Original Article

The Effect of Interactive Metalinguistic Feedback on the Iranian Middle School Students' Argumentative Writing in English: A Mixed-Methods Research

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Abstract

The subject of corrective feedback in writing in English has always been a contentious issue among Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers despite an extensive body of research investigating the matter. This mixed-methods study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Interactive Metalinguistic Feedback (IMF) on the Iranian middle school students' ability in argumentative writing. To this aim, based on a multi-stage sampling, from 5 middle schools in Varamin, six classes were selected randomly; finally, 40 EFL students were sampled from the courses as the main participants of this study. A researcher-made writing test and a self-assessment questionnaire were utilized to collect the quantitative data. The participants were grouped into Interactive Metalinguistic Feedback Class (IMFC) and Control Class (CC) and they were given a writing test as a pretest to ensure their homogeneity in terms of initial writing ability. After a 12-session treatment, a writing posttest was given to them. Furthermore, a self-assessment questionnaire was administered to collect data on students' attitudes toward the IMF in the learning-teaching process. To assemble the qualitative data, an interview accompanied by observation was conducted after the treatment to complement the quantitative results. The experimental findings of this current study revealed that IMF had a significant effect on the growth of argumentative writing ability among EFL students. The results of the qualitative part also indicated that social learning, situated learning, and dialogic interaction through IMF encouraged students to develop their writing skills as they co-constructed knowledge with others.

Keywords: Co-constructed Knowledge, Dialogic Interaction, Metalinguistic Feedback, Situated learning, Social learning

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1. Introduction

In the newly published English textbooks for middle and high schools in Iran, the new approach to teaching grammar is based on a communication approach. The exclusive focus is on communication at the expense of conscious grammar education (Javadi & Tajik, 2021). As a result, such an educational deficiency has impaired students' writing skills. It means that grammatical inaccuracies in the text may hinder progress. It is believed that the L2 learner learns from grammar when classroom activities focus on meaning communication and that teacher feedback addresses not only the content and meaning of the learner's language but also its grammatical structure (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005).

According to Schmidt's (1992) noticing hypothesis, for language acquisition to occur, any form should be consciously noticed in the input; in other words, it is believed that meaning-oriented activities are not enough and claimed that there must also be some exclusive attention to form. That is why many studies underpin the efficacy of focusing on form-function mapping and providing L2 learners with metalinguistic feedback to improve their productive skills (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). They believed that learners need to be given comprehensible L2 input, they must consciously notice the form in the information as well as its meaning, they must be allowed to produce the L2, and finally be provided with corrective feedback to modify their production for greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

Additionally, many practitioners and English language teachers testify that teaching L2 writing is a challenging task (Silva, 2013). As many researchers claimed that for effective writing, L2 writers need to master not only higher-level sub-skills of planning and organizing but also lower-level sub-skills of spelling, word choice, and writing mechanics. They believed that failure to achieve any of these skills and sub-skills could also hinder the development of L2 writing (Wilson, et al., 2016).

Therefore, to develop students' writing competence, it is necessary for English teachers first to identify complex and problematic areas in writing and then respond accurately and appropriately to students' specific writing skills (Effatpanah, et al., 2019).

They concluded that students are eager to receive adequate and immediate feedback on their performance from the teacher when these problematic areas of writing are identified by their teacher and introduced to them. According to these theories, writing teachers tend

to give constructive feedback to second language (L2) writers on various issues in their writing classes.

Ferris (2004) and Hyland and Hyland (2006) argued that feedback is crucial for ESL/EFL writing classes worldwide. This means that in writing classes, instruction and feedback are the most important ways teachers can improve their students' writing skills (Rahimi, 2009). Therefore, Feedback in Writing Classes (WCF) seemed to have attracted the most research attention recently to the extent that numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of corrective feedback for L2 writing. Written corrective feedback, widely used by L2 teachers in writing classes, refers to a response to the errors in learners' second language productions to improve the accuracy of the targeted form (Abadikhah & Ashoori, 2012).

Unfortunately, as an L2 writing teacher and researcher, the more the researcher read and look thoughtfully for a long time at this topic, the more abstracted the researcher becomes about the current state of the research on WCF. In summary, investigations on the effects of corrective feedback and its different types have yielded conflicting results. Despite the large volume of research on corrective input in this field, there is little or no agreement on what kind of feedback is the most effective.

