

The Effect of Teacher Feedback on the Accuracy of Iranian Advanced EFL Learners' Writings: Coherence in Focus

Sepideh Alipour *

Department of English, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

Firooz Sadighi

Department of English, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

Abstract

This study researched coherence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writings by taking transition signals into account. Transition signals were used as the operationalized measurement of this construct. The study was undertaken to see whether the implicit feedback plays any role on the coherence of learners' writings. To meet the purpose, a twenty two session class was held for 15 advanced level EFL learners learning English in a language institute. Every session students were required to write on a topic proposed by the teacher, one at home and one in class. Writings were then handed over to the teacher to be checked and corrected. Corrections mainly focused on the incoherent sentences. A pretest was administered to the participants prior to the treatment. Twenty two sessions of instruction each about an hour comprised the whole treatment. In the last session a post-test was administered which proved to have a strong correlation with the pretest. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in the coherence of texts. Besides, the number of incoherent sentences committed by the students decreased in the posttest and the number of transition signals used increased which was an explanation for the effectiveness of the treatment.

Keywords: implicit feedback, writing, coherence, transition signals

INTRODUCTION

Writing is essential for the learning process (Celce-Murcia, 2006). Writing well is not just a choice to be made; it is a necessity for the people and a prerequisite of success (Graham & Perin, 2007). Effective writing is becoming more and more important, and writing instruction is finding its place in second language (L2) education (Weigle, 2002). Along with reading comprehension, the writing skill is a prognosticator of academic success and a basic precondition for joining in higher education (Graham & Perin, 2007). Writing is defined as clear, fluent, and effective communication of ideas (Raimes, 1983). Production of an effective piece of writing depends upon careful consideration of

a number of fundamental components of writing, such as, content, organization, language use, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics which need to be incorporated into the written discourse. Examining from a broader overview, writing is a tool for thought. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking, for learning in all disciplines, for taking notes, writing essays, and answering written questions. Writing is considered as one of the active and productive skills of language usage. According to Olshtain (2001, p. 206) the skill of writing has found its place in curriculum development. It is via writing that a person can communicate a variety of messages to others, whether close or distant, known or unknown. However, writing is not a simple process, even in first language (L1). It is very challenging for almost all L2 learners. Writing in English has always been a challenging task to L2 learners.

Good writing in English is regarded as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons. So, due to these reasons, English writing instruction is thus assuming an increasing role in L2 education. Communication across languages is more essential, so the ability to write effectively in English is becoming more and more important. Writing is a complicated process which requires cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis.

Writing correct and complete sentences is essential to creating messages that are easy for readers to understand. Writing is more challenging because the reader/readers is/are not present to let you know he/she doesn't understand. Your words must indicate your thoughts when you are not present. Every time you get into writing something, you, as a writer should check, find, and remove all possible impediments to understanding on the part of your readers. One of the biggest impediments, and one that causes trouble, is inappropriate flow of thought, or incoherence.

One of the recurring problems in students' writings and one that causes obstacles to their success in writing classes is the notion of incoherence. "I cannot follow your argument" and "I do not understand what you are saying" are just two of the comments written on the students' papers to indicate the inability of the papers to be understood by their teachers. Unfortunately, unlike the grammatical errors which can be easily corrected, errors in coherence are often more difficult to handle as they involve a chunk of units, such as a series of sentences or paragraphs. Nunan (1999) maintained that producing a coherent, fluent writing is probably a very difficult language skill as the reader has to comprehend what has been written and rely on himself/herself for comprehension. To worsen the situation, the studies in this area are few and far between. Those conducted confronted a challenge that the learners face: incoherence (Jones, 2011; Ahmed, 2010). These studies concluded that incoherence is a serious problem. Coherence is the logical connections that readers or listeners perceive in a written or oral text, a relationship that links the meanings of utterances in a discourse; these links can be based on shared knowledge of the speakers.

Coherence, in this study, is operationalized in the form of transition signals. Transition signals are one way to achieve coherence. They are expressions such as first, finally, and, however, or phrases such as in conclusion, on the other hand, as a result. Other

kinds of words such as subordinators (when, although), coordinators (and, but) can serve as transition signals. They tell you when to go forward, turn around, slow down, or stop. In other words they tell your reader when you are giving a similar idea (similarity, and, in addition), an opposite idea (on the other hand, but, in contrast), an example "(for example), a result (therefore, as a result), or a conclusion (in conclusion). They give paragraph coherence, because they guide your reader from one idea to the next.

For the above-mentioned reasons, the present study aims at investigating the possible effects that implicit error correction in the form of teacher feedback can have on sentence coherence. To achieve the purpose, the focus was on transition signals. According to Oshima and Hogue (1991), transition signals are tools to create coherence and consistency (i.e., 'flow') in the writing. Without them the relationship between ideas may be unclear.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Writing is a necessary skill that needs to be improved. Creating good writers in an L2 has various challenges. Most L2 learners at all levels believe that writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master (Atay & Kurt, 2006). It is observed that L2 learners face a major problem in writing. In the era of language teaching, various methods and tools have been used to describe and explain the writing processes of each individual L2 learner. Many studies have examined the effects of variables such as L2 background (Connor, 1996), cultural expectation (Matsuda, 1997), topic and audience (Jarvis, Grant, et. al., 2003). These studies are done on different aspects of writing. Some have studied the problems that L2 writers have while writing.

