed which will be discussed in details in the Results section.

Interviews: Furthermore, the researchers interviewed a group of five volunteers from each experimental group about their attitudes on the written comments they had received. The interviews were done after the treatment period was over and the participants had returned their posttest compositions. Each interview took nearly five minutes and the interviewees were asked to state their opinions on how they felt about the received type of feedback, how well they implemented the comments in their revisions, and if they had any difficulty in interpreting the comments.

3. Results

3.1. Test of Homogeneity

After piloting the reading and writing subtests of the PET, it was administered to the initial 97 participants of this study. The test was utilized to verify that all groups belonged to the same population. Hence, as mentioned earlier, those student writers whose scores lay between one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the study (M=41.50, SD=7.65). The final

number of participants (N=80) were assigned to one control and three experimental groups where each group held 20 students as discussed in the method section. The results of the skewness analysis, as it is signified in Table 2, revealed that the assumption of normality was observed in the distribution of the scores of the three groups (-1.93 for IEG, 1.06 for SEG, 1.45 for QEG, and -1.74 for all four of the indices falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96). Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the proficiency test:

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the proficiency test

Groups	No.	Mean	SD	Std. Error	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
IEG	20	41.25	7.25	1.622	-0.99	0.512
SEG	20	41.90	7.05	1.577	0.543	0.512
QEG	20	40.9	9.019	2.016	0.746	0.512
CG	20	41.95	7.66	1.714	-0.892	0.512

To examine whether there existed a significant difference amongst the proficiency means of the four groups prior to commencing the treatment process, a one-way ANOVA was run and the results revealed no significant difference with alpha set at 0.05 level of significance [F (3, 76)=0.086, P=0.96]. Table 3 displays the results of the ANOVA:

Table 3. ANOVA results of the proficiency test

ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	15.70	3	5.23	0.086	0.967
Within Groups	4608.30	76	60.63		
Total	6424.00	79			

3.2. Pretest

Subsequently, the students wrote the pretest composition; the two sets of scores (after two ratings) were positively correlated and the inter-rater reliability estimate (rr= 0.87) signified a relatively high index. The descriptive statistics for the pretest essays are shown in Table 4:

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the pretest compositions

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SE	Minimum	Maximum
IEG	20	14.61	1.66	0.37	11.00	18.00
SEG	20	15.13	1.49	0.33	12.00	18.00
QEG	20	15.40	0.87	0.19	13.50	16.50
CG	20	15.03	1.50	0.13	12.75	18.75
Total	80	15.04	1.41	0.15	11.00	18.75

Note: The scores are out of 20.

As it is illustrated in Table 4, the means of the four groups seemed to be close to one another. However, once more, a one-way ANOVA was run in order to check whether there was a significant difference among the means of the pretest compositions of the groups prior to receiving the comment types. The results, as Table 5 shows, [F (3, 76)=1.066, P=0.368] yielded no significant difference among the means of the groups:

Table 5. ANOVA resutls of the pretest compositions

ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.43	3	2.14	1.066	0.368
Within Groups	152.82	76	2.01		
Total	159.26	79			

Furthermore, to insure that the participants were normally distributed in each of the four groups after sitting for the pretest composition, a series of non-parametric goodness-of-fit Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests (K-S test) was run.

Finding of significance, in K-S test, means that the sample may *not* be assumed to come from a normal distribution with the given mean and standard deviation. The results indicated that the assumption of normality was observed in the distribution of the scores of the four groups.

