

# THE IMPACT OF WRITTEN PEER CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON PRE-INTERMEDIATE IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' WRITING PERFORMANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*The state of effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) on learners' command of a second language writing has always been a heated debate. Although many scholars harbored deep-seated doubts regarding the usefulness of WCF in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Truscott, 1996), it was settled from mid 1990s onward that written corrective feedback, as a whole concept, cast positive influence on learners' performance (Ferris, 2004). Yet what type of feedback, what level of feedback, and whose feedback might have the largest degree of influence on L2 learners' writing are yet to be determined. As an attempt in this regard, this quasi-experimental study was designed to investigate the impact of providing written corrective feedback by peers on writing performance. The researchers homogenized 46 pre-intermediate learners in a private English institute in Tehran, Iran, and assigned them into two groups of 23: the peer feedback group, which were required to provide peer feedback, and the teacher feedback group, which received teacher feedback. In a 20-session course, participants handed in 16 paragraphs, and the feedbacks were given based on a checklist designed by the researchers. The t-test analysis of the post-test results revealed a meaningful statistical difference between the two groups, and the comparison of means reported a higher rate of performance improvement on peer-feedback group.*

**KEYWORDS:** Corrective feedback, Peer feedback, Performance, Writing performance

## INTRODUCTION

Developing a coherent and cohesive piece of writing that communicates effectively is probably the most demanding task to perform in a second/foreign language (Nunan, 1999). In fact, the difficulty of producing high-quality writing is up to a degree that even the majority of educated individuals do not master the skills of writing in their native language (Celce-Murcia, 2001). This difficulty is out there due to the fact that writing is a complicated and multifaceted skill, and it involves much more than just the language (Tsai & Lin, 2012). Thinking, reflecting, generating ideas, selection of ideas, arrangement of ideas, adhering of ideas, paraphrasing and summarizing

ideas, grammar, structures, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, and many other qualifications should collaborate effectively for a piece of writing to come to existence (Zamel, 1983).

Besides various techniques that have been devised and implemented throughout years in order to develop the skills of writing in L2 learners, the area of assessment has come to the light in the recent years as a technique that could assist learners in developing writing. In a modern perspective on assessment, Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling (2000) remarked that assessment tends to be shaping each and every part of the student learning experience, and part of this experience is the learning that is derived from the heart of the assessment. Better put, in the light of alternative means of assessment that has received a lot of attention these days, assessment is looked at as a medium that could be engineered to lead to effective learning (Taras, 2002). Most certainly, writing is not an exception to this trend, and writing assessment could always be driven to play a part as a learning vehicle.

One of the assessment types which could prove useful in the field of writing assessment for the purpose of learning is *reflection* which “is and has been a key concept dealt with by many philosophers from the Enlightenment to modern times, where a fast changing world forces people to make decisions without tradition for support” (Dyke, 2006, p. 105). In fact, taking a reflective approach to learning is believed to help people respond and cope better in different life situations (ibid). Hence, reflection is an absolutely helpful tool which could be used in the assessment of writing, not just to simply think over a passage, but also to reflect on it by comparing it with one's own writing.

## RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Assuming that reflecting on one's peer's writing, trying to pinpoint its flaws, and comparing it to one's own writing, the following research question was formulated:

Does providing written corrective feedback on peers' writing have any impact on pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing performance?

And based on this research question, we came up with the following research hypothesis:

Providing written corrective feedback on peers' writing does not have any statistically significant impact on pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

## METHODOLOGY

In this section, the design, the demographic features and the selection method of the population, the instruments, and the procedure of the treatment administration would be discussed.

### ***Design***

This study had a quasi-experimental design with two peer feedback groups and no teacher feedback groups. The results of the treatment were compared via a pre- and post-test design, as well. There were two variables in this study: provision of corrective feedback served as the independent variable of this study, whereas the writing skill proficiency shaped up the dependent variable.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study were a group of 46 Iranian learners of English. They were all students of pre-intermediate level at Tehran Oxford Language Center. Initially, 54 pre-intermediate students were selected through convenience sampling, but after the administration of the (Key English Test) KET test, 8 participants were found to have extreme scores that did not fall within one standard deviation from the mean, and were hence left out of the population. The remaining 46 students were divided into two peer feedback groups (teacher feedback, and peer feedback) on a random basis, and the inter-homogeneity between the two groups were checked by two *t-tests* (one for the general English proficiency, and the other for writing proficiency).

