The Impact of Observer Ring Technique on the Writing Achievement: A case of Iranian EFL Learners

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This study was conducted to probe the effect of *the observer ring techniqu*e on the participants' writing achievement. In so doing, the researchers utilized a quasi-experimental design with 20 participants in the control group and 18 in the experimental group. Instrumentation included a writing handout, an Oxford Placement Test (standard proficiency test), and a rating scale of writing. As a treatment, the participants in the experimental group were asked to write at home and bring their papers to the class to be corrected by their classmates and the teacher was the supervisor. In the control group, the papers were corrected by the teacher. The results of the pre-test indicated that the participants of the two groups were homogeneous with regard to proficiency level as well as their writing ability. The results of the post-test revealed that the writing ability of the participants in the experimental group had improved during the study. Moreover, the observer ring technique had a positive and significant effect on the participants' writing ability. The

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findings may promise implications for incorporating this new interactive feedback model into EFL writing classes.
Keywords: observer ring technique, peer feedback, writing ability, Iranian EFL learners

One of the proposed strategies which help develop the writing skill is the employment of the observer ring technique as an oral peer feedback in writing classes. Richards and Renandya (2002) have defined the observer ring technique as "while a group conducts its discussion about whatever it is, the observer-evaluators sit with the discussion group and monitor the proceeding; it is a kind of oral peer feedback"(p.228).

Traditionally, the most of the time in writing classrooms was spent on the mechanics of writing, the number of words, the size of the margins, and on the use of certain grammatical forms. Teachers did not pay attention to the audiences of the papers. In fact, they ignored the paper which could be understandable for someone else (Rivers, 1981; Kroll, 1990). Nowadays, the approach to the writing skill has differed and in recent years the process approach to writing has become the mainstream orthodoxy in EFL composition classes (Muncie, 2000). This approach seeks to shift emphasis away from an endless stream of compositions assigned by the teacher, written by the learners, handed in for making corrections by the teacher, handed back to the learners, and promptly forgotten by them as they sort on the next assignment. Instead, the emphasis is on the process of writing itself which involves pre-writing work to generate ideas, and the writing of multiple drafts to revise and extend those ideas.

This process-oriented writing approach has become prevalent among writing teachers. According to Bartels (2003), peer feedback(also known as peer review, peer editing, peer critiquing, peer response, and peer evaluation) has been considered as a key factor in this approach in which the students read each others' papers and provide feedback to the writer, usually answering specific questions the teacher has provided.

Regarding both cognitive and psycholinguistics perspectives, there are four theoretical stances that support the use of peer

response activities in the writing classroom. These four theoretical stances are process writing theory, collaborative learning theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and interaction and second language acquisition (Liu and Hansen, 2002). Researches based on these four theoretical stances support the use of peer response activities. In fact, peer response activities help second language learners develop not only their L2 writing abilities but also their overall L2 language abilities through negotiation of meaning that typically takes place during the process of peer response (Keh, 1990; Liu and Hansen, 2002).

Advantages and Constraints of Peer Feedback Activities

Using peer feedback in writing classes has several advantages and constraints. As for the benefits of peer response activities in teaching L2 writing, Mittan (1989) believed that these activities force L2 learners to exercise their thinking as opposed to passively receiving information from the teacher, in fact students develop a sense of shared responsibility (e.g. as stated by Somervell, 1993). In the same vein, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) suggested that learners who were involved in peer response activities can take an active role in their learning, and they can reconceptualize their ideas in light of their peers' reactions. Thus, peer response activities give students the opportunity to have more ways to discover and explore ideas, to find the appropriate words to express their ideas, and to negotiate with their audiences about these ideas. Peer response activities are flexible and can take place at various stages of the writing process (prewriting, discovery, invention, between-draft revision, and editing) (Conner and Asenavage, 1994). Moreover, many students have reported that peer-assessment facilitates their learning (Ballantyne, Hughes &Mylonas, 2002).

Regarding the constraints of peer feedback, several studies have confirmed that there are some major limitations of peer response activities.For example, Lui (1998) showed that the most important constraints of peer response activities are uncertainty concerning peer comments, lack of learner investment, superficial comments due to time constraints, and inappropriate interactions in

commenting on peers' feedback. Also, according to Leki (1990) students sometimes focus too heavily on surface concerns, or editing, neglecting other important revising issues. Sense of uneasiness and discomfort are among the other constraints which may develop among the participants. Case in point, Amores (1997) believed that, students may become rather defensive when their work is criticized, especially by their peers.