Table 6. Kolmogorov-Smirnov results for the four groups

Pretest Compositions	IEG	SEG	QEG	CG
N	20	20	20	20
Normal parameters				
Mean	14.61	15.13	15.40	15.03
SD	1.66	1.49	0.87	1.50
Most extreme differences				
Absolute	0.15	0.11	0.24	0.26
Positive	0.15	0.08	0.14	0.16
Negative	-0.14	-0.11	-0.24	-0.09
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	0.70	0.50	1.09	1.16
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.69	0.95	0.18	0.13

In Table 6, the *Most Extreme Difference* values refer to the largest positive and negative differences between the sample distribution for each group and the theoretical normal distribution for the pretest scores with the same normal parameters (i.e. means and standard deviations). The largest extreme (absolute, positive, or negative) difference value, for each group, was used in calculating the K-S test statistic. The two-tailed significance value of the test statistic for all four groups were larger than the level of significance [(P_{IEG}=0.69>0.05); (P_{SEG}=0.95>0.05); (P_{QEG}=0.18>0.05); (P_{CG}=0.13>0.05)] indicating that the pretest writing scores of the four groups may be assumed to come from a normal distribution.

To examine whether the commentaries had any significant impact on the writing ability of the learners (i.e. the first research question), the participants, once more, wrote a composition which served as the posttest.

3.3. Posttest

Like the pretest, the inter-rater reliability of the two ratings was computed through Cronbach's Alpha which indicated positively correlated sets of scores with a relatively high reliability index (rr= 0.82). Given the descriptive statistics in Table 7, the means of the four groups after receiving the treatment suggested a superiority of the three experimental groups (IEG=16.70; SEG=15.53; QEG=16.00) over the control group (CG=14.87).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the posttest compositions

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SE	Minimum	Maximum
IEG	20	16.70	1.08	0.24	15.00	18.50
SEG	20	15.53	1.68	0.37	11.00	17.50
QEG	20	16.00	0.87	0.19	14.00	17.50
CG	20	14.87	1.58	0.35	13.00	18.50
Total	80	15.77	1.48	0.16	11.00	18.50

To statistically determine the significance of this superiority, a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the three commentary types on the improvement of the writing ability of the learners (Table 8). The analysis signified that there was a significant difference in the application of the three different commentaries [$F(3, 76) = 6.51$, $P=.001$, $\eta^2 = .25$]. The effect size, using eta squared was 0.25 which indicated a large effect size which means that teacher commentary by itself accounted for 25% of the overall variance.

Table 8. ANOVA results of the compositions of the groups, posttest

ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared ($\eta^{2)}$
Between Group	35.45	3	11.81	6.512	0.001	0.25
Within Groups	137.92	76	1.81			
Total	173.37	79				

Multiple comparisons of the mean differences of the four groups (Table 9) and a Post hoc test using Tukey Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) (Table 10) indicated that the mean score for the IEG who received *imperative* comments (M=16.70, SD=1.08) was significantly higher than the control group (M=14.87, SD=1.58), and also, the mean scores of the QEG who received *question* comments (M=16.00, SD=0.87) and the SEG who received *statement* comments (M=15.53, SD=1.68) were higher; though, the mean difference of SEG and the control group (-0.66) was not statistically significant.

Table 9. Multiple comparisons of the mean differences, posttest

Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std Error	Sig.
IEG	SEG	1.16*	0.42	0.03
	QEG	0.70	0.42	0.36
	CG	1.82*	0.42	0.00
SEG	IEG	-1.16*	0.42	0.03
	QEG	-0.46	0.42	0.69
	CG	0.66	0.42	0.41
QEG	IEG	-0.70	0.42	0.36
	SEG	0.46	0.42	0.69
	CG	1.12*	0.42	0.04
CG	IEG	-1.82	0.42	0.00
	SEG	-0.66	0.42	0.41
	QEG	-1.12*	0.42	0.04

*. The mean difference is significant at 0.05 level.

Table 10. Post hoc homogeneous subsets of compositions, posttest

Group	N	Subset for Alpha= 0.05		
		1	2	3
CG	20	14.87		
SEG	20	15.53	15.53	
QEG	20		16.00	16.00
IEG	20			16.70
Sig.		0.410	0.699	0.361

To investigate whether there was a significant difference between the impacts of the three types of commentaries on the student writers' posttest compositions (i.e. the second research question), another one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the each of the three written feedback types on the improvement of the learners' writing ability (Table 11). The analysis revealed that there was a significant difference in the application of the three commentary types [F (2, 57) = 4.31, P=.018, η^2 = .13]. The effect size, using eta squared was 0.13 which indicated a relatively large effect size which means that imperative commentary by itself accounted for 13% of the overall variance.

