



## Does Task Shape Learning Strategy Use? Constructive Feedback-based Journal Writing and Use of Learning Strategies by EFL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

While since a rather long time ago teacher feedback has received a lot of attention in learning a foreign language, quite recently, a gradual but prominent shift has taken place within the field of education, resulting in greater emphasis on learners and learning and less stress on teachers and teaching (Hismanoglu, 2000). An outcome of this event has been more emphasis on language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). As another sign of increasing emphasis on learners, many studies have focused on the use of journals in EFL classes (Park, 2003). However, the present researcher failed to find any published research on how teacher feedback on EFL students' journals can contribute to strategies they use for learning English as a foreign language. Thus, this study was conducted to explore contributions of teacher constructive feedback on Iranian EFL students' journals to their use of language learning strategies. A group of EFL learners received a 3-month treatment of feedback-based journal writing and a control group did not receive any treatment. Prior to and following the treatment, the SILL was administered to the groups. Then, they were required to write journals which were followed by teacher constructive feedback for eight sessions. Pertinent statistical analyses showed that feedback-based journal writing does not have any significant effects on the use of learning strategies by EFL learners. However, longitudinal studies are suggested so that further realities of mental processing can be explored.

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### Introduction

Journal writing has been found to have various contributions to the educational development of students including increasing their autonomy in the process of learning (Carroll, 1994; Danjun, n.d.; Park, 2003). More precisely, it is believed that journal writing enables learners to take on the responsibility of their own learning autonomously. Autonomous learners are usually defined as those "who have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher" (Wenden, 1991, p. 15). Therefore, journal writing might contribute to learners' autonomy through enhancing their use of learning strategies required when writing a journal or focused and reflected on within the journal.

A lot of studies have been done on the applications of journal writing in education in general and language education in particular. Its applications are diverse; from kindergarten classes to ESL students to eight grade math classes (Heidi Dodson, 2001). Fulwiler (1987) holds that journals are interdisciplinary and developmental by nature; it would be hard for writers who use journals regularly and seriously not to witness growth. A study by Srimavin and Pornapit (2004) resulted that journal writing is perhaps the easiest tool to use for self-assessment, and Hockings (1998) concluded that journal writing is an effective tool to develop high level skills and deepen understanding if appropriate time and feedback is provided.

In the same vein, Emi (1993) has shown evidence that journal writing is an ideal means in developing language skills even in elementary level of language learning. Wenden (1991)

emphasized that autonomy in language learning is built on LLSs while the present study failed to reveal similar findings.

Journals, in fact, act as medium in the process of learning, for example, by affecting and setting other mechanisms of learning; learning strategies. As an evidence, Glogger et al. (2008) asked high school students to write journals in 2 weeks, consequently, to see the effects of prompts on the use of learning strategies. Learners received cognitive and metacognitive prompts which included specific and nonspecific ones. The results showed that specific prompts increased the quantity of cognitive learning strategies but the quality of learning strategies could not be enhanced. Doing the same, Holmes and Moulton (1997) conducted a study on the students' views on dialogue journal writing as a learning strategy. They looked for patterns in the students' views of the dialogue journaling and found that ESL students considered dialogue journaling as an effective tool for learning English. However, their writing fluency and motivation to write improved. They believed that because they were writing on the topic they chose on their own, it was easier to write. In addition, they felt free to express themselves. Two reasons made participants motivated to write. Firstly, they gained confidence because they wrote frequently. Secondly, their writing was not corrected; therefore, they were not afraid of errors.

Regardless of the effectiveness of journals in shaping the use of learning strategies, no pedagogical attempts may entail required accomplishments without the intervention of some type of feedback. Then, it might be claimed/hypothesized that journal writing as a channel of input transmission and manipulation will be helpful if it is integrated with appropriate feedback.

