

A Study on the Effect of Teachers' Text Specific Comments and Rubber-Stamped Comments on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Ability

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Abstract

Written corrective feedback (WCF) refers to the feedback given by writing instructors and tutors on novice writers' performances. Although extensive importance has been attached to the implications of WCF for improving writing skill in L2 writing studies, there is a paucity of research into research on whether student writers benefit differently from elaborated and evaluative feedback. Having this in mind, the aim of this research was to examine the effect of teacher's text-specific and rubber-stamped comments on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability at intermediate level. Quick Placement Test was employed to select 40 pre-intermediate EFL learners as the participants of this research. Then, they were randomly assigned into two experimental and control groups. Prior to the treatment, the participants of both groups were given a pretest to disclose their initial writing ability. After administering the rubber-stamped comments to the experimental group and text specific to the control group, a posttest was administered to seek the effect of two types of instruments. An independent samples t-test was used to see if the treatment was effective. Paired samples t-test was also employed to determine the amount of progression between pretest and posttest of the experimental group. The results of the study revealed that rubber-stamped comments improved the learners' writing ability. Implicationally, instructors can use rubber-stamped comments to help learners improve their writing ability.

Keywords: text-specific, rubber-stamped, teacher comments, writing skill

Introduction

In the process of education, writing plays a significant role by which students can be assessed. According to Khansir and Dashti (2014), writing is considered as the most difficult among four main skills of English language i.e. reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Because of the numerous aspects to attend to when reflecting on a piece of learner writing, involving ideas, organization, development, and rhetoric, teaching writing is a very exhausting and time-consuming process. Definitely, encountering a huge number of difficulties makes language learners become less motivated to write and find writing tasks so daunting. Writing is a complex skill for second language learners. The difficulty is due to generating and organizing ideas and then translating them into readable text is difficult and long-sought skill even for native writers.

Feedback is one of the most influential ways to improve the writing ability. The most frequently source of giving feedback is the teacher given feedback (Williams, 2003). For the time being, L2 educators and writing instructors are still uncertain about the potential of written corrective feedback for the development of second language writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), and has been so ever since Truscott's (Truscott, 1996) strong reservation about this type of feedback that should be unheeded. Added to this is the opinion of (Gad, Li, Kliewer, Langberg, Jiang, & Bruck, 2016) implying that studies have not convincingly proven that correcting students errors assists L2 learners in enhancing their writing competence. Furthermore, they take issue with error correction process on the ground it spoils energy and time allotted to productiveness of the writing stages. Nonetheless; as Mao and Crosthwaite (2019) note, the selective nature of the written corrective feedback has received positive attention from point of view of many researchers.

One of the most significant steps of the process writing approach that can aid the students to do revisions on their written drafts so as to enhance its quality and correctness is providing a useful comment on students' writing. It is difficult to improve writing skill inherently and without obtaining any instruction formally or informally (Weigle, 2002). It is hypothesized that by altering the way of giving feedback on learners' writing according to a

reformed view of the writing skill and the writing process, the students could write effectively and interact with others via their written production.

Commenting creates the drive for having a different performance in the next draft; careful commenting motivates the learners to revise. Not receiving any comments from the tutor or peers, learners make revision in a regularly narrow and expected way. Rubber-stamped comment and text-specific comment are two types of comments that teachers can provide the learners on their writing tasks. As Sommers (1982) mentions, in rubber-stamped comment one can simply delete all the comments from the paragraphs and rubber-stamp them on a different learner text, and they will make as much or as little sense on the second text as they do in first. It is a kind of indirect feedback. In this study, rubber stamped comment means tutor simply claims that an error has been made by different means, such as simple underlying, marginal description, circling, or correction code. Text-specific comment, however, is a kind of direct feedback that indicates the points to students' writing. In the text-specific comment, teacher clarifies the errors in writing and then directly provides the correct forms of errors in the students' written text (Ellis, 2009).

If no comments are provided by readers, learners accept that their writing has conveyed their intended meaning and see no need to revise the element of their text. Most of the time student writing is not commented in a way that help learners to be absorbed to the subjects they are writing about or which aid them reflect on their aims and objectives in writing a specific text.