Related Studies

For many years the roles of classmates as contributors to the development of other learner's writing has been ignored in writing classes. This ignorance to peer responses has become the focus in writing classes applying the process approach. In fact, peer response activities, in which students work together to provide feedback on one's writing in both written and oral formats through active engagement with each other's progress over multiple drafts, have become a common feature of recent L2 writing instruction (Bartels, 2003; Lui and Hansen, 2002).

Aside from uncertainties about whether students will be engaged by and therefore motivated to complete peer response activities, many researchers also express concerns about whether peer revision activities help students write better papers. For example, Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998), examining 64 ESL students' 30-minute drafts and 60-minute revisions, both at the beginning and at the end of the semester, indicated that students' linguistic accuracy improves both over the semester and from draft to revised essays. Similarly, Rabiee (2006) stated that students incorporated the teacher's and peers' comments in revising their drafts in the research and this incorporation had a significant effect on their final drafts.

Moreover, in a study done to compare the effects of four different methods of evaluating students' free writing assignments: (1) writing responses to the contents, (2) marking all grammatical errors and writing in the correct forms, (3) making positive comments and marking errors, and (4) requiring students to correct all errors marked according to a system that indicates the type of error, Semke (1984) suggested that those students who received

comments based solely on the content spent more time preparing the writing assignment, made greater progress than the other three groups, and became more fluent. Those students who were required to correct all their errors wrote shorter compositions, had the most negative attitudes, and did not eliminate corrected errors in their future compositions. One interesting finding was that among those students whose papers were not corrected, six out of forty-six requested that some errors be corrected. The author concluded that writing practice and not evaluation is the most important factor in improving the writing skill.

The important point to be mentioned is that peer-assessment in ESL/EFL contexts has often been conducted qualitatively under such names as peer-response and peer-review (Caulk, 1994; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mendonça and Johnson, 1994); on the other hand, few researchers conducting studies of self- and peer assessment have used quantitative methods. They believed that when quantitative methods were conducted, they were mostly done by calculating simple correlations (e.g., Patri, 2002) and paired t-tests (e.g., Cheng and Warren, 2005) using the true-score approach. In addition, teachers are doubtful about applying peer feedback in their classes; that is, they may question its value when thinking of it as a time-consuming activity (Rollinson, 2005). Furthermore, students have shown both generally positive (Rothschild and Klingenberg, 1990; Saito and Fujita, 2004) and mixed stances (Cheng and Warren, 1997) toward the use of peer assessment; however, such differences in attitudes do not appear to be related to the feedback received (Saito and Fujita, 2004). In fact, learners themselves may find it unfruitful; the reason lies in the lack of trust in the accuracy, sincerity, and specificity of the comments from their peers (Zhang, 1995).

Although the benefits and constraints of peer feedback have been documented in the literature, it is still used with doubts (Mendonca and Johnson, 1994; Villamil and DeGuerrero, 1996). However, to date, little researches have been completed in this context in order to provide an opportunity for EFL learners to learn via a process of discussion and to uncover the kinds of peer feedback on the EFL learners writing task. Therefore, this study

attempted to determine whether or not applying the observer ring technique, as a kind of peer feedback, has any impact on the Iranian EFL learners' writing achievement. More specifically, this study addressed the following research question:

Does the observer ring technique have any significant impact on the writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners?

Furthermore, to answer the research question empirically, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

The use of the observer ring technique does not have a significant effect on the writing achievement of Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Participants

The participants of the current study consisted of thirty eight EFL male university students studying at Ayandeh Institute in Tehran, Iran. They were all Iranian native speakers with an age range of 16 – 22 years. They were in the intermediate level, studying the Interchange book by Jack.C.Richards. Due to the administrative limitations, the intact groups design (Hatch and Lazaraton, 1991) was used with 20 participants in the control group and 18 participants in the experimental group. To comply with the main requirement of experimental research and to ascertain that the learners were homogenous with regard to their English proficiency level and writing ability, the Oxford Placement Test established by Oxford University Examinations Syndicate (OUES) in October 2007, was administered as a pretest.

