

The Effect of Written Feedback on Iranian Intermediate Learners' Knowledge of Passive Sentences

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Abstract.

The current study was done to see the effectiveness of applying written feedback on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of passive sentences. To see if any change has occurred for both groups between their pretest and posttest separately, two paired-sample *T-test* were calculated. The results of the paired-sample *t-test* calculation showed that the EG group benefitted from written feedback. Finally, in order to compare the performance of experimental and control groups in the post-test, first their gain scores were calculated, then the gain scores of experimental as well as control groups were compared using an *Independent T-Test*. The average of the scores in the Experimental group was meaningfully higher than the control group ($p < 0.00$). Thus the outcome of this study is that applying written feedback has positive effect on Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' knowledge of passive sentences.

Keywords: written feedback, writing ability, EFL learners, passive sentences

1. Introduction.

Writing in a foreign language is one of the most challenging and complex tasks for language learners. It is a difficult skill that requires considerable effort and practice on the learners' part to reach an acceptable level of writing. Due to the complexity of this skill, many students find it very difficult to master all the mechanics of writing and to produce an adequate piece of writing; therefore they do not produce acceptable compositions. What makes writing a very troublesome task for EFL learners is the fact that it requires some criteria of acceptability relative to different aspects of writing which include content, organization, vocabulary, language use, spelling, punctuation and accurate capitalization and paragraphing (Hamadouche, 2010).

To written feedback (WF) – which is the focus of this study – Truscott (1996) paid special attention. He pointed to the fact that there was no sufficient research in favour of grammar correction. He also claimed that grammar correction is neither helpful nor effective, and worse it is harmful. This claim led to a controversy among the specialists in the field – which in turn yielded a growing body of research.

A number of studies examined the research results for or against grammar correction and concluded that earlier research findings failed to provide clear evidence whether WF helps learners improve linguistic accuracy (Ferris, 1999; Geunette, 2007). Many researchers have done studies to clear the issue; however, the experts in the field are still unable to reach a conclusion. As extensive reviews of the available empirical research show (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006) the findings about the efficacy of WF are mixed and thus inconclusive.

Most of the studies on WF make a distinction between two kinds of feedback, namely direct CF and indirect CF (Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Hendrickson, 1978, 1980; Lalande, 1982). In the case of direct CF the students are provided with the correct form (Ellis, 2009) the teachers cross out an unnecessary word, insert a missing word, and write the correct form. This type of feedback is desirable for low-level-of-proficiency students who are unable to self-correct, and cannot provide the correct form. However, the learners perform the least processing and thus it does not contribute to long-term learning (Ellis, 2009). However, Sheen (2007) indicates that direct CF can be beneficial for learning only some specific grammatical features.

Indirect feedback occurs when the students are informed in some way that an error exists but are not provided with the correct form, thus placing the burden of spotting the erroneous forms on students. The experts in the field argue that indirect feedback is superior for most students, because it involves them in "guided learning and problem solving" (Lalande, 1982), focusing their attention to linguistic forms that may lead to long-term learning (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Reid, 1998). However, the findings of different studies which have focused on the difference between direct and indirect CF are very mixed. Some studies (Ferris & Helt, 2000;

Lalande, 1982) claim that indirect feedback enables students to correct their errors, however, some suggest the opposite (Chandler, 2003), and others (Robb, et al., 1986; Frantzen, 1995) found no difference. In this study the researcher tries to find the impact of WF on Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of passive sentences.

2. Review of Literature.

The terms 'writing' and 'accuracy' have been variably defined. Raimes (2002) believes that writing is a chaotic and messy process as well as a generative idea. Leki (2002) states that writing is a text-composing and social construction process. And Chandler (2003) maintains that the increase of accuracy is when learners have learnt to avoid their many errors.

There are three arguments in favour of direct modes of feedback (Chandler, 2003). First, it has been stressed that direct feedback is more helpful to learners because of the reduction of misunderstanding and confusion. Second, learners are provided with more information for resolving the complex errors. And third, immediate feedback is provided to learners based on their hypotheses. However, Ellis (2009) stresses a disadvantage of direct corrective feedback, saying that "it requires minimal processing on the part of the learner and thus, although it might help them to produce the correct form when they revise their writing, it may not contribute to long- term learning".

Another distinction is made between coded and uncoded feedback in the relevant literature. Coded feedback is one that specifies the exact location of an error and indicates the type of error with a code. Uncoded feedback, on the other hand, refers to instances when the teacher underlines or circles an error, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron., 2005).

Glover and Brown (2006) examined the perceptions of teachers and students towards written corrective feedback. The teachers complained that although written corrective feedback was adequately provided, there was no engagement on the part the students. On the other hand, students reported that they did pay attention to the feedback but did not act upon it.

Rahimi (2009) investigated the effect of written corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy over time. The study consisted of two groups: one that received indirect feedback and a control group which received general comments and no written corrective feedback. Both groups wrote four essays during a semester. The errors of the experimental group were underlined and coded with the grammar categories. At the end of the semester, the learners were interviewed, the results of which showed that learners who did not receive written corrective feedback on their grammatical structures were discouraged and demotivated. Moreover, the results of the study showed that corrective feedback helps learners improve their writing over time.