Table 11. ANOVA results for the experimental groups, posttest

ANOVA	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared (η^2)
Between Groups	13.70	2	6.85	4.31	0.018	0.13
Within Groups	90.48	57	1.58			
Total	104.19	59				

Consequently, multiple comparisons of the mean differences (Table 12) and Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test (Table 13) indicated that the mean score of IEG was significantly different than SEG (I-J=1.16).

Moreover, QEG did not significantly differ from IEG (I-J= 0.70) and SEG (I-J=0.46) respectively. Thus, the participants in the IEG performed better than the other two groups on the posttest. Although the QEG who received *questions* was better than the SEG with *statements* as their commentaries, the difference was not statistically significant at $p<0.05$.

Table 12. Multiple comparisons of the mean differences for the experimental groups, posttest

Group (l)	Group(J)	Mean Difference (l-J)	Std Error	Sig.
IEG	SEG	1.16*	0.42	0.03
	QEG	0.70	0.42	0.36
SEG	IEG	-1.16*	0.42	0.03
	QEG	-0.46	0.42	0.69
QEG	IEG	-0.70	0.42	0.36
	SEG	0.46	0.42	0.69

Table 13. Post hoc homogeneous subsets for the experimental groups on the posttest

Group	N	Subset for Alpha= 0.05	
		1	2
SEG	20	15.53	
QEG	20	16.00	16.00
IEG	20		16.70
Sig.		0.481	0.193

To summarize, and taken together with the results of the second ANOVA, all groups who received teacher commentaries on their texts improved their composition writing ability. However, this improvement was only significantly different for the imperative comments over the statements. Imperatives and questions, and also statements and questions did not significantly exceed each

other in leading the compositions to most influential changes in both form and content. This will be subtly discussed in the next section.

3.4. Students' Perceptions and Preferences

In order to find answer to the third research question, five students in each of the experimental groups were interviewed to state their perceptions of the received type of commentary, how well they implemented the feedback in their revisions, and if they had any difficulty interpreting the comments. The results of the interviews, to a great extent, were in line with the results of the statistical analysis of the posttest compositions. All Interviewees agreed on the beneficial nature of the commentaries. Nearly all interviewees in the imperative group (80%) claimed that the authoritative tone of the imperative comments turned out to be constructive to them and they implemented the comments in revising the first drafts; 60% of the interviewees who received questions stated that they successfully implemented the written feedback in their revisions and only two learners (40%) in the statement group believed that they had implemented the comments in the revised version of their composition drafts. In terms of having difficulty in interpreting the received feedback, all students in the first group believed that although the imperative comments, like the other two types of written feedback, gave indirect clues, these comments were transparent enough to lead them to changes in their revisions. However, 40% of the students in the second group (i.e. questions) asserted that the questions made them more confused and were not helpful in the revision. The third group of interviewees who had received statements experienced difficulties in revising over this type of written feedback. Statements made no sense to 60% of them and did not motivate them to strive for the correct form or appropriate content.

4. Discussion and Implications

As one of the viable sources for the improvement of EFL learners' writing ability, teacher feedback has always gained research attention in the past few decades. Nonetheless, lack of agreement in the findings of such research does not permit any secure generalizations. Body of research into teacher feedback on writing suffers from several shortcomings. The studies are often too general or too specific in defining the language territories within which teacher feedback is delivered. Furthermore, the form of the given feedback is not clear in terms of length, direct or indirect, extra-linguistic features it addresses, characteristics of the learners' text, and the feedback of the student writers on the feedback they receive. The present study, at least partly, has attempted to cover some of these flaws. The discussion that follows unfolds the answers found to the research questions based on the collected data and their analyses, and contrasts or compares them with similar-in-nature studies.