Some studies have focused on coherence as an important textual element that has been of concern since the proposal by Halliday and Hasan (1976). As an example, Oshima (1999) studied about the errors in the writings of L2 learners. Among the errors identified in the writings, he found that errors in coherence are more difficult to handle as they are a chunk of units, a series of sentences or paragraphs. He further identified that these errors, because of their nature, are neglected.

Another study conducted by Hill (2000) pointed out that L2 teachers tend to focus more on correcting grammatical mistakes, so they do not notice the errors due to incoherence, disconnected portions of the text. The study done by Liu and Qi (2010) focused on the factors that led to coherence errors. They identified such errors to be associated to the cultural transfer. Hoey (2001) stated that coherence as a textual feature is a complex process and in his study he proposed lexical patterns to achieve coherence for a general discourse. Jones' study (2011) showed that students have difficulty with constructing coherent arguments. He proposed metadiscourse as a way to improve coherence in academic writing. Foltz, Kintsch, and Landauer (1996) studied textual coherence using latent semantic analysis. They employed this technique in order to measure the coherence of texts. They further argued that coherence is in close connection with the comprehension of texts. The focus of some studies has been on the

levels of coherence. For instance, Jones (2007) studied coherence at two levels: local and global. He argued that a challenge that confronts the students at the Australian University is that of coherence. He attributed incoherence to the writers not taking a global view of their work. He said that less skilled writers seem to be unable to see that the individual points they make are sometimes too local and do not fit into the global progression of their essays.

Error treatment is one of the key issues in second language writing. In language classes, teachers usually respond to learners' errors. These responses may be referred to as feedback, the comments they receive on their written products, ideas, and the organization of their essays (Hyland, 2003). The feedback that the teacher writes refers to the written comments provided to students' writing. There is controversy on the effect of corrections made by the teacher. Some studies reveal that corrective feedback can promote accuracy in students' writing (Frantzen, 1995; Sheppard, 1992). Fathman and Wally (1990) in a study investigated the effect of error feedback on students' improvement in writing. They compared a group who received error feedback with the group which received little if any feedback. They found out that the groups obtaining error feedback did much better in grammatical writing than those receiving little, if any feedback on their writing. Some other researchers believe that L2 writers expect their errors to be corrected explicitly (Leki, 1991; Satio, 1994). And according to surveys of students' preferences of feedback, ESL writers are very positive about teacher written feedback and consistently rate comments, and corrections on all aspects of their texts (Satio, 1994; Zhang, 1995). Ferris (2003) reports the findings of students' survey research that are supported by various empirical evidence mentioning that students say that they value teacher feedback, that they pay attention to it and that it helps them to improve their writings.

On the contrary, Yorke (2003) and Sadler (1998) argued that as it is difficult to design effective feedback practices, it cannot be of much help. Another study to be mentioned as opposite to feedback is the one done by Truscott (1996). He argued that all forms of error correction of L2 student writing are not only ineffective, but also harmful and should be abandoned. He further emphasized that although most L2 students desire grammar correction, teachers should not give it to them. Due to controversy over this issue, it seems to be a challenging one and one which needs to be investigated further in different contexts and at different levels. The rationale behind the present study was to find the correlation between the implicit feedback of the teacher on the coherence of the participants' writings in the form of transition signals. To achieve the purpose, a pretest and a posttest were administered to compare the possible changes in the participants' performance.

Since the purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of implicit feedback on the coherence of Iranian advanced L2 Learners' writings and the possible changes of implicit feedback on their posttest performance, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated:

RQ1. Is there any significant change in the use of transition signals used by the participants in the pretest and posttest?

RQ2. Is there any significant improvement in the coherence of the writings due to the use of transition signals?

H1: The use of transition signals will significantly increase due to teachers' feedback.

H2: The teacher written feedback on transition signals improved the coherence of the participants' writings

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 20 male and female advanced L2 learners, aged 20-28. They were different majors studying English for about 10 semesters. Their main book was the TOP NOTCH written by Saslow and Ascher. They were already familiar with the writing mechanism.

Materials

The first material was the proficiency test (MTELP) prior to the study to determine the proficiency level of the participants. The test composed of three parts: grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. It was administered to a group of 50 L2 learners. Then, based on the mean score and the standard deviation, those whose score were two standard deviation above the mean were included in the study.