All the participants were adults (above 18), and their age ranged from 19 to 39. Out of 46 participants, 29 were female and 17 were male, and they all spoke Persian as their native language. Three of the participants had high school diploma, 22 were bachelor's students, 11 were bachelor's holder, and the other 10 were either post-graduate candidates or graduates of different academic major. The participants came from various socio-economic status and personality.

### ***Instrumentation***

The instrument used in this study was a version of the KET test to homogenize the participants in terms of general English proficiency. This test is a basic level internationally recognized standard English test which is designed and administered by University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate. The test involves three papers. The first paper covers the reading and writing questions, which constituted 50 % of the test scores. Paper two and three contain listening and speaking questions, respectively; and each constitute 25 % percent of the total test score. The whole test takes 1 hour and 50 minutes, and it equals A1 grade based on the classifications of language proficiency by Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Next, the writing section of the KET was applied as the pre-test and the post-test.

### ***Procedure***

After the selection of 54 pre-intermediate learners, the researchers homogenized them via a KET test, and the elimination of the learners whose scores did not fall within one standard deviation from the mean. Next, we divided the participants into two peer feedback groups on a random basis, and checked the inter-homogeneity of the groups in terms of general English proficiency and writing proficiency with two *t-tests*. It should not be left unmentioned that since KET already had a writing section, we used the KET writing scores of the participants as their pre-test scores.

After homogenization, both groups took their regular pre-intermediate course-book based class at the institute, which upon the request of the researchers were taught by the same teacher and via the same lesson plan. In the course of this 20 90-minute sessions, learners of both groups were assigned 16 paragraphs to write on the same topic, which were all collected and scores. In the teacher feedback group, one of the researchers did the corrections, but in the peer feedback groups, the students exchanged papers, and provided feedback on their peers' writing.

This reviewing was done on a blind basis, and learners had no idea whose paper they corrected. It should be added that the researcher altered the peers on a random basis so that learners experience different version of feedback provided by different peers. Also, it should be added that the researcher briefed the learners of the peer feedback group regarding the styles of feedback provision, items that they had to consider, and the procedures they had to go through to analyze their peers' writing. After the end of the regular semester of the institute, the same KET writing section was administered to the learners of the two groups as the post-test, and the results were statistically analyzed, as discussed below.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, attempts were made to homogenize the population both in terms of general English proficiency and in terms of writing skill. After administering a Cambridge KET test to the initial 54 conveniently selected participants, the scores were descriptively analyzed, as the data in Table 1 depict.

*Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of KET Test*

	N	M	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Homogenizing KET	54	54.57	6.33	40.09	.96	.32	1.21	.63

The table depicts the scale 1.21 for Kurtosis and 0.96 of Skewness, and this proved that the KET results had been distributed normally, as the Skewness and Kurtosis within  $\pm 1.95$  is normal. Other descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation were calculated, and found to be 54.57 and 6.33, respectively. Hence, all the participants with scores within 46 and 61 were deemed homogeneous in general English. Hence, 8 participants were left out of the study due to having extremely low or high scores. Then, when the researcher randomly assigned the population members into the two peer feedback groups, she decided to check the inter-group homogeneity, as well. To do this, two *t-tests* were administered. The results of the first *t-test* on the KET results of the two groups are laid out in Table 2.

Table 2: T-test on KET Results

		Test Value = 54					
		T	df	Sig. tailed)	(2- Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
KET Teacher Group	Results Feedback	-.36	22	.72	-.34	-2.34	1.64
KET Results Peer Feedback Group		.40	22	.68	.34	-1.42	2.12

As Table 2 reveals, the  $p$  value for  $t$  (22) was 0.72 and 0.68, while the mean difference was -0.34 and 0.34 at the confidence interval of 0.95. Hence, both  $p$  values were larger than 0.5, and the mean difference was almost small, proving that there were no meaningful difference between the general English proficiency of the groups.