4.1. Does Instructor's Written Commentary as a Means of Feedback Provision Have any Apparent Impact on Iranian Student Writers' Text?

The positive answer to the first research question of the study based on ANOVA results of the pretest and posttest compositions is in line with the similar studies conducted in this field, and reminds the practitioners and writing instructors of their key responsibility to respond to ESL/EFL texts (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994; Kepner, 1991; Lee, 2008; Paulus, 1999; Shin, 2003). Accordingly, the study reminds teachers of the very fact that handwritten commentary can still serve as the primary method to fulfill their responsibility as feedback providers (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Hyland, 1998; Sugita, 2006). The fondness for utilizing handwritten comments might be

due to their availability to both teachers and students. A red (or any other color) pen is a tool that can be found in any ESL or EFL classroom regardless of the scope of the program or course. Student writers often praise the teacher feedback; yet, they would praise this feedback more if it is user-friendly and easy to catch (Rashtchi and Mirshahidi, 2011).

In other words, the higher scores student writers who belonged to the experimental groups obtained on the posttest composition once again highlights the salience of the indispensible role of teacher in providing written feedback. Regardless of their English proficiency background, Iranian EFL student writers verified that teachers are "at the center of the stage" (Lee, 2008, p. 144). This can be linked to the level of availability of communication technology, notably the Internet, to some of the ESL students in their home countries. In such an isolating setting, the only remaining source for feedback interaction, apart from the existing print sources, would be writing teachers and their on-the-draft feedback (Rashtchi and Mirshahidi, 2011).

4.2. Which of the Three Comment Types (questions, statements, and imperatives) Lead to the Most Influential Changes in Iranian Students' Writing?

The second research question aimed at exploring the most influential of the narrowed down trio of *imperatives*, *statements*, and *questions* as the means of providing written feedback to student writers' compositions. The studied commentary types, based on Sugita's classification (2006), were chosen due to their dialog-based and dialectic core. As for the most influential of the three comment types, the results verified Sugita's (2006) findings that imperative comments lead to a greater-in-significance improvement in students'

composition writing ability. It can be assumed that imperative tone of the comments better reminds the student writers of the urge to implicate the required changes in their texts. Sugita (2006) reported on the superiority of statement as the second most influential commentary. In contrast, the present study found that questions were the second most influential commentary, and statements occupied the third place among the entertained types.

As mentioned in the research background, Sugita (2006) failed to answer to a number of serious queries including why the statements and questions could not usher student writers to a significant improvement in their writing as the imperatives did. The results of the present study may suggest that statements and questions are not linguistically strong tools to communicate to student writers. It seems that that there is still a gap between a true autonomous learner and Iranian EFL learners. The essence of Iranian EFL writing classes is far from learner centered contexts in which learner autonomy is inclusively acknowledged. Not having been addressed in Sugita's (2006) study, this trend might be shared with Japanese EFL students. According to the results, the questions function more fruitful than statements for Iranian student writers, perhaps for the reason that they promote critical thinking when students interpret the commentaries.

Unlike the other study which has ignored implementing form-focused feedback into the three commentary types, "… taking the term content to represent what a writer is trying to generate or express, the teacher researcher focused on meaning or thoughts and provided commentary for helping students explain, describe, or add details" (p. 37), the comment types in the present study were on both content and form, consisting of marginal and end notes on organization, content, style, structure, and mechanics. Evidence from previous studies has shown that the recommended pattern of content feedback followed

by form feedback is not superior to the reverse pattern or to a pattern of mixed feedback. In all, it did not matter to the students in which order they received form or content feedback (Ashwell, 2000).

