



## Comparing Online and Offline Modes of Corrective Feedback on EFL Learners' Writing Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency

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### ABSTRACT

Corrective feedback (CF) is an inseparable part of second language acquisition (SLA) and has been the focus of numerous studies since the concept of CF was introduced in the field of SLA. This study focused on investigating the differences between two modes of providing CF, namely, online and traditional modes, which would affect Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. To serve this purpose, 317 EFL learners from four language schools in Tabriz took the TOEFL: 271 participants scored between 477 and 510, the scores of 164 of them fell between  $\pm 1SD$ , and 66 of them agreed to participate in the study who were asked to deliver a 200-word composition. Their compositions were analyzed based on CAF (complexity, accuracy, and fluency). They were then divided into two groups; one group underwent a treatment of 10 sessions of online chatting (1 hour each session), and the other group was asked to deliver 10 writing tasks. Afterward, all participants were asked to deliver another 200-word writing task. These tasks were analyzed based on the CAF criteria. The obtained results proved a significant difference between the writing ability of the participants receiving CF through online sessions and that of those receiving CF in traditional mode. The findings implicate that EFL teachers could be encouraged and allowed to use up-to-date ways of providing CF if more development in the teaching and learning of English as a second language is anticipated.

**Keywords:** CAF; CF; Online sessions; SLA

### INTRODUCTION

In a few types of research, internet-based language teaching and computer-mediated communication (CMC) are shown to be increasing in recent years. For example, Rassaei (2017) conveyed that CF provided via computer can positively affect language learners' writing quality. Bataineh (2014), also showed that learners studying writing through chats and word processors did better in their posttests. Cohen et al (2016) claimed that CF is a significant tool for the errors or mistakes made by language learners. CF operates on the wrong-produced sentences and utterances (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

By reviewing the literature, one could conclude that among the CF strategies, a few are more important such as meta-linguistic feedback, recasts, prompts, clarification requests, elicitation, repetition, explicit negative feedback, and translation which are applied in the present study.

Writing is assumed to be as important as the other three skills discussed, practiced, and employed in the realm of language teaching, namely speaking, reading, and listening. But not enough importance is given and sufficient attention is paid to this skill in Iranian teaching and learning language programs and the writing of language learners is presumed to lack acceptable quality. Meanwhile, Iranian

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language institutes have been focusing on three skills: speaking, listening, and reading. They have no special plan or program to enhance and promote the writing quality of their language learners. That is why the present study has focused on the importance and enhancement of writing quality.

CF provision is believed to be one of the key elements leading to L2 development, it is also a key factor that cannot be overlooked by L2 practitioners and teachers according to Karim & Nassaji (2019). The proven effect and usefulness of CF provision in L2 learning have been attracting the attention and interest of researchers in the field in recent years (Karim & Nassaji, 2019). As Fadilah (2018) claims, to enhance and facilitate the language learners' improvement in second language learning, CF should be implemented during teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language class. Reviewing the history and studies carried out on the usefulness and effectiveness of CF in L2 learning returns to 1994 in which Aljaafreh & Lantolf highlighted the role and place of CF in L2 learning instruction.

Hyland (2006) emphasizes CF as an important part of L2 productive skills such as writing for its potential for learning and student motivation. In several undertakings, the CF role in language development is elaborated; studies such as Haifaa & Emma (2014), Ellis (2009), Hyland (2003), Muncie (2000), and in several other studies on the effectiveness of CF on language proficiency has been investigated. Rassaei (2019) affirms that CF maintains the researchers' attention and interest in the above-mentioned history.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

According to Yu et al (2019), written corrective feedback (WCF) has a key role in the second language (L2) teaching and learning process. As Nelson and Schunn assert, several functions of feedback like notifying the language learners of their work to achieve the learning objectives will affect this role (2009). Sheen and Ellis (2011) stated that "WCF is a form of feedback that informs learners of the linguistic errors they make in their oral and written production

in a second language" (p. 593). WCF is supported by cognitive interactionist and sociocultural theories as a second language acquisition (SLA) promoter (Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994); it is also confirmed that SLA can be speeded by enhancing internal learning processes which can be promoted by learners' self-correction (Long 1996). Yet attention has been paid to the efficacy and fruitfulness of correcting grammar in teaching L2 writing. According to Truscott, WCF has not been effective on the learners' written production because of its limited value although this assertion has been under question by experts practicing L2 writing and L2 instructors (1996).