Furthermore, most previously conducted studies have been carried out merely on an empirical basis. The other complementary method of investigation, such as identifying the teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes and the actual observation of the classroom performance, has been largely neglected and overestimated. To fill the existing gaps in this regard and shed some new light on the effectiveness of metalinguistic corrective feedback, the present study was conducted. This study was primarily intended to investigate whether the interactive metalinguistic feedback would influence EFL learners' argumentative writing. As Sasaki (2000) defined argumentative writing as a kind of writing in which the primary assumption of the argumentative genre is audience awareness; therefore, the writer tries to convince the reader about their opinion with logical claims. There was also an attempt to explore whether Iranian EFL learners had any attitudes and tendencies toward using IMF in the language learning process. Further, it was also conducted to identify the EFL learners' perception of the interactive metalinguistic feedback as the most effective approach to writing to enhance their proficiency in writing argumentative essays.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Interactive Metalinguistic Feedback

One of the pedagogical tools that have recently been considered in Second Language Learning (SLA), taken as a focus-on-form instrument, is Long's interactive metalinguistic feedback (Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2018).

It is highly agreed that L2 teachers use metalinguistic feedback as an educational technique to draw the attention of L2 students to erroneous utterances. Thus, it aids them in noticing L2 features that have not yet been learned or have been partially learned. According to Long's theory, the focus on form occurs when learners interact with the teacher or other learners amidst a communication problem. Learners are made aware of them through negotiation of meaning (Suzuki, 2004).

According to the comprehensible output hypothesis, maintained learners learn language by noticing the output grammatically, that is, whether the language they use is grammatically correct or not. They then correct themselves and use the language that correctly follows the grammatical rules (output; Swain, 2000).

It is believed that when L2 learners produce work, they may confront and experience difficulties in conveying their intended meaning. For dealing with these problems, corrective feedback is necessary, in fact, such corrective feedback from teachers, i.e., interactive metalinguistic feedback, according to the current study, would be taken as comprehensible input, and the L2 learners may process language with focused attention (Abadikhah & Ashoori, 2012).

2.2. The Role of Metalinguistic Feedback from a Sociocultural Perspective

According to sociocultural theory, L2 learners are collaboratively enabled to do something within a developmental zone that they would not otherwise be able to do on their own (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the idea of ZPD refers to an area of knowledge or skill in which L2 learners are unable to function independently; otherwise, they can get the desired result when they are scaffolded (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Nassaji and Swain (2000), in a study on the effect of negotiated ZPD-related corrective feedback versus no ZPD-related corrective feedback on learning specific articles, reported that corrective feedback is effective when provided within learners' ZPD. It is claimed that teacher's scaffolding refers to a situation where a knowledgeable and proficient

participant can create comprehensible conditions where a non-proficient participant can participate and extend their current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence.

According to the sociocultural perspective, SLA is attributed to a learner's participation in social activities where negotiation of meaning is crucial to effective learning. Accordingly, from a sociocultural perspective, corrective feedback focuses on social bargaining. Consequently, as mentioned in the study, an interactional view of metalinguistic feedback involves joint participation and meaning negotiation; hence, between the learner and the teacher will be established (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

2.3. Grammatical Knowledge and Metalinguistic Understanding

Mitchell and Myles (2004), in examining the relationship between grammatical knowledge and multilinguistic knowledge, pointed out that explicit grammatical knowledge is commonly known as multilinguistic knowledge that can be acquired through conscious awareness tasks or activities. They believe that linguistic knowledge refers to the language that students learn explicitly.

The conception of metalinguistic awareness is supported by Hallidayian Systemic Functional Linguistics and by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Because these theories are based on the premise that multilinguistic awareness and the ability to think grammatically about language requires the development of language knowledge, that is, grammar is taken as a semiotic mediating tool (Williams, 2012).

Furthermore, Bialystok (1987) pointed out that metalinguistic awareness in bilinguals involves language processing consisting of the components of analysis and control, which are responsible for language learning and use. According to him, the analysis component of language processing refers to representing explicit and conscious knowledge. The control one refers to selectively attending to and applying knowledge. Therefore, he argues that developments in linguistic abilities result from the consequences of these two related components of language processing.

Myhill and Jones (2015) maintained that from Bialystok's analysis, it might understand that meta-linguistic activity involves both the ability to recognize and identify patterns of language use and to regulate learners' language use.

2.4. The Need to Teach Argumentative Writing

From the literature, the researcher believes that argument writing is a kind of skill that students need to know for success in real life and college. The purpose of argument writing is to use logic and evidence pragmatically and grammatically to convince an audience of the soundness and validity of claims (Sasaki, 2000). He claims that argumentative writing is a kind of writing in which the primary assumption of the argumentative genre is audience awareness; therefore, the writer tries to convince the reader about their opinion with logical claims.

Several studies signify that, however, in an EFL environment, it should be taught systematically because of the specific genre, including register and rhetoric (Rashidi & Dastkhezr, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to teach argument writing to high school students and prepare them to broaden their knowledge, develop ideas, and communicate effectively using relevant and authentic evidence to be able to argue logically and thoughtfully in real-world situations, get ready for success in college, and meet the needs of their life. That is why students need explicit instruction and feedback in argument writing, as they are not likely to learn to develop strong arguments by themselves.

2.5. Studies on the Corrective Feedback and Writing Skill

Loo (2020) explored the role that feedback plays in developing the language awareness of graduate students in academic written drafts by providing grammar lessons and metalinguistic feedback. In this study, students also completed three surveys, and the researcher analyzed the errors in the students' written drafts and the results of these surveys. The results showed that metalinguistic feedback has an influential role in developing students' language awareness in written drafts. Secondly, students positively perceive the practical effect of grammar lessons and metalinguistic feedback on writing skills.

In Gorman and Ellis's (2019) study of form-focused instruction, 33 learners aged 9 to 12 years were asked to complete four dictogloss tasks designed to elicit the use of the Present Perfect Tense. Group 1 received instruction consisting of explicit metalinguistic explanation; Group 2 received direct written correction or no form-focused instruction. The results showed that FFI benefits young children when undertaking meaning-focused writing tasks.

Andarab (2019) investigated the effectiveness of Spatial Intelligence-Based (SIB) metalinguistic feedback, using colorful pens to write, highlight, and underline the linguistic errors of the learners while giving feedback on EFL learners' development in writing. Results indicated that the accuracy of the first group of students who received SIB metalinguistic feedback for their linguistic errors excelled that of the second group of students who received written correction was only metalinguistic. However, there was no significant difference between the groups in the content and organization of their writing.

Saadi and Saadat (2015) investigated the effects of Direct Electronic Feedback (DECF) and Metalinguistic Electronic Feedback (MECF) on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy and their attitudes toward Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The results revealed no significant differences between the final writing accuracy scores of the DECF and MECF groups. However, the results indicated that DECF and MECF developed the learners' writing accuracy and attitudes toward CALL.

Hashemian and Farhang-Ju (2018) investigated the effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback on Field-Dependent (FD) and Field-Independent (FI) intermediate L2 learners' writing accuracy. The study results also showed that both groups benefited from metalinguistic feedback; however, the FD participants outperformed the FI ones.

Ebadi (2014) examined the effectiveness of focused metalinguistic feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing in terms of grammatical accuracy. The study results showed significant progress among the experimental group subjects compared to the control one.

Ganapathy et al. (2020) examined the possible effect of different types of written corrective feedback on ESL students' writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools and their perceptions of the provision of written corrective feedback in the Malaysian context. Results revealed that most learners benefited from and preferred metalinguistic feedback. Since it helped them focus on the form, such as grammar, paragraph organization, content, and clarity of ideas, they were also able to understand errors more clearly.

Hence, to shed some new light on the effectiveness of metalinguistic corrective feedback, the present study was conducted around the following research questions:

1. Does interactive metalinguistic feedback (IMF) significantly affect the EFL students' argumentative writing ability?
2. What are the Iranian EFL students' attitudes and feelings towards IMF as a teaching intervention and their proficiency assessment in writing English?

3. How do middle school students perceive IMF as the most effective approach to writing to enhance their proficiency in writing an argumentative essay?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

Mixed-methods research was conducted to answer the above-mentioned research questions, explicitly implementing the convergent parallel design. Informed by the guidelines of a convergent mixed methods research design, the researcher is involved in the following: (a) Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently but separately. (b) Analyzing the two data sets separately and independently using typical quantitative and qualitative procedures. (c) Interpreting how the two data sets converged will enable the researcher to make meaning out of their outcomes to accomplish better the purpose of the study. To sum it up, the researcher triangulated the data from qualitative analysis of interviews, observation, and quantitative analysis of students' pretest and posttest test scores. That is why they followed a mixed-methods approach in which students' writing results were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed and compared after implementing metalinguistic feedback treatments to their initial argumentative writings.

3.2. Participants

The population of the current study was 195 preuniversity students in humanities, experimental and mathematical fields, who were studying in middle schools of Varamin, located 35 km from Tehran, in the academic year 1399-1400. Both male and female students learning English as a foreign language participated in the study. Based on multi-stage cluster sampling, five schools were first randomly selected out of 35 high-school schools in Varamin, regardless of the gender of the schools. Then from each school, two classes out of 5 or 6, studying pre-university courses, were randomly chosen. As a result of such sampling, out of these five schools, three boys ' and two girls' schools were chosen as participating schools in this study. Finally, one class was selected as an interactive metalinguistic feedback group among the two classes and one class as a control group. Eventually, each class consisted of 20 students. Some of them in each class stood as proficient EFL learners, so the researcher needed to be aware of the homogeneity of the participants and reduce the effect of their proficiency level on the study results in both groups in all five schools.

3.3. Instruments and Materials

The researcher used the following instruments and materials for both parts of the mixed-method study.

3.3.1. Proficiency Test

To ensure learners' proficiency level homogeneity, the Key English Test (KET) was administered before conducting the study. According to the test, students were asked to take the test in 60 minutes, allocated 50 minutes to the reading and writing part, and 10 minutes to the speaking part. It included three sections: reading, writing, and speaking.

3.3.2. Writing English Tests

The researcher designed two writing English tests, one test as a pretest and the other as a posttest. The instructions for these tests had three main parts; the first part included the time limit of the test, the second part included a topic that test-takers should write about, and the third part showed that essays should be written in a few words. The researcher selected two different issues for the tests to avoid practice effects.

3.3.3. Rating Scale for EFL Argumentative Writing

To provide precise and clear scoring criteria and adequately evaluate the quality of arguments/argumentation, the researcher developed a rating system appropriate for classroom assessment of the argumentative writing ability of the participants. This scale was used to score the pretest and posttest essays of the participants.

3.3.4. Self-Assessment Questionnaire

A self-assessment questionnaire was another vital data source sustaining an improvement in writing proficiency. There were ten items in this questionnaire. The results demonstrated the students' attitudes and feelings towards the teaching intervention and their proficiency assessment in writing English. The self-assessment questionnaire was administered to the students after treatment to gain an insight into their perceptions of and feeling toward English writing instruction and to learn from their experience during the treatment.

3.3.5. Semi-Structured Interview

In the present study, the researcher selected a semi-structured interview for two-way communication. Participants could easily express their experiences, perceptions, and feelings about this approach to writing argumentative articles. Thus, 20 students were interviewed after writing the posttest to record their experiences, perceptions, and feelings about the argumentative writing strategies they had learned.

3.3.6. Observation Checklist

An observation checklist is a set of items that assist an observer to investigate the extent of the effect of interactive metalinguistic feedback on participants' argumentative writing and their active participation in the teaching-learning process.

3.3.7. Estimating the Reliability and Validity of the Research Instruments

The following sections demonstrate the results gained from the analysis of the reliability of the instruments used in this study, obtained in the piloting stage.

Table 1

Reliability Indices of Research Instruments

Instruments	Items	R
Written English tests	20	0.78
Analytic rating scale	18	0.83
Self-assessment questionnaires	10	0.85
Observation scheme	13	0.79

As shown in Table1, the reliability indices of the research instruments were satisfactory to be utilized in the present study. In the second phase of the study, the researcher personally carried out a semi-structured interview with the participants. The interview sessions were conducted in the hope to bring about reliable and valid results. To this end, he initially created a friendly atmosphere to make the students feel comfortable. Having introduced himself, the interviewer informed the interviewees of the purpose of the interview but avoided providing too much information about the research study to preclude the formation of bias in the respondents. In a bid to gauge the reliability of the interview questions, two language experts in the field of applied linguistics were requested to evaluate the relevance and appropriateness of the questions through a short interview session. The amount of consistency and agreement in the experts' responses was measured and considered as the yardstick for reliability.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

After examining all groups' homogeneity, the researcher initially gave the experimental group a pretest in the second session. In the pretest, they were invited to write on the topic "Holidays and Birthdays Are Moments to Come Together. How Are You Adapting during the Pandemic?" using between 150 and 200 in 45 minutes.