To discuss the nature of the commentaries, in terms of direct or indirect feedback, the treatment included both indirect feedback that indicated and located the existence of an erroneous production but did not provide the correct form (Ellis, 2009) or suggest any alternative to the content. Coupled with indication and location of the problematic areas, the indirect commentaries aimed to give metalinguistic clues to students; that is, as Ellis (2009) argues, the teacher provided "some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error or ambiguous content" (p. 98). This was in order to authorize the learners to be involved in the process of exploring accuracy and appropriateness by themselves, to strengthen their problem-solving abilities, and enhance learner autonomy:

Erroneous Production

Most of the people are worry about …

Written Feedback

→ Check the category of this word. [: imperative + metalinguistic clue]

Revised form

Most of the people are worried about …

On the other hand, direct feedback provided the learners with the correct form or appropriate content specifically when it came to statements as commentaries. Since there is an ongoing debate on the prominence of direct/ indirect feedback (Bitchener and Knoch, 2008, 2009; Ferris, 1999; Rahimi, 2009; Shin, 2008; Truscott, 1996), although these studies mostly focus on form feedback, the researchers did not entirely ignore the implementation of direct

feedback. Hence, there were occurrences of a "judicious combination" (Ferris, 1999) of direct and indirect feedback (Ferris, 1999):

Erroneous Production

In my opinion the best way of escaping stress is …

Written Feedback

→You need a comma here. [: statement + correct form given]

Revised form

In my opinion, the best way of escaping stress is …

4.3. What Are Iranian Student Writers' Perceptions and Preferences of the Type of Commentaries They Received?

Another aspect of teacher written feedback which has been partly ignored in the literature is the attitude of the students toward the feedback they receive. Mentioned earlier, commentaries addressed in this study own a dialectic nature. In an ideal interaction, both sides involved play a role, and more importantly, neither side's contribution is fair to be undermined.

The answer to the third research question illuminated the important impact of teacher commentary on students' writing. The interviewed student writers valued the received comments. Nevertheless, the type of this feedback mattered to them: they cherished imperative comments; they accepted questions; and they did not find statements pertinent and impressive. Ferris (1995) argues that whatever a particular teacher's orientation toward responding to student writing, it is clear that teachers' response is important to both instructors and students. They seem to value the amount of time their teachers spend on writing comments and appreciate the precision with which

the comments are prepared. The commentary type feedback on the students' writing seems to motivate the learners and encourage them to apply the corrections to their future writings.

By and large, findings of the present study can be implicated in ESL/EFL teaching practice from several aspects. Taking the context of the study into account, EFL in Iran, or in situation alike, is a unique setting that necessitates the EFL teachers to limit themselves to certain approaches, methods, and strategies in order to be compatible with the available facilities and accepted procedures. Teaching English in Iran is done in a condition in which access to outside sources such as the Internet, satellite media, and direct contact with native speakers of English are available to a minority of the learners (Rahimi, 2009). In such a context, the role of the teacher feedback is highly valued as one of the only applicable sources for the students to improve their language skills. Hence, ESL writing cannot be an exception and teacher written feedback is an effective medium in this regard.

5. Conclusion

Still, in many ESL/EFL classrooms, writing is practiced in single-draft cycles. Teaching composition writing in a single-draft has started to give way to multiple draft classes in which instructors reflect thoroughly on student writers' in-class performance. The teacher response in such a context is not limited and learners are left with the opportunity to actually implement the received feedback in their revisions. Also, written feedback has proved to be a viable tool to this end. Therefore, providing certain forms of written feedback, notably those that feature some sort of interaction, can orient student writers towards a more accurate and appropriate composition writing.

References

Ashwell, T. (2000). "Patterns of teacher response to student writing in a multiple-draft composition classroom: Is content feedback followed by form feedback the best method?", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 3, pp. 227-257.

Bitchener, J., and Knoch, U. (2008). "The value of written corrective feedback for migrant and international students", *Language Teaching Research,* 12 (3), pp. 409-431.

Bitchener, J., and Knoch, U. (2009). "The value f a focused approach to written corrective feedback", *ELT Journal,* 63(3), pp. 204-211.