The role of providing CF in L2 learning is crystal clear and many research projects have been carried out regarding the impact of CF on different facets of language proficiency, besides the experts' consensus on it. What is absent is the investigation of the impact of different modes through which different kinds of CF are provided to EFL learners. This gap gave an impetus to the authors of this study to conduct the present research. Thus, two different modes of providing CF; namely, CF provision in a traditional way and CF provision through online sessions were targeted, with a focus on recast, meta-linguistic feedback, elicitation or prompts clarification requests, and repetition. The following research questions were, therefore, addressed:

*Q1. Is there any significant difference between the written output quality created by Iranian EFL learners who receive CF via online chatting and the ones receiving CF in traditional ways?*

*Q2. Is there any significant difference between the written output quality created by Iranian EFL learners who receive CF via online chatting and the ones who do not?*

*Q3. Is there any significant difference between the written output quality created by Iranian EFL learners who receive CF traditionally and the ones who do not?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **CF in Second Language Teaching**

Since in the present undertaking one mode of providing CF was through WCF, let us first

have a brief look at the practicality of WCF in the ESL writing classroom. The utility of WCF is still a debatable issue; namely, there are some contradictory perspectives on the impact of providing CF on students writing accuracy in which various variables can be involved (Al Hajri & Al-Mahrooqi, 2013). The provision of WF in second-language writing had not been sought sufficiently before 2000 and just a few studies have been carried out concerning the issue. A number of the studies we can refer to are Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Kepner, 1991; Radecki & Robb et al., 1986. Since writing in the L2 teaching and learning field was of little interest and priority for instructors and learners, the mentioned studies were done. Therefore, as Ferris asserts L2 learners were not motivated to consider teacher feedback on their writing (2010). According to him, there were other reasons beyond the neglect of WCF such as bilingualism and Krashen's SLA theories.

Because of the significance of providing CF, a handful of studies regarding L2 learning have been carried out, so far especially in examining the process through which L2 learners benefit from different types of WCF. In similar studies, Adrada-Rafael & Filgueras-Gomez, 2019; Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007 and Yang & Zhang, 2010 support the results of the aforementioned research.

According to Benson & DeKeyser (2018), WCF tells the learners that they have made a mistake or error and because of this, we can say that WCF is explicit. In "direct feedback", the learners are provided with the correct form whereas in other cases, the teacher or instructor points to the error and here we can say that feedback is given indirectly. In the following part, different types of feedback are introduced and defined shortly; the types that were applied in the present study. In a similar study on the frequency and type of different feedback moves in Intelligent Computer-Assisted Language Learning, Ferreira et al. (2007) showed the effectiveness of providing language learners with appropriate feedback.

### **Different Types of Feedback**

The notion of CF has many interpretations and definitions in the literature. As Berkant et al.

(2020) state, CF should inform the language whether they have behaved in agreement with the goals of education or whether they have obtained the target language behaviors. In SLA, CF is classified into two main groups:

A) *Giving-Answer Strategies (GAS)* are targeted to a language learner's incorrect response which specifies the location of the error in the incorrect sentence and is straight provided by the teacher. These strategies cover:

1. *Repetition* which uses a rising intonation or the teacher repeats the student's error to draw his attention to the erroneous part of his production.

2. *Recast* which is the most common type of CF (Ellis, 2003 and Sheen, 2006), and through which all parts in the learner's comments are reformulated.

3. *Explicit* correction by which the learner's utterance is corrected explicitly and directly by the instructor. Ghahari & Piruznejad (2017) report that explicit correction is effective for writing language learners.

4. *Give an answer* being used in recast and when the learner is not confident about his/her answer.