Writing is an important language activity, and a major classroom procedure. It is an effective technique for reinforcing the oral language material. It is important for providing evidence of our students' achievements. It is a communicative skill to send, store and retrieve messages with the help of written symbols. Writing can be expressive, poetic, informative and persuasive. According to the type of writing, the writer concentrates on the subject matter of the written piece, on the reader, and on one's own feelings and thoughts. (Millrood, 2001, p.134)

According to Brown (2000) written products are often the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures which require specialized skill that not every speaker develops naturally. Writing needs thinking that focuses students on how to generate ideas. Written product involves thinking, drafting, and procedure. Skills are also important in writing activity.

Despite the relative plethora of previous research in the area of written corrective feedback, few have focused on grammatical and lexical writing accuracy in an EFL context. Even fewer studies have had control groups; most of them have compared the effect of various modes of feedback without a comparison condition. Thus, the present study aims to explore Iranian learners' perceptions towards written corrective feedback and the effectiveness of direct, coded, and uncoded written corrective feedback versus a control condition on grammatical and lexical writing accuracy.

1. Research Question and Null Hypothesis.

This study aims to seek answer to the following question:

RQ: Does written feedback have any effect on Iranian pre- intermediate learners' knowledge of passive sentences?

HO: Written feedback doesn't have any effect on Iranian Intermediate learners' knowledge of passive sentences.

3. Research Design & Participants.

The researcher in this study adopted a Quasi-experimental design. A pretest of passive sentences was administered to both EG (Experimental Group) and CG (Control Group). The EG participants then had the advantage of being treated with the feedback whereas the participants in the CG could only benefited their existing method of learning passive sentences. At the end of the semester a posttest of passive structures was administered to both EG and CG.

The total population in this study was students at Islamic Azad University of Tonekabon Branch. By an SPT (solution Placement Test) the researcher selects 60 Intermediate TEFL and Translation students who were homogeneous based on the SPT scales. The researcher then randomly divided them into two EG and CG groups. Each group consisted of 30 participants.

4. Procedures.

The researcher of this study selected 60 Intermediate homogeneous participants by applying SPT (solution Placement Test). Their age range was from 18 to 22 years old with a mean age of 20 years. All of the participants were female. These participants were then randomly divided into two EG and CG groups. A pretest of passive structures was administered to both EG (Experimental Group) and CG (Control Group). Then the EG participants had the advantage of being treated by feedback plus their regular course book at the university whereas the participants in the CG could only benefited their regular course book. At the end of the semester a post test of passive structures was administered to both EG and CG. To see if any change has occurred for both groups between their pretest and posttest separately, two paired-sample *t-tests* were calculated. Finally, in order to compare the performance of experimental and control groups in the post-test, first their gain scores were calculated, then the gain scores of experimental as well as control groups were compared using an *Independent T-Test*.

5. Data Analysis Procedure.

The researcher analyzed the data obtained via calculating a *t-test* between the post – tests of passive exam scores of the experimental and the control groups of the study and two two paired-sample *t-tests* between the pre – tests and post – tests of the experimental and control group of the study to see any progress happened from pre – test to the post – test or in fact during the treatment period.

5.1. Data Analysis and Findings: Descriptive Analysis of the Data

As mentioned in the procedure, three tests were employed in this study. Firstly, a proficiency test based on Oxford placement Test was administered to homogenize the groups in their language proficiency. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the proficiency test.

Table 1. descriptive statistics of the proficiency test.

Groups		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
Control Group, proficiency test	0	25.4000	8.9002	1.6249
Experimental Group, proficiency test	0	26.6333	4.9722	.9078

In order to find out whether the participants consisted homogeneous groups at the onset of the study, a two-tailed *t-test* ($p < .05$) was conducted between the means of the proficiency tests in two groups which is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. T-test between scores of proficiency test between two groups ($p < * .05$)

Scores of proficiency tests	t-test for Equality of Means			
		f	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	.663	8	.510	-1.233

Regarding the results represented in table 2., one can conclude that since the *p-value* is above .05, the null hypothesis (*H₀*) considered in this *t-test* is retained and the difference between the means of the proficiency tests in two groups is found not to be significant at .05 level of significance, that is, the two groups were probably homogeneous in their proficiency level in English at the onset of the study. To investigate passive structures, a pretest of passive knowledge was conducted before the treatment for both the control and the experimental groups. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics of pre-tests' scores in the control group and the experimental group.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control Group, pre-test	30	6.3667	2.8826	.5263

Experimental Group, pre-test	30	6.4333	2.5688	.4690
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Table 4. T-test between scores of pre-tests between two groups (p<*.05)

	t-test for Equality of Mean			
Scores of pre-tests	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	-0.095	58	0.925	-0.0667

The investigation of the results in tables 3.and 4. reveals that the p-value, being above .05, the difference between the means of the pre-tests in two groups is not significant at .05 level of significance. In other words, the two groups can be considered as having almost the same level of knowledge in passive structures, too. Then, the treatment, i.e., feedback was implemented for the experimental group teaching the same material. After the treatment, a post-test of passive knowledge related to the same content taught during the course was administered to examine whether the treatment had any influence on the experimental group. The descriptive statistics of the post-tests is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the post-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control Group, post-test	30	13.000	5.3379	0.9746
Experimental Group, post-test	30	24.2333	6.6834	1.2202

In order to see whether there would be a difference between the means of the post-test between the two groups, that is, to see whether the treatment for the experimental group was beneficial, a t-test was also run to determine the difference between the two groups of learners in their scores. Table 6 reveals the statistics.