The theoretical framework underlying the study is based on (Vygotsky, 1978) zone of proximal development' (ZPD). The theory of ZPD deals with writing when the language learner learns to write in a collaboration with a more skillful person in the field, who can provide expert support. As Grabe & Kaplan (1996, p. 243) mentions "students learn writing in this manner 'in the process of the writing activity and through feedback on the writing"; to be exact, process and feedback are significant facets of learning writing in line with Vygotsky's theories of language development.

Ashwell (2000) examined four forms of feedback in a process writing context. Ashwell (2000) also indicated that the suggested forms of feedback on ideas first, next feedback on language, was not essentially better than

feedback initially on language, then on ideas, or the mixed feedback form. Hence, not any enormous difference was observed on the effect between the three different forms. This claim has also been verified by Fathman (1990) who in their research documented that feedback on form all together as feedback on ideas or content did not lead to any lack of improvement in revising the presented ideas. This advocates that discrete feedback on presented ideas and form might not be needed as a precondition for improvement.

Sommers (1982) notes that teachers comment on learner writing since they believe that it is essential for them to provide help for learners while they are in the course of generating a text, rather than after the text has been finished. She stated that instructors' notes can take learners' attention away from their own aims in writing a certain text and concentrate more on the instructors' aim in commenting (Sommers, 1982). Sommers (1982) clarified another kind of comment which is not text-specific and can be interchanged, and rubber-stamped from text to text. She asserted that these notes are not anchored in the specifics of the learners' texts, but rather are a sequence of inexplicit directives which are not text-specific.

Ebrahimzadeh and Khodareza (2015) investigated the impact of post-text written corrective feedback on written grammatical correctness of EFL intermediate students. They observed that the learners who received post-text written corrective feedback were able to significantly improve their grammatical ability. They felt greater commitment to improve their writing when the teacher gave them the chance to correct their errors based on useful comments written at the closing part of their text. Students found the explained comments on definite features of their writing more useful in guiding their revisions. They note that applying post-text feedback in learners' writing tasks motivates, encourages, and prepares students to notice their mistakes revise, and redraft their writing work to produce target-like sentences in their writing tasks and store them in their adopted grammatical system, which they could use later when required.

Focused written corrective is feedback "targeted to specific error types or patterns" (Ferris, 2011, p.30), or that "selects specific errors to be corrected and ignores other errors" (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008, p.356). The integral characteristics of focused WCF are clear, and hence

“focused WCF” is used interchangeably with “selective WCF” (e.g., Van Beuningen, 2010). In regard to this clarification, the quantity of intended error types is not specified, though in WCF studies by some researchers (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010), focused written corrective feedback refers to those feedbacks that are aimed at one or two language structures only. For example, Sheen et al. (2009) see these feedbacks concentrated only on a limited linguistic structure. Having this in mind, researchers and teachers may ponder on how focused should focused written corrective feedback be as far as the number of intended structures is concerned. Translated into classroom dynamics, how many error types should be aimed for focused written corrective feedback? It seems that no predetermined response can be found in this regard.

In L2 writing literature, student involvement with teachers’ feedback has been described as a meta-construct consisting of three elements: affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement (Zheng & Yu, 2018). The affective engagement basically concerns to students’ attitudinal response to feedback and their willingness to pay attention (Ellis, 2010); cognitive involvement refers to their mental attempt to handle the feedback; and behavioral engagement deals with the level of incorporating feedback in editing and revising the written performance (Zheng & Yu, 2018).

The general goal of this study was to pursue an alternative to the customary way of correcting learners’ compositions to inspire them and to make writing a stress-free and enjoyable task for both learners and instructors. The objective of the new technique was to go forward in the direction of generating in our learners’ minds the concept of writing as a tool for communication, not merely an exercise on grammar. More specifically, the research intended to investigate the impact of teachers’ text-specific comments and rubber-stamped comments on the writing ability of EFL learners by asking the following question:

RQ. Is there any statistically significant difference between writings of EFL learners who receive text-specific comments and those of learners who receive rubber-stamped comments?