**Table 1. Reliability Indices**

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Pretest	.937	50
Posttest	.968	50

**Table 2. Normality Tests based on Pretest of Learning Strategies**

GROUP	Skewness		Normality Test	Kurtosis		Normality Test
	Statistic	Std. Error		Statistic	Std. Error	
EXPERIMENTAL	-0.03	0.434	-0.07	1.385	0.845	1.64
CONTROL	-1.509	0.717	-2.10	2.182	1.4	1.56

**Table 3. Independent t-test Pretest of Learning Strategies by Groups**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.014	.906	1.007	36	.321	10.59004	10.52086	-10.74726	31.92733
Equal variances not assumed			.978	12.798	.346	10.59004	10.83042	-12.84519	34.02527

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics on Pretest of SILL**

GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CONTROL	9	165.5556	28.73200	9.57733
EXPERIMENTAL	29	154.9655	27.23244	5.05694

**Table 5. Normality Tests based on Posttest of Learning Strategies**

GROUP	Skewness		Normality Test	Kurtosis		Normality Test
	Statistic	Std. Error		Statistic	Std. Error	
Experimental	0.44	0.434	1.01	-0.221	0.845	-0.26
Control	0.199	0.717	0.28	0.47	1.4	0.34

**Table 6. Independent t-test Posttest of Learning Strategies by Groups**

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.034	.855	.502	36	.619	4.98851	9.94286	-15.17655	25.15356
Equal variances not assumed			.470	12.175	.647	4.98851	10.60916	-18.09016	28.06717

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics on the Posttest of SILL**

GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CONTROL	9	170.3333	28.53507	9.51169
EXPERIMENTAL	29	165.3448	25.30567	4.69914

### Feedback

Feedback is any information which provides a report on the result of a certain behavior. Feedback is useful to examine the success or failure of performance. In the process of teaching and learning, feedback has recently become an issue of a special interest to many researchers. However, a controversial question among researchers is that what types of feedback should be given to students' writing. Truscott (1996) believed that error correction as a type of feedback on the students' writing is harmful. In addition, (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Lalande, 1982) realized that feedback on grammatical errors could improve the students' writing accuracy.

Lighbown and Spada (1990) showed that accuracy and fluency might develop well when corrective feedback is provided and the level of linguistic knowledge and performance improve. They also mentioned that feedback may be in the form of recast, elicitation, repetition, implicit feedback, and explicit feedback regarding the types of error and linguistic aspects that a student comes across. On the contrary, Vengadasamy (2002) contended that too many error corrections can be discouraging to the learner writing. It supports the notion that teacher response should focus mainly on content. He concluded that teachers demotivate students when they consider responding activity as an error correction activity and directive response in the form of instructions, while facilitative response can motivate students to write more efficiently. Holding a bit conservative science, Hendrickson (1978) believed that only errors which prevent understanding of a message should be corrected.

Studying on six ESL writers at a university, Hyland (2003) found that some language errors may be treated through feedback. Besides, Chandler (2003) resulted that both accuracy and fluency of some university students' writing significantly improved through teachers' feedback on students' grammatical and lexical errors. Similarly, Rahimi's (2008) study on the effect of feedback on writing accuracy showed that all participants improved their writing accuracy while the feedback group made more improvement. Hong (2004) investigated the effect of teachers' error feedback on self correction ability of international students. The results showed that teacher feedback was the most significant factor influencing students' self correction, compared to proficiency level and performance on the grammar test. Robb et al. (1986) compared four different types of corrective feedback over an academic year and resulted that direct correction of error was not better than the other methods of corrective feedback. Ashwell (2000) compared four methods of providing feedback, and the results showed that all the three groups who received feedback made more improvement in their writing accuracy than the group with no feedback.

Obviously, core of the research studies on feedback revolve around its contributions to mainly academic achievements in various areas of language ability. While, its contributions to learner's personal, cognitive and affective variables including, for example, learning strategies have received little attention.