Instrumentation

To accomplish the purpose of this study, which was to examine the effectiveness of the use of the observer ring as an oral peer response technique on the writing ability of Iranian EFL students, these instruments were utilized: 1. an Oxford Placement Test (standard proficiency test) to assess the language knowledge of the participants, and 2. Brown and Bailey's scoring profile (1984) to assess participants' essays:

Oxford Placement Test

In order to homogenize the participants, the Oxford Placement Test with 60 items was administered to them. The test consisted of three sub-tests. The first part was primarily a test of grammatical structures and vocabulary including 50 items, covered by the vast majority of course books in the range of elementary to intermediate. The second part was a test of reading skill with 10 items. The last part was a writing task; this part was also used as the writing pretest in this study. According to the introduction of the test, each part of the test is scored separately so that teachers who choose not to include any tasks in the placement test could still make an accurate assessment of their students' ability. Therefore, the grammar, vocabulary, and reading parts were used as the proficiency test, and the writing part was used as the pretest part. The two parts of the test, grammar and vocabulary, and reading, were designed to be used together to produce a total score of 60. The basic assumption underlying the Oxford Placement Test is that although it is highly economical and easy to administer, it is an objective test which can be attempted by any student from elementary level upwards. It is also a highly sophisticated and refined measure of communicative performance. According to the test manual, facility values, administration indices, item and inter-test reliability, and concurrent validity of this test have already been established by Oxford University Examinations Syndicate.

Brown and Bailey's Scoring Profile (1984)

One of the best known and most widely used analytic scales was developed by Brown and Bailey (1984). The form of this instrument recruiting in this study included five equally weighted criteria for scoring: (1) Organization, (2) Logical Development of Ideas, (3) Grammar, (4) Mechanics, and (5) Style. The five aspects are differentially weighted to emphasize first organization including introduction, body, and conclusion (18-20 or excellent to good), and next logical development of ideas including content (15-17 or good to adequate), with grammar weighted (12-14 or adequate to fair), with mechanics weighted (6-11 or unacceptable), and style receiving very little emphasis (1-5 or not college-level

work). This scale was extensively piloted and revised to ascertain that it could be used reliably by the raters (e.g., Mohebi, Beykmohammadi, and AminiFarsani, 2011).

Procedure

The present study was conducted over 20 sessions between November and January 2010. The following three steps determined the delivery and the sequence of the study: 1) proficiency pretest with the control and experimental groups: an Oxford Placement Test was given to the participants to ensure that they (the two groups) were homogeneous in terms of English proficiency at the outset of the study. Then, the writing section of the Oxford Placement test, an essay writing task on the topic "Write an e-mail to your friend, telling him/her about the holiday" was used as the writing pretest to ensure that there was no significant difference among the participants in terms of their writing skill. The time allocated to the test was 90 minutes. The writing task was then scored by the two raters, second and third researchers of this study, to maximize the reliability of the scoring procedure (Table 1). 2) Integration of an observer ring technique into classroom activities and encouraging the students to correct their peers' papers: after writing their essays, the participants were asked to bring their papers to the class to be corrected by their classmates. The whole class was considered as one group and all students were responsible to take part in the activity. The teacher acted as a supervisor in the experimental group , she observed the process of activities and participated in them when it was necessary. The students in the control group followed the traditional form of teacher correction for their essays. The teachers in the two groups assigned the same topics for the essays during the research. 3) Writing task with the same topic as the posttest assigned to both groups of students: the papers were scored by the researchers to determine whether there was any significant difference in the writing ability of the participants in the experimental and the control groups.

The inter-rater reliability for the two raters who rated the students' writings was .96 (P = .000 < .05) (Table 1). If a single

rater rates the students, the intra-rater reliability index is .93 (Row one Table 1). Both indices are statistically significant.

Table 1.
Inter-Rater Reliability

	Intraclass Correlations	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	Sig
Single Measures	.936b	.893	.962	30.289	.000
Average Measures	.967c	.944	.981	30.289	.000

Results

Independent samples T-Tests were utilized, with the alpha level set at .05.

Results of the Pretest

With respect to the quasi-experimental design of the research, in order to check the homogeneity of the participants in terms of English proficiency, they were given an Oxford Placement Test. The test was scored by the first researcher, and in each class, the students whose scores were within the intermediate domain of the Oxford Placement scale were selected for the study (Table 2). To be confident about the initial differences between the participants in the control and experimental classes regarding the variable under investigation, a t-test was run as a statistical technique to compare the means of the two groups on the pretest.