Method

Participants

The initial sample of population consisted of 60 Iranian EFL students majoring in English Translation at Rasht Azad University. Both male and female students took part in the study. Out of this population, 40 students whose scores were one above and below the standard deviation were chosen as the participants of the present study.

Instrument

Quick Placement Test (QPT) was employed to select the participants of the study. Simply put, this test was conducted to homogenize the students based on their level of proficiency. Before the onset of the treatment, the participants were requested to write a short essay consisting of 100-150 words as the pretest. To check the students' writing, they were asked to write on a topic. This pretest of writing was selected from IELTS Cambridge book one. The same parallel construct derived from the pretest formed the posttest that was finally employed to comparatively check the two groups' performances once they were finished with the treatment.

Procedure

In the treatment sessions, the experimental group received rubber stamped comments, whereas the control group underwent the traditional way of feedback (text-specific) from the teacher. The students wrote five essays on different subjects so as to develop their writing skills. Each time, the tutor corrected learners' productions in experimental group using rubber stamped comment and returned the papers back to the students so that they could read the notes in order to correct their mistakes. At the end of the term, the students were given a posttest so as to evaluate the research hypothesis.

Due to the nature of writing tests and essays, their scoring was somewhat subjective. In other words, evaluating writing papers was to some extent complicated and mostly based on subjective means and opinionated judgment by the scorer and sometimes it might be affected by the scorer's experience. Such a case may breed a threat to the reliability of ratings. In order to sort out this problem, Performances were scored as to ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wromuth, Hartfiel, & Hughey (1981). Based on Mousavi (2009), in this type of scoring various components or qualities of the learners' responses are given separate scores.

Jacobs et al. claim that this assessment profile is reliable if the writings are rated by two raters. The timed essay test included an unseen topic *vacation they really enjoyed*

To check the students' achievement due to the treatment at the end of the course, a posttest writing was administered. The posttest was of the same parallel construct as the pretest. The students were asked to write an essay consisting of 100–150 words about “a time they went clothes shopping with a friend”.

Results

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data collected through tests. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the writing pretest.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Pretest of Writing

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest of writing	Con	20	72.425	1.0915	.2441
	Exp	20	73.375	1.0114	.2262

As indicated in Table 1, the number of students was $N_{Exp} = 20$; $N_{Con} = 20$. There were not any significant differences between the mean of control ($X=72.425$) and experimental groups (73.375). The SD for each experimental and control group was 1.0114 and 1.0915 respectively.

In order to calculate inter-rater reliability for the two raters, the Pearson correlation was applied to provide the agreement of the two raters. Table 2 shows the measures of inter-rater reliability of two raters for the pretest scores in the control group. The correlation (0.950) was found to be significant. To be exact, the scores provided by two raters indicated a correlation within acceptable limits.

Table 2
Inter-Rater Correlation for the Pretest Scores of the Control Group

Correlations		
pretest control group	Pearson Correlation	.950
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	20

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 illustrates the measure of inter-rater reliability of two raters for the pretest scores in the experimental group. The correlation (0.956) is significant. Therefore, the scores provided by two raters indicated an acceptable correlation.

Table 3
Inter-Rater Correlation for the Pretest Scores of the Experimental Group

Correlations		
pretest experimental group	Pearson Correlation	.956
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	20

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As presented in Table 3, the mean score for the experimental group ($M = 14.250$) is higher than that for the control group. At the same time, Table 4 illustrates that the scores were more heterogeneous in the posttest of the experimental group ($SD_{Exp} = 1.1976$, $SD_{Cont} = 1.1177$). It was then claimed that the writing achievements of EFL learners who received rubber-stamped comments were higher than those who received text-specific comments.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Posttest of Writing

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Error
Posttest of writing focusing on gram	Con	20	74.525	1.1177	.2499	
	Exp	20	81.250	1.1976	.2678	

The Pearson correlation was also used to achieve the inter-rater reliability of the students' posttest writing. Table 5 presents the measure of inter-rater reliability of two raters for the posttest scores in the control group. The correlation (0.950) was found to be significant, which meant that the scores given by two raters were in an acceptable range of correlation.