### Learning strategies

Defined as "techniques, tactics, learning skills, potentially conscious plans, and cognitive abilities" (Wenden, 1987, p. 7), learning strategies have also received prominence in the recent decades. Their significance mainly rests in the way O'Malley and Chamot (1990) approach them as "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (p. 1). Therefore, learning strategies should play a crucial role in any academic achievements, especially in SLA. Studies by Raei (1998) on the teachability of good reading strategies and exploring the effects of reading

strategy training on Iranian students' reading comprehension, Griffiths' (2003) findings on a positive correlation between course level and reported frequency of language learning strategy use, Song's (1998) exploration on the effect of reading strategy training on FL college students' reading ability, Marefat and Ahmadi Shirazi's (2003) investigation on the effect of teaching direct learning strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) on the vocabulary retention, short term and long term of EFL learners, are few amongst so numerous studies on the educational significance of learning strategies.

Then, what seems highly worthwhile is what might set the type and use of learning strategies of various types. Yang (2007) studied the effects of ethnicity and language proficiency on the use of LLSs by Taiwanese college students. It was found that ethnicity did play a significant role in the selection of LLSs. Abbasian (2005) run a comprehensive study trying to investigate the role of contextual variables in the selection and use of metacognitive strategies in Iranian multi-dimensional EFL educational setting. He found positive correlation between the educational setting type and selection, use and extent of use of metacognitive strategies.

Given these issues, this study was an attempt to make a bridge among these tripartite variables (i.e., task in the form of journals, feedback and learning strategies). More specifically and in line with what scholars like Yang (2007) and Abbasian (2005) reported on the ways use of learning strategies can be determined, this study investigated the nature of language learning strategies assumed being affected by the feedback rendered through the channel of daily journal developed by the learners in the light of constructive feedback.

### Problem and Purpose

#### Method

#### Context of Research and Participants

The study took place in Iranian EFL setting in which 38 mainly female B.A. junior students of TEFL aged from 18-30 and intermediate in terms of language proficiency level attended the study while taking a course in Language Testing. As intermediate in terms of proficiency level, their ages ranged from 18 to 30.

#### Instrumentation

Two specific instruments including an inventory (i.e., SILL) and a set of journals developed by the students were used to collect the required data.

#### SILL Questionnaire

Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) as a valid and reliable instrument contains 50 items organized according to the six-subset strategy taxonomy. There are nine items on memory strategies, 14 on cognitive strategies, six on compensation strategies, nine on metacognitive strategies, six on affective strategies, and six on social strategies (Oxford, 1990).

#### Students' Journals

As an open-ended instrument, student-developed journals contained the students' daily report of their entry and exit behaviours. They would think about what they knew about the topic before each session starts and write it down at the beginning of every session, and would do the same but a bit more comprehensively about what happened to them during the lesson and what and how they achieved. Totally, eight journals were collected from each student.

#### Procedure

As a quasi-experimental research in design, this study was conducted through the following steps: First the participants received the SILL prior to the commencement of the experiment.

Then, they were randomly divided into two groups (i.e., Experimental and Control). One of the researchers attended the course as a student offered by another researcher offering two language testing classes for two groups of BA students. The class members were not informed about the attending researcher so that any Halo effect and subject expectancy could be avoided. Then, they were asked to develop a journal each session on what they learned about the new lesson after preparation before the session. Their journals were collected every session and scored analytically (Heaton, 1988). Necessary constructive feedback on the form, content and writing style used to be written on their journals and the next session prior to the start of the following treatment the instructor himself used to give oral feedback on the very common errors to all the class.

Feedback on form was on grammatical features, capitalizations, punctuations, tenses, and other surface structures. Feedback on content included comments on main and supporting ideas, noting details, and length of the paper. Feedback on writing style involved assessment of the use of language, persuasion, originality, and creativity. Lastly, oral feedback contained some general points which were offered to the whole class. The researcher would score each new journal in light of the previous journals of the same student to detect and analyze their strengths and weaknesses and provide them with appropriate feedback. Juxtaposition of journals was also done to check if, and the extent to which, each participant had taken the researcher's previous comments into account.

This process continued for eight sessions, which involved collecting eight journals from each participant, analyzing and giving recommendations on each of them, and having the participants read through them carefully and take them into account when writing the following journals. The last step was to ask students re-administer the SILL to explore the degree to which their use of language learning strategies had changed compared to the state prior to the instruction.