Table2.
Oxford Placement Scales

	Total	Elementary	Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate
Grammar &Vocabulary	50	0-20	21-30	31+
Reading	10	0-4	5-7	8+
Writing	10	0-4	5-7	8+

Furthermore, a writing task was given to the students of the two groups as a pretest, and their means were compared with each other to determine the homogeneity of the students regarding their writing ability. The results of the pretest phase are given below (Table 3):

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest for both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	SD Error Mean
Control	20	13.24	1.55	0.80
Experimental	18	12.89	2.11	0.83

Also, in order to determine the homogeneity of the students, the researchers also calculated the f-test. The observed f-test value was much lower than the critical value of 3, so it indicated that the variances are homogeneous and the researchers were allowed to run a t-test. As displayed in Table 4, the t-observed value was 0.59, which was much lower than the critical value of t, i.e. 2.021 at 36 degree of freedom. Therefore, it was confirmed that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their writing ability prior to the treatment. Mean placement test scores for the experimental and control groups were 12.89 and 13.24, respectively. The independent samples T-Test demonstrated that there was no

statistically significant difference between the two groups with respect to their proficiency level before the treatment.

Table 4.
Independent Samples Test (Pretest)

	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)	Mean Difference	SD Error	Lower	Upper
Equal variances Assumed	1.86	0.78	0.59	36	0.02	12.89	0.80	5.50	25.253
Equal variances not assumed			0.59	36	0.02	13.24	0.83	5.50	25.253

Results of the Posttest

In order to investigate the effect of the treatment, a matched T-test was utilized. As table 5 depicts, the results of the paired samples t-test revealed that there were significant differences between the performance of the participants in the pretest and posttest.

Table5.
Paired Samples T-test between the Means of the Pretest and Posttests of the Experimental and Control Groups (Writing Task)

	Paired differences					Sig(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean	t	df	
Pair:pre-post differences	12.30	1.75	.81	-6.39	36	.03

Thus, this significant difference could be the consequence of 20 sessions of working with the participants during the treatment.

That is, the participants' writing ability had improved during the study. Moreover, another t-test was conducted to see if there was any significant difference between the performance of the participants in the two groups on the posttest. The descriptive statistics calculated for the posttest are given below (Table 6):

Table 6.
Descriptive Statistics of the Posttest for both Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	SD Error Mean
Control	20	13.37	2.35	5.52
Experimental	18	14.84	1.53	2.34

In order to investigate the possible differences between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the final test, another T-test was carried out. The application of the t-test revealed that the t-observed was equal to 2.33 at 36 degree of freedom, which was greater than the t-critical value of 2.021. This result indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups' mean scores on the final test. The experimental group (M= 14.84, SD=1.53) outperformed the control group (X=13.37, SD=2.35) on the final test. The results of the post-test indicate that there is a significant difference between the participants' performance in the two groups. The subjects in the experimental group performed much more differently than that of the control group (Table 7).

Table 7.
Independent Samples Test (Posttest)

T-test for equality of means	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Upper	Lower
Homogeneity of Test	2.33	36	0.02	1.47	1.82	3.501	3.369

Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected, and it could be concluded that the treatment has had a significant impact on the EFL learners' achievement in writing in the experimental group.

Discussion

This study was conducted to probe the impact of observer ring technique, as an oral peer feedback, on the learners' writing achievement. That is, the researchers attempted to find out whether there exists any significant difference between the writing achievement of students who practice the observer ring technique and those who do not. The findings of the current study revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the writing performance of those students who practiced the observer ring technique and those who did not. In other words, the use of this technique has an impact on the participants' writing achievement. This finding is consistent with the researches in the literature, which claim the assets of peer feedback activities in writing accomplishments (Ballantyne, Hughes and Mylonas, 2002; Mittan, 1989; Mendonca and Johnson, 1994).

Also, the findings reported in this study support some of the arguments made by other researchers. Case in point, Han (2002) believed that in communicative language teaching, corrective feedback remains an important vehicle for facilitating L2 knowledge construction and enhancing knowledge use. In the same vein, Keh (1990) stated that peer feedback is versatile with regard to focus and implementation along the process writing continuum. Therefore, one might conclude that students feel that peer feedback is valuable in gaining a wider sense of audience. Increasing students' motivation for writing, enabling them to receive different views on their writing, helping them learn to read their own writing critically, and assisting them in gaining confidence in their writing are among the advantages mentioned by Mittan (1989), which were also endorsed by the findings of this study.

With the emergence of the new millennium of teaching and learning in which the researchers have focused on the learner-centered approach (e.g. Amini Farsani and Nikoopour,2010; Liu and Hansen ,2002), peer response activities can help students take

charge of their own learning, build critical thinking skills, and consolidate their own knowledge of writing. Furthermore, in terms of social effects, peer response activities can enhance students' communication, build their social skills, and provide them with a supportive social network, although they can also be anxiety provoking and lead to communication breakdown.