Brown, J. D. (2005). *Testing in Language Programs,* New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Brown, J. D., and Bailey, K. M. (1984). "A categorical instrument for scoring second language writing skills", *Language Learning,* 34 (1), pp. 21-42.

Cambridge's Preliminary English Test, retrieved September 20, 2009 from http://cambridgeesol.org/exams/general-english/pet.html.

Ellis, R. (2009). "A typology of written corrective feedback types", *ELT Journal,* 63 (2), pp. 97-107.

Ferris, D. (1995). "Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms", *TESOL Quarterly,* 29 (1), pp. 34-54.

Ferris, D. (1997). "The influence of teacher commentary on student revision", *TESOL Quarterly*, 31 (2), pp. 315-341.

Ferris, D. (1999). "The case for grammar correction in L2 writing classes: a response to Truscott (1996)", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 8 (1), pp. 1-11.

Ferris, D., Pezone, S., Tade, C. R., and Tinti, S. (1997). "Error feedback in L2 writing classes: How explicit does it need to be?", *Journal of Second Language Learning,* 10, pp.161-184.

Hedgcock, J., and Lefkowitz, N. (1994). "Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 3 (2), pp. 141-163.

Hyland, F., and Hyland, K. (2001). "Sugaring the pill: praise and criticism in written feedback", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 10 (3), pp. 185-212.

Hyland, F. (1998). "The impact of teacher written feedback on writers", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 7 (3), pp. 255-286.

Keh, C. (1990). "Feedback in the writing process: A model and methods for implementation", *ELT Journal,* 44 (4), pp. 294-305.

Kepner, C. G. (1991). "An experiment in the relationship of types of written feedback to the development of second-language skills", *Modern Language Journal,* 75, pp. 305-313.

Kroll, B. (2001). "Considerations for teaching an ESL/EFL writing course", in Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language,* Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle, pp. 219-232.

Lee, I. (2008). "Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 17, pp. 144-164.

Paulus, T. M. (1999). "The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing", *Journal of Second Language Writing,* 8(3), pp. 265-289.

Rahimi, M. (2009). "The role of teacher's corrective feedback in improving Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy over time: Is learner's mother tongue relevant?" *Reading and Writing,* 22(2), pp. 219-243.

Rashtchi, M., and Mirshahidi, S. (2011). "Written feedback: Still, a strong pedagogical tool", *Foreign Language Teaching Journal, Iranian Ministry of Education,* 25(4), pp. 27-34.

Reid, J. (1994). "Responding to ESL students' texts: the myths of appropriation", *TESOL Quarterly,* 28 (2), pp. 273-292.

Shin, S. J. (2003). "The reflective L2 writing teacher", *ELT Journal,* 57 (1), pp. 3-10.

Shin, S. K. (2008). "Fire your proofreader! Grammar correction in the writing classroom", *ELT Journal,* 62(4), pp. 358-365.

Sugita, Y. (2006). "The impact of teacher comment types on students' revision", *ELT Journal,* 60 (1), pp. 34-41.

Truscott, J. (1996). "The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes", *Language Learning,* 46, pp. 327-369.

Zamel, V. (1985). "Responding to student writing", *TESOL Quarterly,* 19, pp. 79-102.

