The effect of training and feedback on Iranian EFL learners errors in descriptive and argumentative writing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether training and feedback had any effect on the errors in descriptive and argumentative writing of Iranian EFL learners. 60 females upper_ intermediate Iranian learners in English Hermes language Institute participated in this study. The participants were selected via preliminary English Test (PET). The learners were placed into two groups serving the Experimental Group (N=30) that received training and feedback, and the Control Group (N=30) that received score. The learners are homogenous English proficiency level and they were randomly assigned to Experimental and Control groups. Both groups were pretested at the outset of the study. A unified post _ test was administered at the end of the experiment. The results of an independent samplest_ test revealed a significant difference between training and focused feedback on the numbers of errors in the descriptive and argumentative writing.

Introduction

Error is natural when learning a second language occurs, because according to Corder (1981), " the process of learning a second language is different from the process of acquisition of the first language"(p.7). learners make errors because of their inability to apply what they have learned.

Error analysis (EA) is an approach based on theories of first and second language learning, in fact, EA is applied as a device to appraise the student's amount of learning. Writing is used for communication besides being a standard of student's productive ability (Bachman and Palmer,2010). Madsen (1983) enumerates writing components as "mechanics, vocabulary, grammar, content, diction, different rhetorical matters, e.g. organization, cohesion, unity, appropriateness to the audience, topic, and sophisticated concerns of logic and style" (p.101). At least, writing is significant for learners because of knowing how to develop their thoughts and ideas in different paragraphs; this way they can receive feedback from their teacher. Errors occur in writing because of incomplete knowledge, learners use of linguistic item in a wrong fashion. It is noticed that most EFL learners, based on their level make varied types of errors such as: errors in the use of grammatical items, errors in the use of lexical items, and errors in the use of morpheme, therefore learners can not convey their thoughts correctly. There are two opposite language teaching methods in second language writing: the first one focuses on analyzing the language, while the second one focuses on using it (Itlyand,2003). Descriptive writingis more interesting because students describe a person, a place, or a thing in a varied details , and argumentative writing which not only gives information, but also changes the reader's mind by controversial issues.

Review of the related literature

Writing has been neglected area in English language teaching for many years. Unlike a large number of books available for the English language teaching in reading, there are a limited number of books on writing skill. Chastain (1988) considers the importance of writing in view of its relationship with language proficiency and level of education: " writing with its unique features contributes to overall language learning; moreover, writing is the distinctive ability of educated people"(p.244). Actually, writing is more important skill because it uses as a medium of communication around the world by using internet, so informal and academic writing are required. Writing is not only a tool for communication, but also it serves as a means of learning, thinking, and organizing knowledge or ideas. According to M'carthy(1998) states that descriptive writing is that domain of writing that develops images through the use of prices sensory words and phrases.

The term descriptive writing shows people acting, speaking, and feeling in ways that make them believable. An argumentative writing essay is a complex cognitive process in which the reader's expectation, the writer's purpose, the rhetorical patterns and the contextual situation are engaged (Cohen & Robbins,1976). Errors are rule_ governed and systematic, it indicates that errors refer to the competence of learners; actually learner's system is incorrect.

The source of errors is interlanguage, and it occurs because of overgeneralization. The learners can not correct themselves; it means that errors are not self corrected. Error analysis developed as a branch of Applied Linguistics in the 1960s and demonstrates that many learner's errors do not occur because of mother tongue. EA is based on the view of contrastive analytic, which is believed on the interference of first language on the second language, actually EA follows CA theory. Keshavarz(2005) believes that, " a primary focus of EA is on the evidence that learner's errors provide to an understanding of the underlying processes of second language acquisition"(p.43). Brown (2007) confirms that receiving feedback is one key of successful learning. Feedback provides the information that helps teacher to know the effectiveness of their instruction and change their practice in order to create positive changes in quality of their teaching.