With regard to the linguistic perspective on the employment of peer feedback activities, the researchers might conclude that, peer response activities are considered good opportunities for students to build their own linguistic knowledge, enhance participation, and improve both oral and written discourse, although students tend to over- emphasize local structure and/or grammatical comments.

One of the key features of peer-mediated discussion approaches is the social context for teaching and learning. It can be concluded from this research that, first, setting up peer response groups initially seems time-consuming, but usually patience and guidance lead to positive results. According to Byrd (2003), "writing, regardless of where it is found in today's curriculum, has become more interactive in nature; peer editing reflects this shift"(p. 434). Second, still, a number of foreign language teachers are at a loss as to where to begin such activities. This study presents ideas on how to design and carry out a peer editing response activity and demonstrates a method that can fit most writing task situations. This method may help students to gain vital editing skills that not only improve a peer's paper, but in time also increase their own confidence in writing, improve the content and conventions of their written work, and enhance their thinking skills.

The findings of this study may have important pedagogical implications for L2 writing instruction. Foreign language students are often anxious about writing and need to be encouraged to see it as a means of learning, rather than demonstrating learning. Instead of considering writing as a goal of language instruction, it would be better to focus on it as a means of developing language competence in such a way that the emphasis shifts from learning to write and moves in the direction of writing to learn. Peer response

activity, which has been the focus of this study in writing classes, is one kind of collaborative group work that may lead to greater opportunities for students to negotiate meaning as they work with peers in improving a written text, since it is the students who analyze and decide which comments to incorporate into their next revision and which to leave out. Moreover, it would be suggested that implanting group-oriented tasks including peer response activities would enable the teachers of writing to observe the thinking processes of students as they discuss and write about structures, ideas, and concepts contained in their own writing. Also, during the process of peer response activities, students are able to participate in all aspects of foreign language learning: reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Villamil and DeGuerrero, 1996; Byrd, 2003). Such a communicative tool is ideal for the foreign language classroom context.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into what peers may do as they respond and how students appear to process their peers' commentaries. Peer response has become a common feature in L2 classrooms, where the process approach to teaching writing is used. By training students to offer and receive constructive feedback, and by allowing them to practice these roles, teachers can help make peer response a valuable and successful experience. Involving students in the process of peer learning gives them a deeper understanding of the subject matter at hand and leads to higher order thinking about learning materials. The basis for peer learning is that students learn more and better when they are participants in the learning process. According to the findings of the present study, the following general limitations and remedies are made with the hope that other researchers may find them interesting enough to pursue in the near future: 1. The focus of this study was uni-dimensional, that is, the impact of employment of practicing observer ring technique on the writing skill; other studies can be done to probe this effect on the integration of skills. 2. The researchers used two different teachers for the experimental and control groups which might resulted in low internal validity;

other studies can be done with the employment of the same teacher for both groups. 3. This study investigated the impact of peer feedback activities on the participants 'writing achievement; future researches are required to probe different types of peer feedback such as peer editing, post teacher check, reader response, etc.

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فهیمه محمودی

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مطالعه ی حاضر به بررسی تاثیر تکنیک حلقه ناظربرعملکرد آزمون شوندگان در مهارت نوشتن می پردازد.در این مطالعه تعداد 20 آزمودنی در گروه کنترل و 18 نفر در گروه آزمایش شرکت داشتند.ابزارجمع آوری داده ها عبارت است از برگه نگارش ، آزمون تعیین سطح آکسفورد، و مقیاس ارزیابی نگارش. از شرکت کنندگان در گروه آزمایش در خواست شد تا متنی را در خانه نوشته و نوشته های خود را به کلاس آورده تا توسط همکلاسی های شان و تحت نظارت معلم تصحیح گردند. در گروه شاهد، مقالات توسط معلم تصحیح شد. نتایج حاصل ازپیش آزمون نشان داد که شرکت کنندگان در دو گروه همگن، با توجه به سطح مهارت و همچنین توانایی نوشتن خود قرار گرفته اند. نتایج حاصل از پس آزمون نشان داد که توانایی نوشتن شرکت کنندگان در گروه آزمایش در طی این مطالعه بهبود یافته است. علاوه بر این، تکنیک حلقه ناظر تاثیر مثبت و قابل توجهی در توانایی نوشتن شرکت کنندگان نشان داد.این یافته ها پیامدهای آموزشی برای قرار دادن این مدل جدید بازخورد تعاملی در کلاس های آمورش مهارت نگارش نوشتن پیشنهاد می کند.

کلید واژه ها: تکنیک حلقه ناظر، بازخورد ، مهارت نوشتن، فراگیرندگان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی