

Oral Feedback in an EFL Writing Context

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Abstract

Various researchers have made theoretical claims that feedback obtained through conversational interaction can facilitate language development. As for writing courses, written feedback has been proved to be of little help. Hence, the present study attempted to investigate student view on the implementation of dialog feedback and to trace any improvement in writing as a result of attending such conferences. The participants were 17 male and female Iranian EFL undergraduates. Having been trained, the participants were required to offer their comments on their peers' writing. Reports indicated that the students looked at such dialogs differently, though a majority enjoyed them. No writing improvement was observed!

Key Words: Writing classes, Written feedback, Oral feedback, Conferences, Student view.

1. Introduction

What is student attitude toward writing? When asked to prioritize their favorite skills, students put writing at the end of their list. The researcher was wondering how she could create a more pleasant context for students to write in; where she should focus attention on; and how best she could respond to student writings. Prior studies indicated little contribution for written feedback to the improvement of student writing. This study targeted oral feedback as an alternative. Indeed, the objectives were to investigate the potential impact of ORAL feedback on student view to writing and verify whether such incorporation contributes effectively to improving the quality of writing. The methodology and the results of the research will be prefaced with a brief picture of past work on feedback.

2. Theoretical background

As a result of the movement from product to process orientation, teachers now in writing courses approach teaching writing differently. They, for example, "set pre-writing activities, require multiple drafts, give extensive feedback, encourage peer review, and delay surface correction"(Hyland, 2003: 17). Given this academic climate, studies of feedback, among a host of other factors, become focal. Moreover, with prime attention being paid to learners, and showing, again in Hyland's words (2003: 17) "greater respect for individual writers", feedback gains even further momentum among practitioners.

Originating in biology, the term feedback refers to "the message that comes back to an organism that has acted on its environment" (Rinvulcri, 1994: 287). To Richards et al. (1992), feedback entails "comments or information learners receive at the success of the learning task, either from

the teacher or other learners” (p.137). The goals of feedback, as Williams (2003) elaborates, are to teach skills that help students improve their writing proficiency to the point where they are cognizant of what is expected of them as writers and are able to produce it with minimal errors and maximum clarity (paragraph 1).

Paulus (1999) reported that the majority of revisions that students made on their own were surface-level whereas the changes resulting from peer and teacher feedback were more often meaning-level. He also found that writing multiple drafts resulted in overall essay improvement. In another study, Ashwell (2000) observed no significant difference between form and content feedback. Wondering how explicit feedback needs to be led Hyland and Hyland (2001) to study feedback in terms of its three functions of praise, criticism, and suggestion. They found that the function most used by the teachers was praise, but it was employed “to soften criticisms and suggestions rather than simply responding to good work” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001: 207).

Literature on written feedback portrays contrasting opinions as to its efficacy. There ARE studies that found written feedback to be effective. When they received feedback on the grammar of their writing, and the place but not type of errors was indicated, the students gained a better score in this regard in the subsequent drafts of their work (Fathman & Walley, 1990). Frodesen (2001) noted that indirect feedback was generally more useful than direct correction. Recently, Bartes (2003) explored the differences between written and oral peer feedback. To him, written peer responses create an intended audience for student writers, provide a context for negotiation of meaning, allow teachers to monitor the peer response process, give students material to review, and provide practice for future teachers. (Bartes, 2003:37)

On the other hand, there are studies that did not find written feedback to be efficient. In a case study investigating the impact of teacher written feedback on individual writers, Hyland (1998) concluded that a lot of miscommunication and misunderstanding originates from a lack of “open teacher-student dialog”. Interestingly enough, as early as 1990, Hillocks (cited in Leki, 1990) claimed “the enormous amount of time and energy poured into written commentary... is generally ineffective” (p. 67). Similarly reviewing dozens of studies, Oliver and Mackay (2003) reported that feedback gained through interactions in classroom leads to more interesting outcomes and has “a facilitative role”. Mackay et al. (2003), in yet another study on the potential impact of getting involved in such interactions, claimed that learner fluency was certainly promoted as a result of interacting with peers. Williams (2003) highlighted the significance of “conferences”, as he calls them, for the teacher and learners, saying that they help learners disambiguate themselves, and the teacher learn more about the sources of errors and miscommunication.

Leki (1990) reported that learners are of three types in terms of their reaction to teacher feedback. Some do not read the comments at all. A second group read but do not understand, and still others read and understand the comments but do not know how to actually respond to them.

This typology provides reasonable support for the researcher’s approach as to looking at the issue of feedback from student point of view. Oral feedback allows for more shared understanding between the teacher and learners. Upon receiving the feedback, as Wallace and Hayes (1992; discussed in Ken, 2004) noted, the student is left with the question “what should I do with these comments?” (p. 306). So, oral feedback as a social interaction allows immediate understanding on the part of the learner and the

identification of error source on the part of the teacher (Williams, 2003). As a matter of fact, for the students to better appreciate the feedback they must both grasp and agree with the comment in order to implement it in their revisions (Kim, 2004); this can sure be achieved in face to face interactions. The students' taking part in these talks clears their misunderstandings up, frees them from anxiety, and in the end leads to a positive attitude toward writing.

The interaction between the writer and his peers or the teacher prepares the students for future social interaction. Porto (2001), in this regard, mentioned that "cooperative writing response groups and self-evaluation led to consciousness raising about the writing process" (p. 43). She further noted that such tasks compensated for the lack of self-confidence in some students. Moreover, as a result of taking part in dialogs, students in Blain's study (2001) adopted a positive attitude with regard to mistakes. Likewise, as early as 1977, Moore (cited in Kim, 2004) reported that students preferred audio-taped to written feedback. Working with first-year college students, Kim (2004) was interested to find out how students perceived online spoken versus written response to writing. Contrary to prior studies that predicted students would consider "more information as better" (p.304), his students exhibited split preferences. The researcher concluded that the teacher played a role: "that individual persona emerges and figures prominently in the quality of teacher-student interaction" (p. 330). Apparently, the ground is fertile for studies delving into the nature of and the likely impact of oral feedback on writing performance and student attitude to writing. The following section will discuss the methodology of an action research with the objective of discovering student view on giving and receiving oral feedback. Verifying whether this practice effectively contributes to

improving the quality of writing, and if male and female students equally benefit from such feedback are other concerns of this study.

3. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of using dialog feedback in students' view?
2. Is there any improvement in student writing as a result of incorporating dialog feedback into writing classes?
3. Do male and female students equally benefit from such oral interactions?

4. Participants

Eight male and nine female second year undergraduate students of English taking their writing course with the researcher at Allameh Tabatabaai University in the spring semester of the academic year 1382-83 participated in this study.

5. Procedure

The class met two hours each week and students were invited to work in teams. The whole assignments were in a controlled fashion. A couple of sessions were spent on writing appropriate introductory paragraphs. Later, we moved to body and the significance of the details. A student would read the essay aloud. To provide a better focus, the thesis of the essay being read aloud was put on the board. This was the beginning of the discussion. Other students were then invited to offer their comments. Primarily the comments, if any, were of grammar type. So for the first two sessions the researcher decided to model in offering suggestions and comments concerning content and organization, as well. Towards the third session, the students seemed

quite familiar with the tools of providing comments and well maneuvered with those tools. It was not merely limited to grammar; intersentential and paragraph-level organization, coherence, and cohesion were also of concern. The comments included positive and negative remarks, questions and suggestions. The assumption, also shared by Blain (2001), was that most probably the students would automatically use the principles learned from the conferences to improve their own writing. It was also assumed that such integration of these learned principles from the conferences into their own writing would additionally bring about positive attitudes to writing as a whole. Blain (2001) pointed out that the transfer of knowledge in the conferences leads to learner autonomy. As for in-class assignments, the students worked in groups of 2 to 4. The researcher would walk around supervising what happened in groups and at times she would join a group as a member. There was discussion going on among group members. The study lasted for seven weeks, seven because the period, on the one hand, allowed sufficient time for the students to be exposed to the class activity of attending conferences and, on the other hand, limited the introduction of confounding maturational factors as one threat to the validity of the research. At the end of this period, the researcher asked the students to offer their opinions about the experience. They delivered their comments to the researcher in different forms: some handed in notes on paper, some sent theirs via email, and still some offered their views orally. Some gave comments in Persian, others in English. Some included their names, while the rest offered their notes anonymously.

6. Data Analysis

The first research question, concerning the impact of using dialog

feedback on student view, was an attempt to highlight the recurring themes. Below is a list of the views of the students, with the words in bold giving the exact voices.

- Some students favored oral feedback because

1. they got involved.

Simply getting a few lines about a paragraph does not give us the more complete and enjoyable tips which are obtained through a friendly oral discussion. It keeps us involved and active and I like it.

2. they never read written comments.

To be honest, when I get your view on my essay I never go to read them. I just fold the paper, I'm sorry to say that.

3. they became better judges.

Crystal clear that discussing a matter and comments about writing in class has advantages cause all students will listen and judge about it but in writing your comments only one students will get it.

4. a friendly, enjoyable atmosphere was created.

I feel relax in the class. I think I have something to say. If other students say I can say too.

5. the dialogs were interactive and communicative.

This model is interactive and communicative. I like it more than just writing. It keeps us involved and active and I like it.

6. they learned from peers.

Sometimes some students have brand new ideas that even you may not have thought about it.

7. what they learned was helpful in other classes.

I think according to this method I learnt to comment in other classes. I know now what I have to say when some one reads something. This has helped

me in other courses, thank you.

8. Because they just liked it.

I like the method in which we write paragraphs and discuss on it.

The good thing about this class is listening to different styles and different opinions on that.

I really enjoyed writing at home and have our passages discussed in class.

The best thing I liked about our class was listening to my classmates' paragraphs.

Anyway I did enjoy the discussion we did about the paragraph and I do appreciate the ones who want to know others' ideas.

• Other students argued against oral feedback, favoring written feedback, because they thought

1. just a limited group benefited from oral feedback.

Not everybody is fast enough and can speak articulately enough. Sometimes we know something but we cannot discuss it.

2. it was a writing course not a speaking or discussion class.

As the name of the lesson is essay writing, I think we should concern more with writing than oral discussion.

3. some students were not willing to share their ideas.

As you prefer to understand your mistakes privately.

4. written feedback allowed more time for thinking and concentration.

In your writing I can have time to deeply think and I think and change the wrong.

5. oral comments are threatening.

You are harshly judged in class.

6. students would not forget written comments.

In written form there is a lesser chance of the pointers being forgotten.

7. easier revision was possible via written feedback.

This way I know exactly where to fix and how to improve my paper.

8. students opted for teacher comment.

I need specially your comment about it.

It could help us find the right style of writing.

It is better if everyone's paper be checked by you so that all find their mistakes.

I prefer writing cause in this case we can learn how to write much better. I think you can't understand well we can't concentrate on what we are saying at the moment but for writing we have enough time to think and ... just this.

• Still for a third party, written and oral feedback were both necessary.

I think both methods are good. It is good to be discussed in class since we could understand our friends problem maybe it is our own problem so we would not repeat it again. On the other hand it is good for the one whose papers you are correcting to write the mistakes so that she will have the correct form.

Discussion: All in all, a general positive perspective was not reflected by the student observations as far as oral feedback is concerned, and preference was almost evenly divided. Students who strongly favored oral feedback listed a host of different reasons like being fully involved in discussions, enjoying the interactive aspect of conferences, and benefiting from the friendly atmosphere, to name but a few. Some students pointed to the immediacy of face-to-face feedback, believing that this feature gave dialogs a taste of intimate communication. Moreover, the fact that they learn from their peers and are part of a community of writers who are struggling to share their voices makes all students feel valued (Townsend & Danling, 1997). Westrich (1993) commented that working in groups and getting

feedback on their works “gave learners a sense that what they were doing was real; they began to talk and think as writers” (p. 158). This realistic aspect adds to the wealth of oral conferences. Some students confessed that they did not bother to read written comments at all; this is further support for Leki’s (1990) claim, mentioned above.

Proponents of written feedback have their own reasons. This mode is preferred for shy and less able students who find oral comments threatening. For some, the teacher is the main omnipotent character; they very much care for her, and find her comments invaluable. Easier revision makes written mode attractive to others. Some students are slow, but not necessarily less able, and need more time to offer comments and grasp those of others. So for them the ideal modality would be written words. Those who find oral comments really harsh and confidence- shattering prefer written comments. And finally for a minority, who liked a combined version, this dual modality added to the richness of the comments.

As regards the second question of this piece of research, a quantitative approach was taken. To discover whether any improvement was attained as a result of oral interactions, the researcher had to compare a sample of the writings of the students at the beginning of the study with their paragraph writing at the end of the seven-week period. It must be mentioned that these students had their paragraph writing course with the researcher the previous semester, fall semester of the school year 1382-1383. The paragraph writing course aims at making students familiar with and giving them enough practice in paragraph organization and the different types involved. In the essay writing course, the students move away from the paragraph and onto the structure of essays. As the two courses are very similar in nature, so the scores of the students on the final exam of paragraph writing were

considered as indices of their writing ability prior to the present study. Similarly, their scores on the midterm exam of the essay writing course could designate their writing ability after they had attended classes with oral feedbacks from their peers and the teacher. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the two sets of scores.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the two sets of scores

	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Paragraph writing	17	83.529	7.005
Essay writing	17	72.471	13.848

The study predicted that mean score for essay writing would be higher than paragraph writing; however, the findings did not support this expectation. In fact, the mean for the paragraph writing, 83.529 far exceeds that of essay writing, 72.471. To see whether this difference was statistically significant, a matched t-test was run. The results of the t-test ($t_{(16)} = 3.204$, $p < .05$) allowed the researcher to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the use of oral feedback resulted in a difference. In fact the assumption was that as a result of receiving verbal feedback, the quality of the learners' writing would improve compared to when there was no such feedback. However, it seems no improvement was gained. It was somehow surprising to find that the students performed better in paragraph writing. In seeking for an explanation, the researcher decided to interview a couple of students. They mentioned an interesting point; they really enjoyed their first course in writing because they had so much of grammar instruction that the course was pleasant to them. Yet the rules and principles of the essay writing course bored them. Although the hypothesis of the study was not supported by the

findings, a fruitful outcome could be the point that teaching/learning is not really so straightforward. So many unpredictable elements are at work, like the one for this study.

To determine whether there was any difference between male and female students, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. The results render further support for the previous findings. A look at Table 2 indicates that the males outperformed the females in paragraph writing course. That is to say, the former had a mean of 88.281 while that of the latter was 79.306. And as for their essay scores, the females had a better performance, 73.333, compared to 71.500 of the males.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the two groups across gender

	Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Paragraph writing	Male	8	88.281	4.626
	Female	9	79.306	6.063
Essay writing	Male	8	71.500	18.815
	Female	9	73.333	8.485

Table 3 displays the ANOVA results. The effect of writing is significant, ($F_{(1,15)}=11.98, p<.05$), which is in line with the findings for question 1. Yet as regards gender, the effect is not significant, ($F_{(1,15)}=.762, p>.05$). In other words, genderwise no difference existed between the learners. The interaction between the two groups was not meaningful, either ($F_{(1,15)}=.121, p>.05$).

Table 3: Repeated- Measures ANOVA results for the effect of gender on two groups

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Writing	1096.349	1	1096.349	11.982	.003
Gender	108.028	1	108.028	.762	.396
Error (gender)	2125.409	15	141.694	2125.409	
Writing * gender	247.415	1	247.415	2.704	.121
Error (writing)	1372.493	15	91.500		

Figure 1 graphically shows the difference in performance between male and female learners on the one hand and their writing index in the two tests of paragraph writing and essay writing on the other.

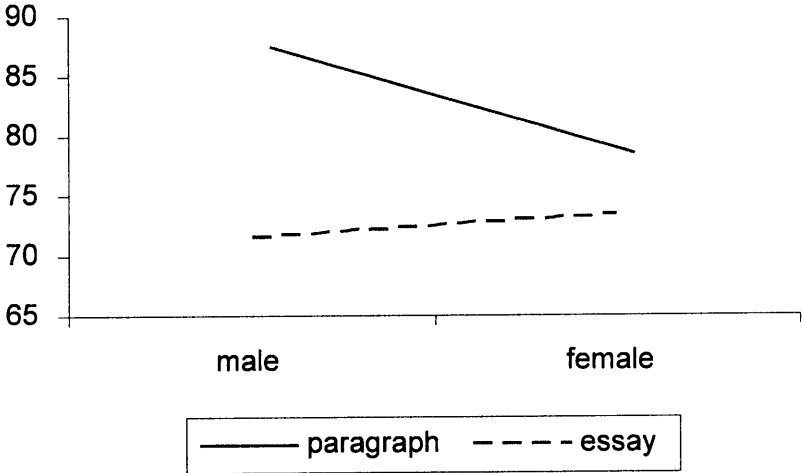


Figure 1. The graphic representation of male and female performance in two test conditions

The male students dropped from 88.281 to 71.500, and the female students fell from 79.306 to 73.333.

What is common in both groups is the experience of decrease, though it was more considerable in the males than in the females.

7. Conclusion

What do all these mean? As reflected by some of the students, the approach proposed here, i.e., using oral feedback, DOES promote social interaction in class. This interaction enables students to discuss and take in the subject being taught. Past research in the field of verbal peer feedback suggests that learners integrate certain comments by peers in the form of revision (Blain, 2001; Mackay et al., 2003; Oliver & Mackay, 2003).

No doubt, written comments are difficult for the students to interpret. This confusion often leads to embarrassment. They cannot, therefore, fully benefit from the feedback they receive. This is especially true with weaker students. Leki (1990) mentioned that weak writers are weak readers as well. So the dialog between the students and the teacher can eradicate this weakness. As the dialogs proceed, students would find the answers to their questions and teachers could identify sources of errors and assist their students. Williams (2003, paragraph 13) describes the conferences as "an excellent time for teachers and students to direct questions to each other and uncover any misunderstandings by either party". Clearly, this method enjoys some other advantages. Skills integration is one such merit. Verbal comments serve to reinforce the understanding of the students. The fact that students take risks and take part in such dialogs leads to learner autonomy and independence, a feature praised in any teaching/ learning context. Of particular significance in this study is the conflict observed in the findings.

Seemingly, though the students favored oral feedback, the quantitative data is not supportive. One factor at work here could be the motivation of the students. Probably if students were sitting for the final exam, their performance would be better since they attach great significance to final exams. Scorer bias could also play a role; thus, including a number of scorers would certainly yield more dependable outcomes. If students are trained to work within this pattern, they surely can better appreciate the whole sessions. It seems reasonable to speculate that the observed outcome arose from the fact that the students were not that experienced in receiving and offering such feedback. It is insufficient to leave students by themselves, denying them the opportunity for developing the skills they need for success. Training sessions might then help.

With this small sample, not much can be said, or generalized; it just shed some light on the issue of feedback. Including a control group, to compare against this group, would be more revealing. The fact that students were encouraged to take risks and act as critical readers and writers was an outcome of this research. This critical ability allows them to learn from their own mistakes and those of other students. Yet several questions remain to be answered.

With the advent of post process approaches (Hyland, 2003), we must expect changes in the direction of studies to come. What, if any, would be the role of feedback in the new research trends?

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