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Participants

The participants of the study were 60 upper_ intermediate level students (female and male) with the age range 18 to 25 in Hermes Language Institute in Tehran. These participants were chosen from 90 upper _ intermediate students according to their performance in a sample preliminary English Test (PET) which was first piloted with 30 students with similar characteristics to check its reliability and then the test was implemented to the study.

Instrumentation

Preliminary English Test (PET)

To be homogenized students at intermediate level, the piloted PET was used. This version of the test which was comprised of three parts included listening, reading, and writing sections and the total score of the test equals to 50. The administration of the whole test took around 60 minutes and the rating scale used to rate the writing section of PET was the one provided by Cambridge under the name of General Mark Schemes for writing.

Pretest of writing

The second instrument used in the pre_ treatment level was a pretest of writing which was given to the participants selected after the pretest of language proficiency. The writings of the learners were corrected by two raters based on the rubrics presented by ETS(2000).

Posttests of writing

The posttests of writing were two tasks types of descriptive and argumentative writing the topics of which were selected from among the topics normally appearing in the writing course book but were checked for their content validity by two experts before they were given to the students.

Procedure

The first phase was the pilot phase during which 30 intermediate students with similar features to the target sample took all the assessment instruments comprising the sample PET used for homogenizing and the pretest of writing. In the second phase of this study the participants were selected. The selected participants were randomly assigned to two groups, an experimental and a control group with 30 students in each. Then the treatment period began and was continued for 10 sessions. The whole semester included eight weeks and the learners attended the class three days a week, each session lasting for 90 minutes in both group. Both control and experimental groups enjoyed the same course book, materials, lexical items, and passage. In the third phase which was the production phase, the learners were encouraged towards developing their writing. The treatment which included focused feedback was introduced to the learners in the experimental group and the learners were asked to take part in the practicing phases in order to get familiar with the concept of planning and thinking before writing. The main errors were focused on and the learners were helped to recognize errors and try to solve their writing problems using dictionaries, books, pee's comments, teacher's comments, and other sources. The learners in the control group did not receive any specific training on the error correction and feedback strategy; however, they enjoyed the same materials to practice. It was tried to keep the situation in both classes the same and the only focused difference was the presence of corrective focused feedback in the experimental group, then after an eight week period the posttests of writing were administered to check the learner's writing development. In this phase both control and experimental groups were asked to write two argumentative and descriptive tasks.

Design

The selection of the participants in this study was non_ random, but the assignment of the participants to the experimental and control groups was random, therefore the design was the quasi_ experimental one. Because of having pre and posttest.

Data analysis

A paired-samples t-test was run to compare the descriptive writing group's means on the pretest and posttest of writing in order to probe the effect of training and focused feedback on the improvement of the descriptive writing ability of the Iranian EFL learners. As displayed in Table 1.1 the descriptive group showed a higher mean on the posttest of writing (M = 70.76, SD = 5.20) than pretest (M = 60.53, SD = 5.57).

Table 1. Descriptive Writing Group: Pretest and Posttest of Writing

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
DescriptiveTestsPosttest	70.76	30	5.20731	.95072
Pretest	60.53	30	5.57540	1.01792

The results of the independent t-test (t (29) = 14, P < .05, R = .93, representing a large effect size) (Table 1.2) indicated that there was a significant difference between the descriptive writing group's mean scores on the pretest and posttest of writing.

Table 2. Paired-samples t-test Pretest and posttest of Writing by Descriptive Group

Paired Differences						T	DfSig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
10.23333	4.00373	.73098	8.73831	11.72835		14.000	29.000

And also, a paired-samples t-test was run to compare the Argumentative writing group's means on the pretest and posttest of writing in order to probe the effect of training and focused feedback on the number of errors in the argumentative writing of the Iranian EFL learners. As displayed in Table 1.3, the argumentative group showed a higher mean on the posttest of writing (M = 69.90, SD = 5.99) than pretest (M = 60.21, SD = 5.82).