B) *Prompting-Answer Strategies* by which the teachers motivate and make students notice their mistakes to correct them. PASs is classified into three sub-categories:

1. *Meta-linguistic cues* in which the instructor provides the student with some information about his utterance implicitly.

2. *Clarification requests*, to indicate that the student's expression is not correct or understandable and includes some sort of error, the teachers ask some questions like Excuse me? What? or pardon me? And these questions demand the student to correct his/her utterance.

3. *Elicitation*, in this type of feedback, the teacher allows the language learner to finish off the teacher's statement. That is to say, the teacher echoes the learner's sentence but stops before the erroneous part and motivates the student to finalize the sentence. These strategies arising from Lyster's projects (1998) are classified into

four types of feedback (elicitation, repetition of error, meta-linguistic cues, and clarification requests).

While many studies have considered the concept of providing different types of feedback in-class discussions or on the writing papers of language learners, very few studies have considered the type of feedback provided through online written chatting, and its effect on complexity, accuracy, and fluency of the written output, especially in Iran. This might be because of the limitation in time for gathering a group of language learners or the unwillingness of the language learners in taking psychological personality tests.

Also, no study in Iran has been carried out on the Openness to Experience Dimension to the best knowledge of the researcher which is introduced in the NEO-FFI model yet. In this model, as was stated before in chapter one, two important dimensions of personality will be investigated simultaneously; these two dimensions are openness to experience and extroversion which are assumed to be effective in learning a foreign language. Since in the present study, one mode of learning is learning through oral class discussion, these two dimensions of personality show themselves better.

In the present study, the time barrier is removed and the participants will willingly take part in-class discussion, and online written chatting and will take any tests that they are required. Besides, taking as many cognitive factors as possible into consideration in the field of language teaching and learning and implementing them in feedback provision can improve the current learning situation for teachers and language learners. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to fill these gaps and provide implications for stakeholders and practitioners in our country as well as other nations.

In Iran's educational system, especially when it comes to teaching and learning a foreign language, very little attention and prominence are given to the real users of the new language, in our context we mean instructors and language learners. Through the present study, the researcher intends to bring these two

important groups into the picture and give them the sense of being important, effective, and valuable.

## **METHOD**

### **Design of the Study**

This study tested the usefulness of two different modes of providing feedback: online and traditional. The researcher wanted to discover which mode of feedback provision was more effective in improving the writing quality of ESL learners. Treatments were providing 6 types of feedback through online sessions and written form on the papers delivered by the participants. The 6 types of feedback used in the present undertaking were explicit feedback, recast, clarification, metalinguistic clues, elicitation, and repetition.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 164 intermediate (male and female) EFL learners from 4 English language schools in Tabriz, Iran. For at least 5 years, they had been studying English at the schools. Their age ranged from 16 to 22 and these language learners were drawn from among a larger group by taking the proper proficiency test. TOEFL test was applied for screening these language learners; the language learners scoring between 477 and 510 were marked as intermediate language learners. The screening phase was completed in one of the institutes which had the optimal setting for holding the test sessions.

### **Instruments**

The tool or instruments used in this study were, first, a TOEFL to screen the participants. Second, a pretest writing task of 200 words. After implementing the treatments, another writing task of 200 words was implemented as the posttest.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Based on the researcher's investigations, 317 intermediate language learners (male and female) from 4 English language schools in Tabriz were available and agreed to participate in the first phase of this study. By taking the proper proficiency test, namely, a TOEFL test,

the scores of 164 of them fell between  $\pm 1SD$ ; 66 of them agreed to participate in the study. Then they were asked to deliver 200-word writing samples on a predetermined descriptive subject. The participants delivered their writings and those writings were analyzed based on CAF criteria (Table 1). For measuring the grammatical complexity, the number of dependent clauses per clause was calculated, for measuring accuracy, the number of error-free units per T-units was calculated and for measuring fluency, the number of words per T-unit was calculated. This study will employ

ratio-based measures as opposed to simple frequency counts, as they have been argued to be more valid representations of learners' developing inter-language (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998, p. 119). Each of the following measures will be calculated for participants' written production.