In the next step, we utilized the scores of the writing section of the KET test as the pre-test. As Table 3 shows, the average pre-test scores of writing were 14.04, and the distribution was normal (Skewness = - .031; Kurtosis = - 1.10).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Writing Pre-Test

	N	M	SD	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Writing Pre-test	46	14.04	3.80	14.44	-.31	-1.10
					Std. Error	Std. Error
					.35	.68

Since the focus of the treatment in this study was on the writing skills, another t-test was administered on the pre-test writing results of the population to check the inter-group homogeneity of the groups in terms of writing proficiency. The results of this test are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: T-test on Pre-Test Writing Results

		Test Value = 14					
		t	df	Sig. tailed)	(2- Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
Writing Teacher Group	Pre-test Feedback	-.720	22	.479	-.522	-2.02	.98
Writing Pre-test Peer Feedback Group		.712	22	.484	.609	-1.16	2.38

As the table clearly demonstrates, the  $p$  value for  $t$  (22) was 0.47 and 0.48, while the mean difference was -0.52 and 0.60 at the confidence interval of 0.95. Hence, both  $p$  values were larger than 0.5, and the mean difference was almost small, proving that there were no meaningful difference between the writing proficiency of the groups.

Thereafter, the researcher made sure of the homogeneity of the population in terms of proficiency in general English and writing proficiency, as well as the homogeneity within the two groups on both these criteria. After these analyses, the research began administering the treatment, and administered the same KET writing test as the post-test at the end of the treatment period. The descriptive statistics of the post-test results are laid out in Table 5.

*Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Post-test Writing*

	N	M	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Writing Post-test	46	15.17	3.129	9.791	.050	.350	-.254	.688

As Table 5 depicts, Skewness and Kurtosis were reported to be 0.50 and  $-0.25$ , respectively, which fell within  $\pm 1.95$ , and hence certified that post-test scores had been normally distributed. The mean of the whole population in the post-test was 15.17 which, compared to the pre-test mean of 14.04, demonstrated 1.09 scores improvement. It could hereby be concluded that the process of handing in 16 paragraphs and receiving corrective feedbacks on them led to the overall improvement in the writing proficiency among the whole population.

Taking another look at the post-test results, this time at the two peer feedback groups separately, Table 6 provides the scales of descriptive statistics. The mean for the peer feedback group in the post-test was 14.7, while the members of the peer feedback group achieved a mean of 15.65. Although both means depicted improvement compared to the initial mean of 14.04, the peer feedback group staged a 0.95 score better performance in post-test writing compared to the teacher feedback group. Hence, it could be concluded that based on the data analysis of this study, provision of corrective writing feedback by teacher proved to be less effective than by peers, and peer feedback could result in a higher degree of development in the writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

*Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Post-test Writing*

	N	M	SD	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Writing Post-test Teacher Feedback Group	23	14.70	2.86	8.22	-.76	.48	-.052	.93
Writing Post-test Peer Feedback Group	23	15.65	3.36	11.32	.43	.48	-.94	.93

Finally, in order to be able to respond to the research question, the researcher had to administer a T-test between the post-test results of the two groups to determine the existence of a meaningful statistical relationship between them. The results of this T-test have been displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: T-test on Post-test Writing Results

		Test Value = 14			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Writing Post-testTeacher Feedback Group		2.16	22	.041	1.29	.06 2.54
Writing Post-testPeer Feedback Group		3.20	22	.004	2.25	.80 3.71

As Table 7 illustrates, the  $p$  values for the  $t$  at the degree of freedom of 22 were 0.041 and 0.004, and on the other hand the mean differences were 1.29 and 2.25, which had less than 1 difference in the means. Therefore, since the  $p$  values were both smaller than 0.05, and there was a 0.95 difference between the means, the  $t$ -test reported a meaningful statistical difference between the two groups. Hence, the null hypothesis of this study was rejected, and the statistical analysis through  $t$ -test depicted providing written corrective feedback on peers' writing does have a statistically meaningful impact on pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing performance.

### Discussion

The first finding of this study, which rose from comparing the pre-test mean and post-test mean was that overall writing proficiency of the whole population was improved as a result of the treatment via which learners received corrective feedback on 16 paragraphs they produced. This finding draws a rejection on the remarks of Truscott (1996) as to provision of corrective feedback on learners' writings was not only ineffective, but also harmful, and it had to be avoided. The data analysis of this study more than clearly reported noticeable improvement in writing quality, even not after a long period, but after only 16 corrective feedbacks. This suggests that not just Truscott's (1996) work, but many studies conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Semke, 1984; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed 1986; Kepner, 1991) which disapproved of written feedback on learners' writing and called in inadequate practice do not correspond to today's learners any longer. It would be safe to conclude here that Iranian EFL learners in the second decade of the twenty first century benefit from written corrective feedback.

