The Effect of Peer Recast on EFL Learners' Writing Ability

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Abstract

The role of corrective feedback in language acquisition has been a highly controversial issue. Recast is known as an activity that learners rephrase a part of another participant's utterance. The present study investigated the effect of peer recast on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability. The participants' (n = 88) homogeneity in terms of language proficiency was manifested by PET. The selected learners (n = 66) took writing section of IELTS as pretest. Two raters scored the writing tasks based on IELTS rating scales. Raters' scores were highly significant in terms of inter-rater and intra-rater reliability. The participants were then assigned to two experimental and control groups. They received advanced writing instruction in different styles of writing. Then, recast was provided for learners. The control group received recast by the teacher, but the experimental group received peer-recast. The learners' writing papers were assessed based on IELTS writing scale. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed control group, in other words, peer-recast had a significant effect on the writing performance of intermediate EFL learners. The results of this study may help EFL teachers for overcoming the complexities in teaching writing skill and EFL learners to make positive changes in written communication.

Keywords: feedback, peer recast, writing ability

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a type of productive skill that is divided into aspects including a means of learning language forms and a way to communicate a message (Chastain, 1988). Communication in this way is more concrete than verbal communication, with less room for error and even less room for mistakes. This presents written communicators with new challenges, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, even writing style and actual wording.

Feedback on students' errors has been a traditional pedagogical strategy in the EFL/ESL classroom; feedback provision allows second language learners to identify their weaknesses and try to enhance their ability to use the foreign language appropriately. Some researchers believe that natural exposure to foreign language is all that learners need to develop their second language (L2); in such situation error treatment is harmful rather than helpful. Feedback, according to Schachter (1991), is always associated with

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the terms "corrective feedback, negative evidence, and negative feedback" in the fields of language teaching, language acquisition, and cognitive psychology. The role of corrective feedback is a controversial issue in language acquisition research. Different researchers often use these terms interchangeably. Chaudron (1988) has pointed out that corrective feedback conveys different meanings. He believes that treatment of error is "any teacher behavior following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error" (p. 150). The feedback can also be explicit (e.g., grammatical explanation or overt error correction) or implicit. Implicit feedback could be confirmation checks, repetitions, recasts, clarification requests, silence, and even facial expressions that express confusion. The implicit negative feedback technique in instructed second language acquisition is the recast-the teacher's correct restatement of a learner's incorrect utterance.`

Lyster and Ranta (1997) investigated the relationship between type of feedback and learner uptake in four French immersion classrooms at the elementary level and found that recasts were frequently provided. However, Lyster (1998a, 1998b) argued that recasts were the least effective type of feedback at eliciting modified output by learners, concluding that "re-casts tend to be less successful at drawing learners' attention to their non-target output at least in content-based classrooms where recasts risk being perceived by young learners as alternative or identical forms fulfilling discourse functions other than corrective ones" (Lyster, 1998b, p. 207).

Mackey and Philp's (1998) experimental study of recasts also demonstrated that little modified output tended to occur immediately following recasts, but significantly, they also found that re-casts had a beneficial effect on language learning measured through posttests. They pointed out that modified output immediately following recasts should not be confused with long-term learning and suggest that the research setting might be one source of the difference between their findings and those studies by Lyster. In a similar study, Van den Branden (1997) investigated the relationship between type of negative feedback and interactionally modified output. He found that his child learners of Dutch modified their output in both learner-learner and learner-teacher dyads. However, Van den Branden (1997) also notes considerable variation in his data, leading him to conclude that context may have had an effect:

> Owing to the lock-step type of education they usually received, the pupils were not used to depending upon another pupil, rather than the teacher, for crucial information. This may partly explain the minimal amount of negotiation in some groups (p. 613).

This is especially true for second language (L2) writing since the goal of L2 writing is often to teach both the conventions of writing in a particular culture as well as L2 grammatical forms (Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Paulus, 1999).

Moreover, peers-correction can be an efficient method in EFL classes. Also it has a role in providing recast. In this way, students prompt to generate correction by themselves (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Long, 1996).

The focus of research in language writing had shifted from the product-oriented approach toward the process-oriented approach (Flower & Hayes, 1980). Academic writing can be very challenging for learners of English as a foreign Language (EFL) as they must overcome different challenges associated with such as writings (generating ideas, organization, and mechanics) in order to develop the skill requisite for genre specific, coherent, and readable essay. Moreover, the research evidence has shown that teacher's written comments, as feedback, do not have any significant effect on student writing except when they are focused (Hillocks, 1986; Leki, 1990).

There is little doubt that academic writing can be very challenging for learners of English as a foreign Language (EFL) as they must overcome the personal challenges associated with academic writing (generating ideas, organization, and mechanics) in order to develop the skill requisite for genre specific, coherent, and readable essay. In other words, the central role of teacher consists of giving the learners feedback and explaining, modeling, and providing opportunities for practice. Besides, correct feedback through recast can help the learners to develop their writing skill.