### Data Analysis Procedure

Regarding Table 1, the participants' compositions were analyzed for measuring grammatical complexity.

**Table 1**

*CAF Measures Used in the Current Study*

Construct	Measure	Code
Grammatical complexity	Dependent clauses per clause	DC/C
Accuracy	Error-free T-units per T-units	Error-free
Fluency	Words per T-unit	W/T

For this matter, two raters counted the clauses and dependent clauses. Afterward, the number of dependent clauses was divided by the total number of clauses. The grammatical complexity of the composition was meant to be the result of the above-mentioned process. To improve the reliability of the results, two experts rated each composition and then the mean of their scores was recorded for final calculations.

After the abovementioned stage, the accuracy of the produced texts by the participants was calculated. For this, the raters counted error-free T-units and divided the result into the number of T-units. The obtained results showed the accuracy of the texts.

And finally, for measuring the fluency of the writing projects, the raters divided the number of words into the number of T-units. The results were meant to show fluency. Two raters were required to rate each piece of writing to guarantee the reliability of the ratings.

After analyzing the writing tasks, the 66 participants were grouped into two experimental groups. One of them underwent treatment through online sessions and the other received feedback on their papers. For the first

experimental group, comprising 34 participants, ten 1-hour sessions were held in which the participants talked on the topics which were selected by the researcher and they received the appropriate feedback for the errors or mistakes they made during the discussion. These sessions were held for ten weeks and every week the participants were assigned to take part in the online discussions.

For the other experimental group, comprising 32 participants, 10 writing tasks were assigned. The participants were requested to deliver a 200-word writing task every week for ten weeks. Every time they handed in their writings, appropriate feedback was provided on their papers, and the participants were asked to study the feedback. The feedback which was provided to all participants was explicit forecast, clarification, metalinguistic clues, elicitation, and repetition. For example, in online sessions the participants would say, "I didn't see it Thursday." and the researcher would say or type, "do you think we can use simple past tense after didn't?" as a metalinguistic clue and then the participant would correct that error. In another case, a participant would type, "he talked to him but he

didn't say anything.”, the researcher would ask, “would you please explain more who “he” is and what “him” refers to?” as a request for clarification. The same feedback provision was applied to those participants who delivered writings. The researcher marked their errors or mistakes and wrote appropriate feedback. Then their writings were returned to them. After holding the sessions, a posttest was given to the participants. The participants were asked to create a piece of writing on the very subject that they had put down about in the pretest stage.

The justification for the use of the same topic was that it was assumed that after quite 3 months, the participants could not think of what they had delivered in the pretest. Like the pretest phase, the participants' renderings were analyzed in terms of CAF after being typed in Microsoft word.

## RESULTS

The results of the pretest and posttest are illustrated in the following table.

**Table 2**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables Points in the Experimental Groups in Pre-test and Post-test*

Groups	Measures	Grammatical complexity		Accuracy		Fluency	
		Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Chat with FB	Mean	0/22	0/32	0/23	0/33	5/49	7/18
	SD	0/02	0/03	0/03	0/03	0/27	0/27
Traditional with FB	Mean	0/22	0/21	0/21	0/20	5/38	5/36
	SD	0/01	0/01	0/01	0/01	0/32	0/27

One of the prerequisites for using covariance analysis is to make sure the data is normal. Table 3 examines the normality of the research

data using Kolomogrthe of-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests.

**Table 3**

*Normalization Results Using Kolomogrov-Smirnoff and Shapiro-Wilk test*

Variable	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			Shapiro-Wilk Test		
		Statistics	df	Sig.	Statistics	df	Sig.
Grammatical complexity pre-test	Chat with FB	0/142	34	0.064	0.927	34	0.056
	Traditional	0/311	32	0.084	0.861	32	0.071
Accuracy pre-test	Chat with FB	0/123	34	0.073	0.854	34	0.084
	Traditional	0/156	32	0.061	0.910	32	0.061
Fluency pre-test	Chat with FB	0/143	34	0.076	0.949	34	0.115
	Traditional	0/106	32	200	0.974	32	0.623

## DISCUSSION

The present undertaking compared two modes of providing CF to Iranian EFL learners which were online chatting and written form or the traditional way. The results of the study revealed that due to several reasons, the participants' writing quality who received CF via online sessions was remarkably better than

the writing quality of the participants getting CF traditionally. While this study can have some practical implications which will be noted in the conclusion part, the three questions of the research will be answered in this section.