Table 5

Inter-Rater Correlation for the Pretest Scores of the Control Group

Correlations		
pretest control group	Pearson Correlation	.920
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	20

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 presents the estimate of inter-rater reliability of two raters for the posttest scores of the experimental group. The correlation (0.931) is significant. Therefore, the scores provided by two raters were acceptably correlated.

Table 6

Inter-Rater Correlation for the Pretest Scores of the Experimental Group

Correlations		
pretest experimental group	Pearson Correlation	.931
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	20

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The question of this study asked whether the students' writing would change through using rubber-stamped comments. The inferential analyses of the data are summarized in the Tables 7 and 8. These tables summarize the inferential analysis of the pre-test scores for the control and experimental groups.

The results of an independent-samples *t* test of writing test score between the pretests of the control and experimental groups, at a 95% confidence, are indicated in Table 7. It demonstrated that the difference was not statistically significant, $t(28) = -.259$, at $p < .05$, 2-tailed. In other words, the average

difference of -.133 between writing test score in the pretest of control group and experimental group was not statistically significant. This pointed to the fact that on the pretest, participants in both groups had comparable writing performances.

Table 7

Independent-Samples t Test Between Pretest of Control and Experimental Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	(2-Mean Difference)	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
pretest Equal variances assumed	.568	.478	-.259	28	.798	-.133	.515	-1.189	-.922
Equal variances not assumed	.334	.568	-.259	22.471	.798	-.133	.515	-1.190	-.923

The results of an independent-samples *t* test of writing test score between the posttests of the control and experimental groups, at a 95% confidence, are indicated in Table 8. It demonstrates that the difference was statistically significant, $t(28) = -6.209$, at $p < .05$, 2-tailed. In other words, the average difference of -3.333 between writing test score in the posttest of control group and experimental group was statistically significant. This further indicates that the learners in the experimental group improved their writing to a statistically significant degree in comparison with the control group.

Table 8
Independent-Samples t Test Between Posttest of Control and Experimental 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
posttest	Equal variances assumed	5.323	.029	-	28	.000	-3.333	.537	-4.433	-2.234
	Equal variances not assumed			-	22.281	.000	-3.333	.537	-4.446	-2.221

The most remarkable finding to arise from the data is that the difference within the experimental group from pretest to posttest is statistically significant, $t(14) = -5.303$, at $p < .05$, 2-tailed.

Table 9
Paired-Samples t Test (Experimental Group)

		Paired Differences		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper			
Pair 2	Pre.exp Post.exp	-3.467	2.532	-4.869	2.065	-5.303	14	.000

Table 9 presents the result of a Paired t test of writing test score in the experimental group at a 95% confidence. The probability, then, is less than 5% that this difference occurred by chance alone. That is, the average difference of -3.467 between writing test score in the pretest and posttest was statistically significant. In addition to being significant, the difference is

meaningful because it is large. This indicates that the students boosted their writing to a statistically significant degree.

Discussion

The current study cast light on one of the problematic facets of EFL education, specifically writing achievements. The main objective of the current research was to assess the impact of rubber-stamped and text-specific comments on Iranian EFL students' writing achievements. The analysis of the collected data in this research showed that there was a significant difference between the students' performance on the writing tests. It was revealed that rubber-stamped had a significant effect on Iranian EFL students' writing performance.

The rubber-stamped comments positively affected the learners' writing. So, the findings of this research were in line with Zareil and Rahnama's (2013), who noted that Iranian English students did prefer to receive written corrective feedback so as to detect their errors, and to make improvement in their writing accuracy. The results of their research also suggest that the type of feedback, tutors give to students' pieces of writing does impact their writing accuracy, though there may be a degree of incongruity between students' observed effect and the actual impact of the different forms of corrective feedback on writing accuracy.

The results of the current research also support those of Rahimi (2009). He documented that providing indirect corrective feedback can be more influential than giving no corrective feedback on students' writing accuracy. In the present study, uncoded corrective feedback, as a type of indirect feedback, was found to be undeniably significantly more effective than no corrective feedback, while coded corrective feedback, as the other type of indirect feedback, was observed to make no difference with no corrective feedback.