On the one hand, in the second session onwards, the researcher initially gave participants of the metalinguistic feedback group one topic in each session. The topics were chosen to elicit students' arguments or viewpoints on a topic that should be presented in the claim form (Paul & Elder, 2008). Next, the students wrote on the topic of the class. One of the topics, for example, requiring them to write an argumentative essay was "Is Online Learning (SHAD) as Good as Face-to-Face Learning?" The other topics, likewise, were: "Should Everyone Learn at Least One Other Language?"; "What Role Will Technology Play in Our Education during the Pandemic?; "At What Age Should Children Be Allowed to Go Places Without Adult Supervision?"; "Should High Schools Do More to Prepare You for Careers?".

After writing the essays, the students handed in their products through ShadeApp or Email. The researcher then provided the learners with interactive metalinguistic feedback in comments and explanations of the faulty parts. During the study, lasting for 12 weeks, these participants composed five argumentative essays on five different topics assigned by the researcher according to the participants' needs and motivation. In this study, the researcher followed Harmer's (2007) Four-Step Model: planning, drafting, editing, and final version to teach argumentative writing through an interactive metalinguistic feedback approach.

The other participants (control group) were instructed in the classroom through conventional methods. At the end of the treatment sessions, a writing posttest was given to both groups of the participants to determine the effect of the treatment.

Furthermore, a self-assessment questionnaire was administered to the IMF group to identify the students' attitudes and feelings towards the teaching intervention and their proficiency assessment in writing English. Having finished the quantitative data collection, an interview accompanied by observation was conducted to obtain more positive findings concerning the participants' perceptions in the experimental group about employing IMF in the English classes. After finishing the data collection, the received data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and theme-based analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Before conducting the primary analyses, it was necessary to investigate the homogeneity of the participants in terms of initial writing skills to ensure that there was no pre-existing difference between the participants in this regard before the intervention. To ensure that all the participants possessed a similar level of writing ability before the treatment, an independent sample t-test analysis was conducted, and the summary of results was presented in the following tables. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of participants' scores in the writing pre-test.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Scores on Pretest of Argumentative Writing

Test	Groups	*N*	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean
Pretest (Writing)	Control	20	4.02	2.09	0.38
	IMFG	20	4.39	1.72	0.31

As can be seen obviously in Table 2 above, the mean scores of the control group (M = 4.02, SD = 2.09) and IMFG (M = 4.39, SD = 1.72) did not differ greatly on the pretest of writing. However, to ensure the significance and meaningfulness of the descriptive findings, the results illustrated in the t-test table should be taken into account.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-test (Pre-tests of both groups)

		Levene's Test for Equality o Variances		T-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Low	Up
Pretest (Writing)	Equal variances Assumed	0.55	0.46	0.805	58	0.423	0.4	0.49	-0.59	10.39
	Equal variances not Assumed			0.805	55.91	0.424	0.4	0.49	-0.59	10.39

As displayed in Table 3, t value and significance level (*t* (58) = 0.805, *p* = 0.423, *p* >0.05) were indicative of no significant difference between the control group and experimental group in terms of initial writing skill. Thus, it can be inferred that the participants in the two groups had approximately similar writing abilities before the main phase of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Investigating the First Research Question

The first research question sought to investigate whether interactive metalinguistic feedback significantly affects the EFL learners' ability in argumentative writing skills. To answer the research question, an independent samples t-test analysis was conducted. The descriptive statistics are presented in table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Scores on Posttest of Argumentative Writing

Test	Groups		n	Mean	*Std.* Deviation	*Std.* Error Mean
Pretest (Writing)	Control	0	2	5.11	1.02	0.41
	IMFG	0	2	8.75	2.32	0.28

As the above table indicates, the mean score of the IMGF (M= 8.75, SD= 2.32) was considerably higher than the control group (M= 5.11, SD= 1.02) in the writing post-test. To ensure the significance of this difference, the results presented in the t-test table (Table 5) should be scrutinized.