Appendix A

Brown's (2005) Analytic Scale for Rating Composition Tasks

I. Organization: Introduction, Body, & conclusion	**II. Logical Development of Ideas: Content**	**III. Grammar**	**IV. Punctuation, Spelling, & Mechanics**	**V. Style & Quality of Expression**
Appropriate title, effective introductory paragraph, topic is stated, leads to body; transitional expression used; arrangement of material shows plan (Could be outlined by reader); supporting evidence given for generalizations; complete & logical conclusion	Essay addresses the assigned topic; the ideas are concrete and thoroughly developed; no extraneous material; essay reflects thought	native-like fluency in English grammar; correct use of relative clauses, prepositions, modals, articles, verb forms, and tense sequencing; no fragment or run-on sentences	Correct use of English writing conventions; left & write margins, all needed capitals, paragraphs indented, punctuation and spelling; very neat	Precise vocabulary usage; use of parallel structures; concise; register good **20-18 Excellent to Good**
Adequate title, introduction & conclusion; body of essay is acceptable but some evidence may be lacking; some ideas aren't fully developed; sequence is logical but transitional expressions may be absent or missed.	Essay addresses the issues but misses some points; ideas could be more fully developed; some extraneous material is present	Advanced proficiency in English grammar; some grammar problems don't influence communication, although the reader is aware of them; no fragment or run-on sentences	Some problems with writing conventions or punctuation; occasional spelling errors; left margin correct; paper is neat and legible	Attempts variety; good vocabulary; not wordy; register OK; style fairly concise **17-15 Good to Adequate**

Mediocre or scant introduction and conclusion; problems with the order of ideas in body; the generalizations may not be fully supported by the evidence given; problems of organization interfere	Development of ideas not complete or essay is somewhat off the topic; paragraphs aren't divided exactly right	Ideas getting through to the reader, but grammar problems are apparent and have a negative effect on communication; run-on sentences or fragments present	Uses general writing conventions but has errors; spelling problems distract reader; punctuation errors interfere with ideas	Some vocabulary misused; lacks awareness of register; may be too wordy **14-12 Adequate to Fair**
Shaky or minimally recognizable introduction; organization can rarely be seen; severe problems with ordering of ideas; lack of supporting evidence; conclusion weak or illogical; inadequate effort at organization	Ideas incomplete; essay does not reflect careful thinking or was hurriedly written; inadequate effort in area of content	Numerous serious grammar problems interfere with communication of the writer's ideas; grammar review of some areas clearly needed; difficult to read sentences	Serious problems with format of paper; parts of essay not legible; errors in sentence-final punctuation; unacceptable to educated readers	Poor expression of ideas; problems in vocabulary; lacks variety of structure **11-6 Unacceptable**
Absence of introduction or conclusion; no apparent organization of body; severe lack of supporting evidence; writer has not made any effort to organize the composition (could not be outline by reader)	Essay is completely inadequate and does not reflect college-level work; no apparent effort to consider the topic carefully	Severe grammar problems interfere greatly with the message; reader can't understand what writer is trying to say; unintelligible sentence structure	Complete disregard for English writing conventions; paper illegible; obvious capitals missing; no margins; severe spelling problems	Inappropriate use of vocabulary; no concept of register or sentence variety **5-1 Not College-level Work**

Appendix B

Raters' protocol

- Ratings should be in line with the score descriptors of the rating guideline to a maximum level.
- Form and content are regarded as separate issues at the time of scoring the compositions.
- Some of the errors in mechanics and spelling will be treated once throughout the text. Hence, reappearance of the same error will not cause any negative scores.
- Typed compositions gain no extra scores over handwritten ones. Only words or phrases which are *entirely* illegible will be regarded as errors. Plural *s* and/or singular *s*, if not readable, are considered as structure errors.
- Since the focus of the study is on essay-writing abilities, only the content and format of the five paragraphs of the participants' compositions are rated. Other features such as, the font and its size, color of the pen, where the title and personal information of the writer appears in the paper, etc., will not be judged by the raters.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

How they felt about the received type of feedback ● *Did the teacher comments attract your attention after receiving the commented drafts? How much attention did you pay?* ● *How did you feel about the comments? What was your reaction?*
How well they implemented the comments in their revisions ● *Did you reread the draft of your composition before writing the revision?* ● *Did you use all the teacher commentaries in the revision?*
If they had any difficulty in interpreting the comments ● *Did you easily read the comments? Why/ Why not?* ● *How did you handle those comments which were difficult to understand?* ● *Did you go to the teacher to explain on the comment? Did you consult outside sources as well?*