Furthermore, as indicated by Bitchener and Knoch (2010), evidence was found signifying that all types of corrective feedback must be more influential than the control condition on students' writing accuracy. Even though this research provided a full support for such a finding regarding lexical accuracy, it was only relatively in line with it with regard to writing accuracy. In the current research, 'direct' and 'uncoded' feedback modes

came out to be more effectual than no corrective feedback mode. Nevertheless, there was observed to be a lack of enough evidence to point out that 'coded' feedback is also more useful than the control condition.

Moreover, the results of this research were found to be consistent with the results of Ebrahimzadeh and Khodareza (2015) research who found that the learners who received post-text written corrective feedback could significantly improve their writing ability. They found that the students were greatly committed to improve their writing when the teacher gave them the chance to correct their errors based on helpful comments written at the final section of their text. Students found the detailed comments on certain features of their writing more useful in guiding their revisions. They noted that applying post-text feedback in learners' writing tasks motivates, encourages, and prepares students to notice their mistakes, revise and redraft their writing work to produce target-like sentences in their writing tasks and store them in their adopted writing system, which they could use later when required.

Also, the results of this study were found to be consistent with those of Sivaji (2012) who states that it would be effective to suggest error correction, irrespective of kinds as a favorite feedback mechanism, to be applied to react to learners' writings. Providing feedback will motivate the learners to attempt to adapt their developing interlanguage system consistent with the feedbacks they receive (Maleki & Eslami, 2013). The findings of the current research were used to inform ESL/EFL instructors and scholars interested in using or examining different kinds of teacher written corrective feedback as applied in this research.

The most notable pedagogical implication which can be inferred from this study is that feedback could improve the students' writing achievements. The results of the current research can be of interest to variety of groups such as curriculum planners, L2 specialists, EFL learners, and EFL teachers. Discovering that the students in the experimental groups in this research developed in writing accuracy might inspire tutors and scholars in the ESL/EFL contexts to offer the type of feedback with confidence that learners may benefit from the most. Moreover, instructors ought to feel confident that providing rubber-stamped feedback is more influential and

aids learners in improving more in correct use of target patterns than text-specific feedback. On the whole, the results of the current research also suggest that the type of feedback tutors give to students' writing does guide the students' writing accuracy.

Certain limitations should be mentioned prior to generalizing these findings to the EFL population at large. The first is that this study was conducted in a small scale, so these results may not be generalized. Also, gender and age are left untouched in this study. Next, this study was restricted to students majoring in translation at Rasht Azad University. Consequently, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to all language students. Then, the number of respondents involved in this study was only 40 adult language learners who were selected across intermediate proficiency levels.

During the course of this study, several interesting areas emerged that were also linked with the effects of feedback on the writing. These areas were, however, outside the scope of this thesis. The current research was done on upper or lower intermediate students. Another research can test this issue on other students from other proficiency levels, namely elementary, intermediate or advanced Iranian EFL learners and compare the results with the existing one. Further research is required to examine the impacts of rubber-stamped comments on writing by different age groups such as children or adults.

In conclusion, all corrective feedback considerations about written feedback scope and respective strategies are context-relevant, such as the novice writers' level of proficiency, the composition task, and the stage of the writing process (Lee, 2020). WCF makes up only a fraction of teacher feedback, and it is important that feedback on content, organization, and other areas of the written performance be received by students. As Lee (2020) argues the learner role in written feedback given by the instructor should not be ignored. The implications of teacher WCF for students' writing skill can be enhanced providing that students are instructed and empowered to be a self-regulating agent in self- and peer editing, and if they are afforded sufficient opportunities to negotiate with peers and the instructor so that they can actively engage with written corrective feedbacks at a deeper level.

It should be said that feedback had better to constitute a necessary component of any writing activity. Nonetheless, language instructors need to know how to make it play a constructive role in encouraging the students. They should also respect students' favorites regarding feedback, and should not only emphasize on writing but also on content. Feedback is a technique of developing learners' writing, thus instructors should make the language learners appreciate the positive effects of feedback. It should also be highlighted, however, that this by no means excludes the significance of writing. Thus, what one should focus on is a sort of compromise between form and content.

Declaration of interest: none

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Biodata

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