Table 5

Independent Samples T-test (Post-tests of both groups)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidenc Interval of the Difference	
		F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		Low	Up
Posttest (Writing)	Equal Variance Assumed	0.5	0.00	7.89	338	0.001	3.67	0.29		-0.96	10.58
	Equal Variance Not Assumed			-7.89	337	0.001	0.4	0.29		-0.96	10.58

As illustrated in table 5, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the writing posttest of IMGF group and that of the control group (*t* (38) = -7.89, p = 0.00, p < 0.05). This indicates that the IMF group performed better than the control group in the regulative writing test, and this advantage is significant. That is, the interactive metalinguistic feedback group compared to the EFL learners who were taught writing courses through conventional methods without any feedback produced much better pieces of regulative writing.

4.2. Investigating the Second Research Question

The second research question sought to identify EFL students' attitudes and feelings towards the IMF as a teaching intervention and their proficiency assessment in writing English.

The analysis of the results revealed that most of the participants in the second experimental group believed in the efficacy of the instruction based on the interactive metalinguistic feedback in the development of such writing among Iranian middle school learners. The higher mean scores showed the participants' beliefs in some items. The following items had higher mean scores than other items: (M=3.97, SD=1.295, My writing skills won't be improved when teachers fix the mistake by providing the correct target form), (M=3.64, SD=1.987, Working with the teacher or in collaboration with others allows me the

opportunity to be successful in writing my first draft; Social Learning), (M=3.88, SD=1.537, I can clearly understand the procedures of the argumentative essays when learning happens through cooperative or collaborative dialogue where the teacher corrects my errors indirectly (Social learning). (M=3.55, SD=1.9592, my writing skills will be improved when the teacher gives me a clue and lets me fix the mistake on my own; ZPD), and (M=3.39, SD=1.982, I can write English correctly after the teacher gives me such feedback in the form of comments about my grammar mistakes; ZPD). All in all, the results revealed that the participants had positive perceptions and attitudes toward using interactive metalinguistic feedback in the classroom.

To further explore the participants' attitudes and overall perceptions concerning the effectiveness and efficiency of IMF, an interview and observation were also carried out to gain much more complementary results in this regard.

4.3. Investigating the Third Research Question

The third research question evaluated how middle school students perceived interactive metalinguistic feedback as the most effective writing approach to enhancing their proficiency in the field. The interviews and observations were gathered and reported to answer this question.

4.3.1. Results of the Interviews

The responses of twenty participants of the experimental groups to the interview questions were analyzed using thematic analysis to explore their attitudes and perceptions of the IMF approach to writing. The significant themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis obtained from the data include social learning, situated learning, scaffolding, dialogic interaction, and ZPD. It appears that learning in context, learning through cooperation, learning through negotiation of meaning, learning through metalinguistic feedback, and learning through comprehensible input are reflected in the themes.

The first theme was situated learning which referred to how learners feel relaxed when learning happens in context. Most students prefer to learn through an argumentative essay model where its function, structures, and language features are introduced to them; that is, they tend to be immersed in the actual usage of English communication.

The second central theme extracted from the interviews was social learning. The participants considered learning through cooperation as an essential technique of writing instruction. Most of them believed that by exchanging their work in a group, they could give questions, suggestions, and corrections about the content and language used by their partners.

The third theme was dialogic interaction which showed that most participants believed that through collaborative dialogue, they understood their strengths and weaknesses and took action to improve and strengthen their weaknesses while assessing their writing tasks.

Regarding the fourth theme, scaffolding, the participants found interactive metalinguistic valuable feedback for writing. They reported that it allowed them to explore the correction of some errors independently.

The final theme was ZPD. The results indicated that most participants believed that when the researcher provided them with support in the form of comments and explanations of errors to the extent that made it easier for them to understand, they discovered solutions by themselves accordingly.

4.3.2. Results of the Observations

After analyzing the results of the interviews, the results from the Interactive Metalinguistic Feedback Group observations were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis and reported to either verify or nullify the previous findings.