### Data Analysis and Results

#### Validation

To make sure of the instrument reliability, as shown in Table 1, the reliability indices for the pretest and posttest of language leaning strategies were estimated, being .93 and .96, respectively.

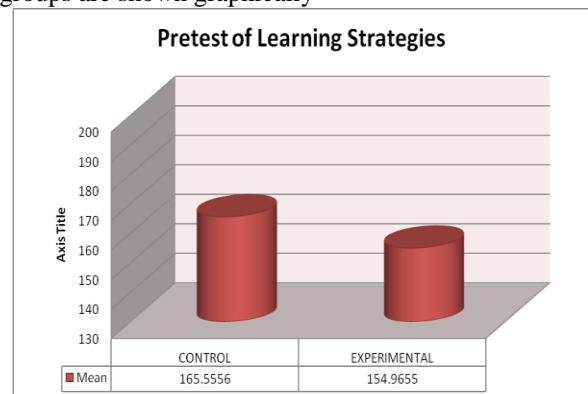
#### Homogeneity Measurers: SILL Pretest

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest. However, the data was checked in terms of normality. As displayed in Table 2, the ratios of skewedness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are within the range of  $\pm 1.96$ . In addition, regarding the skewedness of the pretest of the experimental group, all of the indices are within  $\pm 1.96$ . This means that there is no evidence to consider the data non-normal. However, the skewedness for the pretest of control group is beyond the acceptable range. The best solution is to reduce the significance level to .01 (Pallant, 2005) to compensate for this shortcoming.

In order to check the second assumption, i.e. the homogeneity of variance, the Levene' statistic should be reported. If the significance of this statistic is lower than .05, the groups do not have homogenous variances. Fortunately, the SPSS provides the solution. If the homogeneity of variances is met, one should report the first line of the SPSS output labeled "Equal variances assumed". As displayed in Table 3, the Levene's F-value of .014 has a probability of .90. Since the probability associated with the Levene's statistic is higher than .05, it can be concluded that the experimental and control groups

enjoy homogenous variances on the pretest of SILL. That is why the first row of Table 4.3. is reported.

So, measures of parametric approach were employed. Accordingly, t-test was run based on which, the t-observed value is 1.007 (Table3). This amount of t-value is lower than the critical t-value of 2.71 at 36 degrees of freedom for .01 level of significance. Based on these results, it can be concluded that there was not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of leaning strategies. Another piece of evidence which shows that the two groups did not differ significantly on their use of learning strategies before the administration of feedback-based journal writing to the experimental group is the small difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of SILL (154.96 and 165.55, respectively) as displayed in Table 4. In Graph 1 shows the mean scores of the two groups are shown graphically



**Graph 1. Pretest of Learning Strategies Questionnaire of SILL Investigation of the Research question**

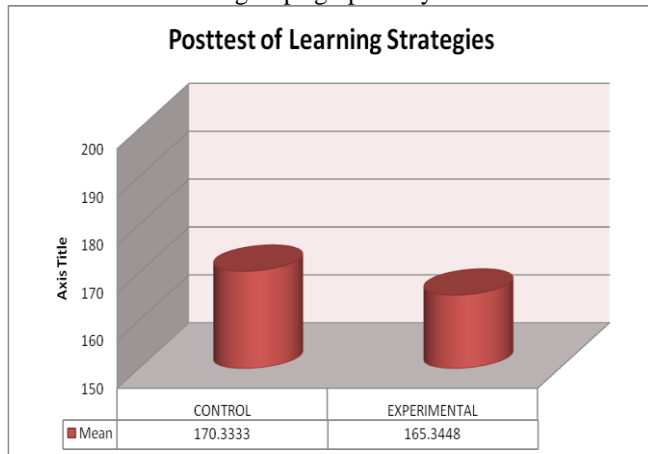
To help refresh our memories, the major question directing this study was "Does the student's feedback-based journal writing have any effects on the use of learning strategies by EFL learners?" In order to answer this question, an independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest of SILL. Similar to what was done regarding the comparison of the two groups' scores on the pretest of SILL, here also before discussing the results of the analysis, the assumptions of independent t-test, namely normality and homogeneity of variances, are focused on.