The other area of problem is that recast by peer cannot be used in different levels. It means, learners may not have enough knowledge to give the correct feedback to each other's and it may lead to be ambiguous for them in L2 classrooms, many recasts can be ambiguous, and therefore not help learners to notice their mistakes (Lyster, 1998). Regarding this problem the teacher should monitor the classroom to accept and not accept the peer recast. This study sought to analyze the effect of peer recast on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. The following research question was posed:

- Does peer recast have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study were 66 female EFL learners of Mehr Language Institute located in this city of Tabriz, Iran. Their age range varied from 18 to 30. They were all native speakers of Persian with the background of more than 4 years of studying English. The participants' level of education was different. It varied from high-school students to master level. Participants' level of language proficiency was checked by Preliminary English Test (PET).

Instruments

As was mentioned, the level of the participants in the present study was elementary, so according to University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, the PET (Preliminary English Test) is compatible to investigate their proficiency level. This test examines learner's general ability in English. The version of test used in this study refers to 2004. The validity of the test is self-evident. Regarding the purpose of the study that is to test learner's writing ability, the researcher selected reading and writing part of PET. It

consisted of 35 questions of reading and 8 questions of writing. It was totally scored out of 60. IELTS test was used to homogenize the subjects regarding their language proficiency. This test included four parts such as task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical rang and accuracy that took 3 hours to answer.

ILETS test was scored by two raters. It was a holistic evaluation of an essay with scores of 0-9 which were defined by statements regarding the topic, organization and development, supporting idea, fluency, naturalness, appropriateness, grammatical and lexical correctness and choice in writing (Brown, 2004). The scale is provided in Appendix B. Each group was required to write one type of essay consist of with the following topics: *write your busy day which you had so far,* and *write about your personal goals and how to achieve them in your life.* At the end of the semester writing of individuals which involved control group and experimental group were compared to examine the performance on essay writing. Jacobs, Wormuth, Harfiel, and Hughey's (1981) scale provided analytic approach for the evaluation of essays, and it was based on four aspects of writing task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical rang and accuracy.

Procedures

At the beginning of study, in order to make sure that there was no significant difference among participants (n = 88) regarding their language ability, a language proficiency test (PET) was administered and 22 students with scores of one standard deviation above and below the mean were omitted from the main study. The remained 66 learners took part in the pretest, i.e., IELTS writing test, in order to make sure that there was no significant difference among the learners in terms of their writing ability. The topic was "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?" teacher would make learning enjoyable and fun for their students. (Use reasons and specific examples to support your opinion). The performance of participants on IELTS writing test was analyzed and scored based on IELTS rating scales by two raters. The results confirmed the satisfactory level of inter-rater and intra-rater reliability of the obtained scores. Also, it was statistically proved that there was no significant difference in writing ability of participants. Finally, the participants were randomly assigned to two equal groups of control (n = 33) and experimental (n = 33). The experimental group received the treatment (peer-recast), but the control group received the normal classroom recast i.e., teacher recast on their writing papers.

In both control and experimental groups, the first session was specified to review sentence and writing paragraph. Each session lasted for 90 minutes and the researcher spent 20 to 30 minutes to teach them. After finishing Chaplet paragraph writing book, then researcher started to teach how to write an essay, the form of description, according to advance writing by Birjandi, Alavi and Salmani Nodushon (2004). Furthermore, the researcher spent 15 minutes per session to answer the question of students about the new lesson. In the following sessions, the researcher focused on feedback in such a way that after teaching one type of writing in each session, she provided a new topic for writing according to what was taught for next session. In the

control group, the participants' essays were collected, checked at home, and then given back to students in the next session. The researcher identified the errors of each paper with correct feedback through recast.

In the experimental group, on the other hand, the teacher taught in the same manner as she taught the control group. In experimental group, the students received peer recast as treatment. The researcher divided participants into ten groups and assigned to them one topic for writing. All groups were required to give correct recast on the selected writing paper and correction of errors. The researcher's job was to accept or to reject their ideas. The writing papers of students were then collected and rated by the researcher according to IELTS writing scale. Finally, the raw scores of experimental and control groups were submitted to statistical analysis to investigate the research question of the study.

Results

The writing section of IELTS was selected as the pre-test of the present study. All the participants of study (n = 66) took the pretest. Each English writing task was scored independently by two experienced teacher according to IELTS rating scale with maximum score of 9 and minimum score of 0. The mean of raters' scores was considered for the final score. The descriptive statistics related to the writing scores are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics of participants on pretest

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
IELTS Scores (rater 1)	66	2	8	5.62	1.310	-.231	.582
IELTS Scores (rater 2)	66	3	8	5.61	1.226	-.909	.582

A Pearson-product moment correlation coefficient was performed in order to test the inter-rater reliability of scores on IELTS test obtained by the two raters. The results, as the Table 2 shows, confirmed that there is a significant relationship ($r = 0.93$, $p < 0.01$) between the scores of IELTS obtained by the two raters. Thus, the inter-rater reliability of scores is highly significant.