Procedure

At first the participants were given MTELP with the purpose of determining their proficiency level. Based on the mean and the standard deviation of the test, 20 were chosen to participate in the study and 30 were excluded. The first session, they were explained about the writing mechanisms, although they were instructed during the years of language study and were asked to write on a topic of their interest. During the treatment sessions, they were told to write two writings one for homework under time pressure and one for class activity without time pressure. Every session they handed over one of the writings to the teacher to be checked and corrected and received a new topic for home activity. Teacher provided feedback on the writings focusing on the students' incoherent sentences and emphasized the use of transition signals as a way to make their writings coherent. Students read the comments. In the last session, a timed writing activity was implemented which was then correlated with their first writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To investigate the first hypothesis, an increase in the use of transition signals due to teachers' feedback, a paired-sample t-test was run on the prewritings and postwritings

of the participants. To do this, the number of transition signals in the prewritings and postwritings were compared. The results are provided in the following table:

Table 1. Paired Samples Statistics of the transition signals in prewriting and postwriting

		Mean	N	t	t
Pair 1	prewriting	5.1000	20	3.09329	-4.636
	postwriting	9.4500	20	1.76143	

As the result shows the mean number of transition signals in the pretest is different from that in the posttest which is an indication of the efficacy of the treatment. It means that the number of transition signals has increased in the posttest.

To test the second hypothesis, that the teacher written feedback on transition signals improved the coherence of the participants' writings, the number of incoherent sentences in the prewriting and postwriting were compared using paired-sample T-test. The following table shows the result:

Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics of incoherent sentences in prewriting and postwriting

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	prewriting	8.5500	20	2.54383	.56882
	postwriting	5.3000	20	2.63778	.58983

As the results show, the mean number of incoherent sentences in the postwriting is less than that in the prewriting which again indicates the effectiveness of the treatment.

Finding of the study revealed that implicit feedback given on the use of transition signals led to the coherence of the sentences or paragraphs in Iranian advanced L2 learners' writings. The rationale behind the present study was the role that teacher feedback on transition signals can play in coherence of the writings. The mean number of transition signals used in the writings of L2 learners in the prewriting was 5.10, but in the postwriting it was 9.45 which was an indication of the effectiveness of the treatment. So, it can be argued that teacher' implicit feedback which focuses on the transition signals used in the writings has conducive effect which strengthen studies such as Barzilay and Lapata (2008), Foltz, Kintsch, and Landauer (1996) done on coherence, employing other approaches to achieve coherence. Raimes (1983) argued that comment in the form of suggestions and feedback are more powerful than merely judging them saying, good, excellent, bad, etc. In this study learners had a positive attitude toward the teacher feedback which was evident in their improved postwritings.

The present study supports the studies done by Fathman and Wally (1990), Ellis, Lowen and Erlam (2006), Chandler (2003), Hyland (2003) mentioned in the literature on the effect of feedback. Fathman and Wally (1990) in a study investigated the effect of error feedback on students' improvement in writing. They compared group who received error feedback with the group which received little if any feedback. They found out that

the groups obtaining error feedback did much better in grammatical writing than those receiving little, if any feedback on their writing. The study of Ellis, Lowen and Erlam (2006) on explicit error correction showed that the explicitness of providing feedback may also contribute to the improvement of students' writing accuracy. Chandler (2003) showed that teachers' feedback on students' grammatical and lexical errors resulted in a significant improvement in both accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing of the same type over the same semester. He used both experimental and control group data and concluded that correction of learners' lexical and grammatical errors between assignments reduced such errors in subsequent writings. Hyland (2003) observed six ESL writers on a full time 14-week English proficiency programme course at a university. It was found that feedback focusing on form was used by most of the students in their revisions to their drafts.

CONCLUSION

This study by comparing the performances of the participants in prewriting and postwriting revealed that the implicit teaching of transition signals leads to the frequency of these signals and the coherence of the students' later writings. In fact the treatment, implicit feedback on participants' errors proved to be helpful in their improvement. The comments of the teacher which followed the participants' writings focused on their mistakes attempting to direct the participants' attentions to those parts. This study and many others focusing on feedback are, in fact, in line with the belief that feedback whether explicit or implicit are beneficial.

In this study, teacher feedback was personalized for each student's needs and their specific problematic areas. Each piece of writing had its own problems, hence teacher focused on those specific weaknesses related to transition signals and incoherence. Feedback provided in the form of comments, suggestions proved to be effective in learners' performances. Good use of transition signals will help to make the relationship between the ideas in writing clear and logical.

Although the study focused on Iranian L2 learners, it has some pedagogical implications with regard to the effect of feedback on writings. Generally, the results show that feedback is effective on the coherence of learners' writings. So, feedback can be given on almost every areas of language to help learners improve their competency and proficiency. Providing feedback in L2 classes should be given the same importance as teaching those materials to the students. The reason is that although they have learnt the material, but they seem unable to apply them in their oral or written productions.

There are some limitations on the study that need to be addressed. As this study was conducted on advanced L2 learners, the results cannot be generalized to intermediate or beginning learners. Another limitation is that the study was limited to incoherence in writing and to the use of transition signals as way to achieve coherence. Some other studies need to be taken by employing other ways to achieve coherence. Further studies need to be conducted on other L2 learners' levels-intermediate and beginning levels to

make the findings generalizable to a larger population. Further studies are needed to test the effect of feedback on the speaking of L2 learners.

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