1.2. Inferential Analysis of the Data

Table 6. T-test between scores of post-tests between two groups (p<*.05)

Roups	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Control Group, pre-test Control Group, post-test	6.3667 19.3000	2.8826 5.3379	30 30
Experimental Group, pre-test Experimental Group, post-test	6.4333 24.2333	2.5688 6.6834	30 30

In the results of comparing the means through the t-test (table 6.), the p-value is shown to be lower than .05. Thus, the difference between the post-test means in the two groups represents a significant difference at .05 in favor of the experimental group. It seems that the written feedback has been fruitful in the experimental group. The result of descriptive statistics of the pre-tests and post-tests in the two groups are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of two groups.

	t-test for Equality of Means			
Scores of post- tests	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	-2.519	58	0.015	-3.9333

In order to compare the mean scores of both groups simultaneously and to see whether the observed variability between group means in their pre-test and post-test is significant, a one-way ANOVA was also applied (Table 8).

Table 8. One-way ANOVA between the pre-tests and post-test of two groups ($p < .05$)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-test post-test, groups	120.000	1	120.000	5.450	.021
Pretest posttest, variables	7552.533	1	7552.533	343.028	0.000
P_P, group * P_P, variables	112.133	1	112.133	5.093	0.026
Error	2554.3000	116	22.017		
Total	34992.3000	120			
Corrected Total	10338.667	119			

6. Results of Hypothesis Testing.

In this part, the results of testing the hypothesis of the study have been presented and explained in detail the rejection or support of the hypothesis. Before the hypothesis of the study was rejected or supported, it was repeated below:

H₀: Written feedback doesn't have any effect on Iranian Intermediate learners' knowledge of passive sentences.

The analysis of the results of Table 8 reveals that the difference between the means of the pre-test and post-test in two groups was significant. That is, the statistics supports that of the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of passive knowledge, which rejects the null hypothesis.

7. General Discussion.

The findings of the present study support Ferris and Roberts (2001), who noted that there were no significant differences among the effects of coded and uncoded feedback modes on the learners' writing accuracy. In this study, this was confirmed with regard to both grammatical and lexical writing accuracy. In addition, much like the findings of Ferris and Roberts, this study showed that both coded and uncoded feedback modes are more effective than the no feedback condition. However, the learners' preferences toward the different feedback modes in this study do not correspond to those of Ferris and Roberts' study. Unlike their study, in which only 48% of the participants favored the feedback mode, there was a significant preference (79%) for the same mode of feedback here.

Moreover, Bitchener and Knoch (2008) found evidence suggesting that all kinds of feedback are more effective than the control condition on learners' grammatical accuracy. While this study fully supports such a result with respect to lexical accuracy, it is only in partial agreement with it regarding grammatical accuracy. In this study, written feedback turned out to be more effective than the no feedback mode.

The findings of the present study also partially corroborate those of Rahimi (2009). He reported that indirect feedback is more effective than no feedback on learners' grammatical accuracy. In this study, written feedback (a kind of indirect feedback) was indeed significantly more effective than no feedback.

The results of this study also lend support to those of Chandler (2003), whose university level ESL learners were primarily East Asian, in several ways. She did not distinguish between grammatical and lexical errors. But she found that direct correction and underlining (uncoded) were the best feedback modes for increasing accuracy on new writing even though her students, like the Iranian students, said they learnt most from coded (underline and describe) feedback. In keeping with the findings of the present study, Chandler also concluded that underlining was best for errors students could correct themselves.

At the same time, the results of the present study are different from those of a number of studies that were reviewed earlier. These findings contradict Ellis' (2009) claim that direct feedback does not influence long-term learning. In fact, these results show that direct feedback does contribute to improving learners' writing.

Frantzen (1995) found no significant difference among the corrective feedback modes. Similarly, Truscott (1996) and Polio et al. (1998) concluded that written corrective feedback is not effective for learners. Such results are in contrast with the present study. In fact, this study indicated that written feedbacks studied here are significantly better than the control group receiving no corrective feedback.

One of the possible reasons for such differences may be partially attributable to the different linguistic background and cultural preferences of the participants in this study in comparison to other studies. It might be argued that because of the linguistic distance between the native language of the learners and the target language, and probably due to social distance, coupled with the fact that satellite is forbidden in Iran, Iranian learners of English lack a strong intuitive (acquired) knowledge of English.

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