The findings from the observation revealed that all of the participants favored the theme of Situated Learning, where the researcher provided an environment where they could practice how to write, and the theme of Social Learning, where participants exchange their work in pairs, construct their knowledge in interaction with peers, reconstruct an argumentative essay through cooperation.

Other important outcomes from the observation were the theme of Scaffolding, which was based on the principle that through metalinguistic feedback, the researcher helped the students to correct the errors, and the theme of Dialogic Interaction, were learning writing skills was done through interaction with and assistance from peers, and the theme ZPD**,** where the researcher provided participants with comments and explanations of errors and allowed them to discover solutions by themselves.

5. Discussion

The current study was set to examine whether there have been significant differences between the argumentative writing competence of the participants before and after treatments of interactive metalinguistic feedback instruction. In addition, it evaluated how middle school students perceived interactive metalinguistic feedback as an approach to writing to enhance their proficiency in writing an argumentative essay.

The primary finding of this study suggested that the EFL learners who underwent the interactive metalinguistic feedback had far better performance within the argumentative writing test than the participants who didn't receive any helpful feedback in the classroom. The results in this section are consistent with Ebadi's (2014) study, in which he has concluded that metalinguistic feedback has a positive effect on the grammatical accuracy of writing. The findings are also in line with Saadi and Saadat (2015), who revealed that the employment of E-feedback developed the learners' writing accuracy, perceptions, and attitudes toward CALL. In the same vein, Hashemian and Farhang-Ju's (2018) study also supports the obtained results. Their study proved that both FD and FI learners profited from such feedback to promote writing performance.

However, the findings do not seem to be in keeping with the study reported by Bitchener and Knoch (2010), indicating that there was no significant difference between the first group who received direct written feedback and those who received written and oral metalinguistic feedback on two frequent uses of the English indefinite and definite article system.

In a similar vein, the findings of Gorman and Ellis (2019) did not also support the obtained results in the current study. They found that the written metalinguistic feedback showed no improvement from the first to the last in producing the target structure.

The inconsistent and inconclusive results in these studies are probably because, to date, few studies have focused on how students perceive the benefits of written corrective feedback, incredibly interactive multilingual feedback, and on the potential role of students' perceptions and attitudes toward these benefits.

One of the reasons to explain the results obtained is that middle school students, unlike children, can benefit from grammatical explanations since the contact between them and L2 is limited to the L2 classroom (DeKeyser, 2018). This may be why the impact of interactive metalinguistic feedback on current study participants was more pronounced. He

suggested that adult L2 learners have mature metalanguage skills that help them represent language units as conceptual categories. This problem is closely related to analytical ability as adult L2 learners rely on cognitive resources. Therefore, their analytical ability is central to their learning.

The other reason which causes inconclusive results is that fewer studies have examined learner-related factors like learners' attitudes, motivation, and learning styles in this field. It is recommended that language teachers appreciate learners' preferences and attitudes before providing any feedback. Egi (2010) looked at the connection between learners' responses to the recast and perceptions of recasts. In a study, twenty-four Japanese EFL learners received recasts on their errors, and analyses were taken regarding learners' responses to the recasts. In any recasts where they produced uptake, their reports indicated that they perceived the recasts as corrective feedback significantly more than those where they failed to make uptake.

Another finding of the current study indicated that most of the participants who have received the interactive metalinguistic feedback (IMF) believed in the efficacy and effectiveness of the instruction based on this feedback type in the development of argumentative writing since such instruction takes into consideration their needs, interests, and feelings. The findings are consistent with a study reported by Hyland and Hyland (2006) that revealed that metalinguistic feedback is salient to L2 learners as it explicitly provides the opportunity for them to diagnose their ungrammatical utterances. Thus, pointing out the grammatical explanation explicitly increases salience. Also, the context of the study, Iran, suggests that L2 learners are in favor of corrective feedback types that include explanations (i.e., metalinguistic feedback), which is probably since they receive a substantial amount of formal L2 grammar instruction.

As put by Hashemian and Farhang-Ju (2018), "If the given signs have a history related to the learner's experience, their prominence may increase. Therefore, the explicit grammatical explanation relevant to EFL learners' experience enhances salience. Consequently, they claimed that as the effect of the explicit grammatical explanation was more pronounced for the FD learners, they benefited more from metalinguistic feedback. Further, as FI learners are in contrast to their FD counterparts, they learn better when more implicit types of corrective feedback are provided. In comparison, FD learners are more likely to benefit from more explicit types of feedback.