Table 3. Argumentative Writing Group: Pretest and Posttest of Writing

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
ArgumentativeTestsPosttest	69.9000	30	5.99051	1.09371
Pretest	60.2167	30	5.82753	1.06396

The results of the independent t-test (t (29) = 12.82, P < .05, R = .92, representing a large effect size) (Table 1.4) indicated that there was a significant difference between the Argumentative writing group's mean scores on the pretest and posttest of writing.

Writing" **was rejected.**

Table 4. Paired-samples t-test Pretest and posttest of Writing by Argumentative Group

Paired Differences						T	DfSig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
9.68333	4.13455	.75486	8.13947	11.22720		12.828	29.000

Conclusion

Findings of the present study firstly revealed that focused feedback training as a strategy has a significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. It means that the

treatment implemented was effective to reduce the number of errors existing in the learners' production in writing. The findings also revealed that focused feedback training did not affect the improvement of argumentative and descriptive writing ability of the Iranian EFL learners differently, though the learners' development in descriptive writing was a bit better than their development in argumentative writing.

The study findings also revealed that training and focused feedback shows different effects across task types though slightly (learners' performance on descriptive writing was better than that of the argumentative task). This finding is in line with that of Kawauchi (2005), who also proved that strategic planning affects the oral and written narratives of learners with low and high intermediate L2 proficiency, but this influence is higher in the more proficient learners.

Although training and focused feedback positively affected the learners' performance in both descriptive and argumentative writing tasks, the number and type of the existing errors were different.

This is consistent with some of the previous findings such as researches conducted by Liu (2008) on the effects of error feedback in second language writing, Lee and Cho (2010) on the effect of collaborative planning strategy in Korean writing classes, Ojima's (2006) case study on three Japanese ESL writers in Japan regarding the effect of training, and Lin, et al's (2004) research on the effect of computer-based concept mapping as a pre-writing strategy for middle school students.

The results of these studies revealed that training based on focused feedback was influential in improving learners' writing. It has particularly influenced the reduction of errors. Chen (2007) confirms that strategy training not only leads to the improvement of language proficiency, but also engages the dynamic internal changes in the learning process.

There have been some other researches in Iranian EFL context regarding the effect of training and focused feedback on EFL learners' writing. The results of the present study were in line with the results of the study done by Talebinezhad and MousaporNegari (2001) on the effect of explicit teaching of concept mapping as a learning strategy in expository writing on EFL learners' self-regulation. They found that the learners gained higher self-regulation in writing task as the result of the explicit instruction of the concept mapping strategy as a preplanning strategy. Mirlohi, Ketabi and Roustaei(2012) studies the effect of instruction on writing performance of intermediate EFL Persian students and the results indicated that writing instruction has made a difference.

To sum up, the present study aimed at investigating the role of training and focused feedback on the writing errors committed by the Iranian EFL learners. The findings of the study revealed that being benefitted from training and focused feedback could improve EFL learners' writing ability in terms of grammar, coherence, cohesion, and task achievement. Such trainings also helped the learners reduce the number of errors they made in their writings. The outcome of the posttest data analysis clarified that the participants in the focused feedback training out-performed the control group, indicating that the treatment had a significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. The study results also revealed that training in writing and focused feedback significantly affected the errors committed by the learners in second language writing across different task types (learners' performance on descriptive writing was better than that of the argumentative task).

The results revealed that employing focused feedback training significantly promoted learners' performance in the writing tasks and reducing errors. Therefore, focused feedback training and its techniques could prove effective in the development of writing ability of the second language learners taking part in the study.

The present study aimed at investigating the role of training and focused feedback in reducing errors of EFL learners in writing. The findings of the study revealed that employing focused feedback could improve EFL learners' writing ability in terms of grammar, coherence, cohesion, and task achievement. However, the number and type of the existing errors were different.

The final remark is that focused feedback training also helped the learners reduce the number of errors they made in their writings.

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