An investigation of meta-linguistic corrective feedback in writing performance

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Abstract

Debate about the value of providing corrective feedback on L2 writing has been prominent in recent years. According to Chandler (2003) meta-linguistic corrective feedback operates as the provision of the correct form in the student’s written texts by underlining the error and writing the target form above it and directing the written corrections at errors in a specific structure. By comparing traditional direct error feedback with meta-linguistic corrective feedback the present study attempts to find out, whether experimental group will be more accurate than the control group or not. After conducting the experiment and analyzing the results through t-test, it was revealed that the experimental group subjects who were assessed and instructed through implementing meta-linguistic code-correction outperformed the traditionally-instructed control group in their post test.

Keywords: Meta-linguistic corrective, Feedback, Error, Paragraph Writing

1. Introduction

The question of whether teachers should provide feedback in the writing assignments of English as second/foreign language students (ESL/EFL), and if so how, has been a matter of considerable debate in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). A range of studies have investigated whether certain types of written corrective feedback or combination of different types are more effective than others. These studies have most often categorized feedback, as either direct, (explicit) or indirect, (implicit). Direct corrective feedback can be defined as the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure by the teacher to the student above the linguistic error (Ferris 2002). It may include the crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, or the provision of the correct form or structure. Additional forms of direct feedback may include written meta-linguistic explanation (the provision of grammar rules and the examples at the end of the student’s script with a reference back to places in the text where the error has occurred) and spoken meta-linguistic explanation (eg, a mini-lesson where rules and examples are presented, practiced and discussed; conferences between teacher and small groups of students). On the other hand, indirect corrective feedback is that, which indicate errors in some ways: underlining or circling the error, recording in the margin the number of errors in given line, or using code to show where the error has occurred and what type of error it is. Rather than the teacher...
providing an explicit correction, students are left to resolve and correct the problem that has been drawn to their attention. Those who suggest that indirect feedback is more effective than direct feedback argue that it requires students to engage in guided learning and problem solving and as a result promotes the type of reflection, noticing and attention that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition (Ferias and Roberts, 2001). In general, error identification may be worthwhile and meaningful, as it is a useful starting point for discussing errors with students (Raimes, 1991).

1.2 Research Questions: In accordance with what was already mentioned, the article seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does meta-linguistic error feedback have any effect on the improvement of paragraph writing ability of Iranian EFL intermediate students?

2. What kind of error feedback is more useful, traditional error feedback or meta-linguistic error feedback?

1.3 Research Hypotheses: In order to be in the safe side, and also reach logical answers to the aforementioned research questions, the following null hypothesizes are formulated:

H0: 1. Written meta-linguistic corrective feedback has no effect on the improvement of paragraph writing ability among Iranian EFL students.

H0: 2. There is no significant difference between traditional and meta-linguistic corrective feedback.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants: The study was conducted in the department of English Language in an Iranian university, where all courses are taught in English. To obtain the population required for the experiment, a large number of students were chosen (two classes and 91 students) and a Nelson proficiency test was administered. From among those who took the test, two groups (experimental and control) were selected. As it is conventional, the scores of the students were ranked, and from among all the scores 60 students were elicited. It means that the highest and lowest scores did not participate in this research and the researcher tried to choose the most homogeneous students of the class. The classes were taught by two instructors of paragraph writing.

2.2 Materials: The materials used in this study comprised a) Nelson test that intended to elicit 60 homogeneous intermediate students out of 91, b) Since the research revolves around writing, a writing test was necessary to be used as a pretest, and after training sessions, as a post test. For this part writing test from Interchange/Passages Placement and Evaluation Package test by Tay Lesely with Christa Hanson and Jean Zokowski/Faust (Cambridge University Press, Third Edition 2005) has been chosen. In order to increase the reliability of the Pre and Post test the researcher used three instructors to make sure that the rating was consistent. Then inter-rater reliability was calculated. Both instructors used one book and one kind of material during the research period, c) "Paragraph Development" (Martin L.Arnaudet, Mary Ellen Barrett, 1990) is the book was used for this research.

2.3 Procedure: the Nelson test was first administered and 60 homogeneous students were elicited and divided into two groups of experimental and control group. In both groups basic components of paragraph writing from the book “Writing Development” (Martin L.Arnaudet, Mary Ellen Barrett, 1990) were taught. Then they were given a topic from the book and were required to write a paragraph in 30 minutes. Students were free to use dictionaries. In the control group, the students’ paragraphs were corrected by the instructor through conventional method of error correction with underlining the error and writing the correct form for students. But in the experimental group, the instructor used code correction. There was a table of codes available for each student. At the first session of the class all the students were asked to buy the book "English Grammar in Use" (Raymond Myrphy, 2001). Whenever the instructor found one noticeable error in students’ writings, he indirectly used some specific codes for the error, and
students had to go for the error and correct it on their own; most of the errors were grammatical errors; thus, English Grammar in Use was a good source for intermediate students to find the correct form of their errors. Finally, after ten sessions of treatment the writing ability post-test was administered to check the participants’ progress in paragraph writing through indirect error correction. The participants’ scores on the pre-test and posttest were then compared to find the degree of improvement of each group. The analysis and comparison of the test results are presented in following sections.

3. Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the results from the analysis of the obtained data. A descriptive statistics for quantitative variables was represented to investigate the resulting data on minimum and maximum scores, sum, mean, standard deviation, and variance of the scores and mean performances in the pretest and posttest both in the control and the experimental groups. As it can be observed, the mean performance of control and experimental groups in the pretest is nearly the same but they are different in the posttest.

3.1 Pretest

A paragraph writing pretest was administered to both control and experimental groups and the paragraphs were rated by three raters. In order to make sure the raters have been consistent in their ratings, the inter-rater reliability was first calculated before comparing the two means obtained from the pretest through t-test and checking whether the two groups have also been homogeneous regarding their paragraph writing ability or not. The consistency of the ratings was tested in two ways, both with the pretest and posttest results: first, the scores given by the raters were compared and represented visually in the form of histograms and then, the mean of the scores given by each rater were compared and represented in the form of tables.

3.1.1 Comparison of the Mean Performance of the groups in Pretest

After making sure of the inter-rater reliability of the raters, the mean score of the group were compared through t-test in order to see whether the two groups are also homogeneous regarding their paragraph writing ability or not. But before implementing the t-test, it was required to check if the p-variance of scores in the two groups was the same or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 vs. group 2</th>
<th>T – test for independent samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. dev Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest-experimental vs. pretest-control</td>
<td>4.614653</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows P-value is 0.915502 and it is more than α = 0.05. It shows there is no significant difference between the variance of the scores in two groups.

Table 2: T-test for mean performances of the two groups in pre-test
According to table 2 the mean performance of both control and experimental group has been compared through implementing t-test. The result show p-value equals 0.875831 which is more than a = 0.5 and it shows there is no statistically significant difference between mean performances of the two group in pretest and it can be concluded that there has been no significant difference in writing performance of the two group and they have been homogeneous in this regard.

3.2 Post-tests
A paragraph writing test was also administered to both control and experimental group after ten sessions of treatment and the paragraphs were rated by the same three raters. In order to make sure the raters have been consistent in their ratings, the inter-rater reliability was also calculated for the scores given by the raters in posttest before comparing the two means obtained from the post test through t-test and checking which of the two group have progressed more in their paragraph writing ability.

3.2.1 Comparison of the mean performance of the groups in post-test
After making sure of the inter-rater reliability of the raters, the mean score of the groups were compared through t-test in order to see which of the two groups has made more progress in writing skill. But before implementing the t-test, it required to check if P-variance of the scores in the two groups was the same or not.

Table 3: Fisher tests for the equality of variance in the mean performances of the two groups in post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 vs. group 2</th>
<th>T – test for independent samples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Std.dev Group 1</td>
<td>Std.dev Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-ratio Variances</td>
<td>P variances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest-experimental vs. posttest-control</td>
<td>4.383136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the P-value is 0.836368 which is more than a = 0.05, and it shows there is no significant difference between the variances of two sets of scores.

Table 4: t-test for mean performance of the two groups in post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 vs. group 2</th>
<th>T – test for independent samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Group 1</td>
<td>Mean Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value</td>
<td>df</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest-experimental vs. posttest-control</td>
<td>28.25333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 4 the result of comparing the mean performance of two groups in posttest has been reported and it shows the P-value of 0.000125, which is less than a = 0.05. This shows the mean performance of the two sets of scores in post test are significantly different and the meta-linguistic error correction group has out-performed the traditional-based writing group. The null hypothesis in this study is rejected. And it can be concluded that implementing meta-linguistic error feedback can have a significant effect on the paragraph writing ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.
4. Discussion and Conclusions

With regard to the analysis of the data in the previous section and the results thereof, the following significant conclusions can be drawn and discussed:

- Teaching the structure of paragraph writing tasks through meta-linguistic feedback can enable the learners to make use of writing tasks more actively and efficiently.
- Meta-linguistic code-correction let the learners to revise their first draft several times and work on the quality of their paragraph and therefore get more sensitive and pay more attention to the mistakes and errors they made and make progress faster and more effectively than usual.
- When learners know they are going to be assessed based on their writing corrective feedback based on code-correction, they will be more motivated in learning and feel more responsible for their learning.

The above conclusions for the two groups in the study confirm the major claim of this research that implementing meta-linguistic error feedback in Iranian EFL courses is quite successful for improving learners’ writing ability. As this study showed, corrective feedback can be a means of assessing students’ accuracy and helping them to be aware of the errors and more importantly, to make fewer errors in writing. Meta-linguistic error feedback helped learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor themselves. The students learned to be responsible for their own errors and become more independent learners.

References