The findings of the qualitative part are consistent with a study reported by Ganapathy et al. (2020) and showed that most learners preferred direct feedback because they could understand errors more clearly. The results also showed that learners tended to focus on forms such as grammar, paragraph organization, content, and idea clarity.

The qualitative results of the current study also lent support to Fithriani's (2019) study in which the findings indicated that social learning, situated learning, and dialogic interaction through corrective feedback tasks encouraged students to develop their writing skills as they co-constructed knowledge with others. Since the thematic analysis from the interview and observation transcripts revealed that, first, it was observed that based on situated learning, several authentic samples of an argumentative essay were presented to the participants who were asked to read it and analyze it with the help of the researcher. Second, it was seen that the researcher gave a sample of an argumentative essay to provide authentic material to immerse participants into the actual usage of English communication, verifying the principles of situated learning. Third, the researcher interacted with students to motivate them to the topic of the sample essay by relating it to their lives. Here, a kind of dialogic Interaction was provided. Fourth, it was observed that the participants were asked to answer questions with the help of the researcher to model the context of culture, situation, and text features so that the learning context was scaffolded. Sixth, to have a kind of ZPD, the researcher explained the purpose, the function, the generic structure, and the language features of the sample essay to provide suitable input to make them understand them. Seventh, it was seen that the researcher allowed the participants to work with him to practice the task. Thus, scaffolding has also occurred. Eighth, based on Social learning, the participants were asked to exchange their work in pairs. They could give comments, questions, suggestions, and corrections about their partner's content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Ninth, the researcher provided the participants with metalinguistic feedback in comments and explanations of errors (Scaffolding).

6. Conclusion

Nowadays, the main focus of most research on teaching English to ESL and EFL learners has been on affective instruction like the metalinguistic feedback approach to developing students' writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Since this approach is influenced by a system that considers students' errors as part of their learning process, not a negative factor that should be suppressed immediately;

therefore, the main focus of teaching writing and speaking skills has changed from product to writing process, and students' cognitive behavior before, during, and after the report. The success of such instruction, in which interactive metalinguistic feedback is considered an essential instructional technique in the learning-teaching process, is related to students' affective factors such as needs, wants, and interests. It is believed that if students accept that such feedback, which is connected to their interests, can strengthen their writing ability, they will undoubtedly be fully committed to the process and will be actively involved in all stages of their learning. Therefore, it is crucial for writing classroom teachers to know how to improve their students' writing skills by considering their attitudes and perceptions about what kind of feedback and how this feedback can be provided.

Although the classroom setting in the current study is an informal one, the results of this study can be of great help to other studies on the efficacy of written corrective feedback in writing instruction, particularly in the Iranian EFL context. It is believed that this research, along with further similar analysis, will lead to a broader framework according to which all Iranian middle and high school English language teachers can improve their students' writing skills by observing the principles mentioned in this research. It is also suggested that to generalize the results of the qualitative section and qualitative awareness of a wide range of students' attitudes and perceptions about the type of corrective feedback and their impact on students' writing ability, it is better to invite more participants to the interview.

The results of the current study may also contribute to the Vygotskyan sociocultural theory (1978) as a theoretical framework as it illustrates a more concrete understanding of the primary constructs of situated learning, social learning, scaffolding, dialogic interaction, and ZPD, particularly in terms of the processes of EFL learner's development of psychical functions from dependence to independence. Therefore, written corrective feedback refers to a kind of feedback contextualized as interactive metalinguistic feedback aiming to tailor learners' feelings, needs, preferences, and state of development.

In conclusion, the results of this study, together with the results of prominent researchers (Kantar, et al., 2020) may allow us to adopt a humanistic view of SLA that shows, in the process of learning, many essential elements can be taken into account to increase the effectiveness. These elements include academic and environmental factors and the mentality of learners, which provide for their feelings, needs, and interests. The humanistic approach, emphasizing the student-centered classroom, provides the elements

needed for the learners' learning process. Thus, the interactive metalinguistic feedback approach is based on what learners are willing to learn and how they want to learn rather than teaching what is essentially acquired.

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