As displayed in Table 5, the ratios of skewedness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are within the ranges of  $\pm 1.96$ . That is to say, there is no evidence to assume that the data are non-normal. In order to check the second assumption—homogeneity of variance—the Levene' statistic should be reported. If the significance of this statistic is lower than .05, the groups do not have homogenous variances. As also mentioned above, if the homogeneity of variances is met, one should report the first line of the SPSS output labeled "Equal variances assumed". As displayed in Table 4.6., The Levene's F-value of .034 has a probability of .85. Since the probability associated with the Levene's statistic is higher than .05, it can be concluded that the experimental and control groups enjoy homogenous variances on the posttest of SILL. That is why the first row of Table 6 is reported.

The t-observed value is .50 (Table 6), which is lower than the critical t-value of 2.02 at 36 degrees of freedom. Based on these results, it can be concluded that there was not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the SILL posttest of leaning strategies.

In order to provide more support for the above finding, as displayed in Table 7, the experimental and control groups' mean

scores on the posttest of learning strategies are 170.33 and 165.34, respectively. That is to say, the two groups did not differ significantly on their use of learning strategies after the administration of feedback-based journal writing to the experimental group. Thus, the data fails to reject the null-hypothesis meaning that the student's feedback-based journal writing does not have any significant effects on the use of learning strategies by EFL learners. Graph 2 also shows the mean scores of the two groups graphically



**Graph 2. Posttest of the Learning Strategies Questionnaire of SILL**

### Discussion and Conclusion

In an attempt to test the hypothesis, the t-test analysis showed that there was not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of leaning strategies. More precisely, t-test showed that the two groups did not differ significantly on their use of learning strategies after the administration of feedback-based journal writing to the experimental group. Thus, the present researcher fails to reject the null-hypothesis as the student's feedback-based journal writing does not have any statistically significant effects on the use of learning strategies by EFL learners.

As Park (2003) claims, journal writing engages students in the learning process and makes them aware of how they learn what they learn and can affect the use of language learning strategies. Apparently, the findings of this study fail to match those of Park; however, strategy use is a mental process which cannot be justified so strongly on the basis of pure quantitative and statistical data. Another study by Emi (1993) showed that journal writing was an ideal means in developing language skills. It has been proved that the students who are good at language skills are usually successful LLS users. However, the findings of this study do not support Emi's findings.

On the contrary, Hockings (1998) concluded that journal writing failed to develop high level cognitive skills such as reflection and critical thinking. Therefore, the present study can somehow support Hockings' findings, though Hockings believes that journal writing is an effective tool to develop high level skills if appropriate time and feedback are provided. Contrary to this, Glogger et al. (2008) provided students with some specific and non-specific cognitive and metacognitive prompts while writing journals. The results showed that specific prompts increased the quantity of cognitive learning strategies rather than quality.

Contrary to failure to reject the hypothesis, it cannot be strongly claimed that the intervention did not have any effects on mental construct of strategy use. In the present study, the feedback was rather general, and the educator made a conscious decision not to directly focus on language learning strategies in

the comments he made on the participants' journals. The main purpose of doing so was to observe how such feedback would eventually affect their use of language learning strategies without necessarily raising the participants' awareness of the significance of learning strategies in an explicit manner. In light of the findings, it might be claimed that most probably the type of feedback provided on journals and the way it is given must be taken into consideration. That is why it is concluded that raising learners' consciousness of different learning strategies and their relevance to learning a foreign language through giving appropriate feedback might contribute to a more effective use of language learning strategies.

Insignificant findings can also be attributed to the medium of giving feedback. In other words, if, for example, the instructor provided oral feedback, it would most probably lead to some productive discussion about how to improve their journals and write a second draft in the class or in some one-on-one conferences between the instructor and each student. As a result, their awareness of the learning strategies and their habits of using them might have been affected in a remarkable manner. However, since the feedback was written and rather brief, the students might not have stood a chance to make sense of them fully and revisit their language learning habits and strategies effectively.

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