The second finding of this study was that post-test mean comparison showed written corrective feedback on pre-intermediate learners' writing by their peers led to higher degree of improvement in the peer feedback group in comparison with the written corrective feedback provided by their teacher in the teacher feedback group. Another proof for this finding was that  $t$ -test rejected the null hypothesis and depicted providing written corrective feedback on peers' writing does have a statistically meaningful impact on pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing performance. Several reasons for the higher efficiency of peer-feedback compared to teacher feedback could be proposed. First, as Tsai and Lin (2012) remarked, when given a chance to work through peer feedback, learners indeed play two parts in the writing tasks: The part of a correction provider, and the part of a correction receiver. Thus, learners are not just passive feedback receivers as in the teacher feedback mode, but they are active and dynamic role players. The fact that they give and take feedback simultaneously increases their noticing to the errors and mistakes in their

writing while they are doing the final revisions in their fair copy. When they get a chance to correct their peers' writings, they notice all aspect of the language used by their peers to be able to make judgments and provide feedback on it (Cho, Schunn, & Kwon, 2007). So when they develop their own writing for the next task, they try to revise it before handing it to their peers, and in the course of this revision, they attempt to consider all the aspect of language as well, and produce a piece of writing that does not have the errors they had already pinpointed in their peers'. This makes them more accurate writers.

Another reason that could be touched on is the increased motivation. Learners are constantly competing with their peers. So when they get to know that their peers are going to give them feedback, they try to write more accurately and more grammatically to narrow down the chances for their peers to find errors in their writings. It should be added that the peer feedback is a novel technique to many Iranian learners, and this novelty is another reason to attract them to the task and increase their motivation.

Moreover, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) argued that seeking errors in peers' writing and being asked to write at the same phase increases learners' perception of writing and gives them a clearer picture of what the nature of writing is. The findings of this study seem to be corresponding with Mendonca and Johnson (1994)'s ideas as well.

## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Since this study discovered that corrective written feedback provided by peers was more effective in boosting writing proficiency of Iranian learners compared to the feedback provided by teachers, the following pedagogical implications could possibly be considered for the findings of this study.

- This study proved that probably the traditional *student writes teacher corrects* practice which is common in Iranian education system is not the only proper and useful practice. Rather, there are more practical techniques which might lead to better results. Hence, teachers should try to delegate more duties to their learners in language classes, and apply peer feedback techniques while working on writing skill.
- Institute policy makers and authorities of the Education Department should be encouraged to incorporate peer feedback in the general policies, teaching codes, and institutional strategies of their organizations, and try to establish peer written feedback as a norm or convention.
- Teacher trainers should take the results of this finding and other similar studies on written corrective feedback by peers to their teacher training classes, familiarize teacher students with the principles of peer feedback on writing, and encourage newly-appointed teachers to utilize this technique from the very beginning of their teaching life.
- Forums and programs should be devised in which English learners could meet with their peers, choose topics, write papers on them, exchange them, and give each other written

corrective feedbacks. This would make them both motivated and autonomous. Besides, if they get a chance to orally negotiate with their peers about the errors they have found in each other's writing papers, they would learn from their mistakes in a far deeper level. Nowadays, thanks to the Internet and virtual world, establishing such forums is not a high-flying and dreamy idea.

### ***Ideas for Further Research***

Research is a cycle, and although the findings of any research could enlighten a dark point in the world of science, they are potential to give rise to new questions and new ideas for further investigation. Here, we would like to share some of the ideas raised as recommended topics for follow-up studies to the present research.

- This study only focused on pre-intermediate learners of English. It would be helpful to consider learners of other levels of proficiency in other studies, and compare the results with the findings of this research.
- Designing a qualitative study to measure the attitudes of learners to both providing the feedback on their peers and receiving feedback from their peers via questionnaires, journals, or interviews could give us a more accurate and vivid picture of their mentality regarding peer feedback.
- This study merely focused on feedback provision on writing. It would be a good idea to plan another study on speaking, and investigate the impact of peer feedback provision on speaking, as well.
- As a delimitation, and in order to make the data collection and analysis more manageable, the researcher decided to disregard other personal variables such as age, sex, socio-economic status, career, education, and personality variables. Other studies could be planned that narrow down the population to participants with specific personal variables and compare the results of peer feedback among learners with different parameters.

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