Table 2. Correlation analysis of pretest

		IELTS Scores (rater 2)	IELTS Scores (rater 1)
IELTS Scores (rater 2)	Pearson Correlation	1	.930**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	66	66
IELTS Scores (rater 1)	Pearson Correlation	.930**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	66	66

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In order to detect whether there was a significant difference between two raters in terms of the scores which they assigned to IELTS writing papers, an independent sample t-test was performed. The results, as demonstrated by Table 3, indicated that there was not any statistically significant difference ($t_{2, 130}$ = 0.06, $p > 0.05$) between two raters' scores.

Table 3. One sample independent t-test for raters' scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
IELTS SCORES	Equal variances assumed	.074	.786	.069	130	.945	.015	.221	-.422	.452

The scores were obtained based on 9 point IELTS writing scale. The results of data collection are shown in Table 4 in form of descriptive statistics. The mean of experimental group is approximately two times more than that of the control group.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of groups

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Score	Control Group	33	3.79	.992	.173
	Experimental Group	33	6.12	1.193	.208

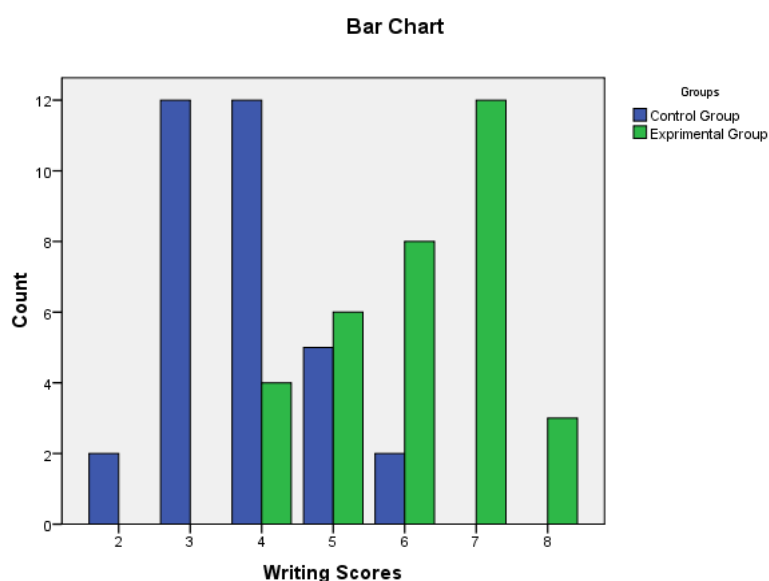Figure 1 clearly shows the differences between two groups in their writing scores.

Figure 1. The scores obtained by control and experimental groups

The control group received recast by the teacher, but the experimental group received peer-recast. In order to find whether there was any significant difference between the writing performances of EFL learners in two groups of study, a one sample independent t-test was performed.

Table 5. Independent sample t-test for writing scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Writing Score (control group)	Equal variances assumed	1.559	.216	-8.63	64	.000	-2.333	.270	-2.87	-1.79

The results indicated that there was a statistical significant difference between experimental and control group ($t_{2, 64}$ = -16.71, $p < 0.05$) regarding their performance on essay writing. In other words, peer-recast had a significant effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability. Therefore, the null hypothesis of study is rejected.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the impact of peer-recast on the writing ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In other words, it was looked for finding the differences among EFL learners' writing ability which may have been yielded by employing the peer-recast technique. It was inferred from the results of different statistical analyses that there was a meaningful significant difference among Iranian EFL learners' writing ability when they received peer-recast effect on their writing performance. In other words, the writing ability of EFL learners developed increased when they were provided with peer-recast. Thus, peer-recast had a significant effect on the writing performance of intermediate EFL learners.

The aforementioned findings of this study provided some valuable insights and implications for writing performance of Iranian EFL learners in language classroom context. A successful language performance requires sufficient knowledge of language skills. From theoretical point of view, this study presented peer-recast as a variable which brings about improvements in foreign language writing ability. It is a potential reason for increasing the writing ability in foreign language performance. Peer-recast may enhance learners' self-confidence to facilitate their written performance.

The present study, from pedagogical point of view, provided helpful insights for EFL teachers, learners and educators and syllabus designers. In EFL context where there is

no opportunity for exposure to the foreign language out of classroom situation, the significance of writing as well as speaking ability is self-evident. This issue has always been accompanied with complexities and problems. In this study, peer-recast was identified as a classroom technique which significantly improved learners' writing ability. Therefore, it can be used in writing classroom to help EFL teachers for overcoming the complexities in teaching writing skill and helping learners to make positive changes in written communication.

For EFL learners, the outcomes of the present study would bring helpful insights in a sense that they can achieve success in language learning simply by developing positive classroom practices such as peer-recast. Peer-recast is a variable which engages learners in the process of writing, independent of teacher. Consequently, it provides more responsibility for students learning. Learners can diagnose their problems in second language writing based on predefined criteria with the help of their peers. The success would belong to those learners who take more insights from their peers in and out of classroom context.

The findings of this study would definitely provide further opportunities to conduct a learner-based classroom and decline the amount of work loads on the teacher's burden. For EFL syllabus designers and curriculum developers, the findings of this study provide precious opportunities to incorporate peer-recast criteria in the classroom and course book content as a useful tool to assess learners' achievement.

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