Since writing skill in learning the English language has been proven to be essential, the impact of giving CF on the Iranian intermediate

EFL learners' writing quality was investigated in the present article. For this matter, different kinds of CF were offered in two different modes, i.e. class discussions and online chatting. The above-mentioned modes were investigated and compared to discern whether any of them would be more influential than the others in offering CF to the participants. Interesting findings were recorded which expressed that CAF was improved in the posttest phase of the two experimental groups secured by CF. An improvement was seen in the post-test of the two groups; however, the improvement in the post-test of the group receiving CF via online chatting was more significant than those who received CF traditionally which answers the first question of this research. We assume that there are several arguments for this improvement.

The first argument is thought to be the essence of online sessions or chatting. That is to say, nowadays people and mostly students are accustomed to online communication of any type for any reason. This mode of communication gives several opportunities to such people; opportunities such as being anonymous, relaxed and less stressed, open to communication with strangers, able to ask their questions freely and explicitly, etc. online chatting seems to be intriguing in contrast to face-to-face communication or even error correction in the traditional way which is boring and old to today's generation of students and language learners. This is generalized to EFL learners too. It seems that considering the current situation of teaching and learning in Iran because of the pandemic situation, Iranian EFL learners enjoy learning their lessons through chatting in traditional classes. We should add parents' worry to this situation too which leads to them encouraging their children to join online classes. This enthusiasm for online learning helps language learners to notice the flow of conversation and the CF provided to them.

For the second justification, one might say that students are used to receiving FB traditionally, which is meant receiving CF on their writings. In most cases, it is observed that the students do not pay attention to the provided

FB and they simply put the papers away. That is why the traditional way of correcting FB, in contrast to the modern way of FB provision, seems to be more effective. The captivating nature of online chatting attracts the students' attention toward the CF given.

Another justification can be mentioned. Time availability is another factor that should be observed in online chatting. It means that the students and teachers can decide on the time of classes held online and this gives freedom to both teachers and learners. Another case related to the time of chatting is that the participants have more time and chances to correct their mistakes to edit for example their typed messages. They can also review the chats and CF provided later and many times. But if they are corrected traditionally on paper, they do not have access to the CF provided to other learners like their access to the learners in on-line sessions. The anonymity of the participants in online sessions is another factor that adds interest to online sessions. Participants can take different names for them and make mistakes without stress and they can practice and test what they have recently learned. They do not also feel any stress when they are corrected by the instructor. To answer the second and third questions of the study which asked about the usefulness of giving corrective feedback either through online sessions or traditionally, we should agree with the results that the feedback provision seems essential.

## CONCLUSION

The attractiveness of online communication and chatting through apps is undeniable, especially for the new generation of people and particularly language learners who prefer everything easy and convenient. These days, partly because of the pandemic disease, COVID-19, most teaching and learning is carried out through online sessions and the field of TEFL is also affected and has not been untouched, consequently. Asking and delivering assignments are done online also for the ease of both instructors and students most of the communication between instructors and learners happens online, and similarly, CF provision in TEFL. So why should the EFL

instructors and practitioners take advantage of the present situation that is teaching and helping language learners through online sessions?

Literature in the field contends that Teachers teaching English as a foreign language spend much time answering the students about the mechanics of writing. But with the use of new technologies, the time spent on the process of error correction can be saved and less effort will be required. Meanwhile, language learners are attracted to new ways of error correction since in other lessons they mostly receive error corrections on paper and in written form. So, using a new channel for CF provision can be refreshing for both teachers and learners, especially for teachers to save more time and effort. There might be several pedagogical implications for language learning materials developers and instructors.

As for the implications of the study, we should hint that the Iranian educational system needs to refresh and improve its instructional strategies through some well-liked apps such as Telegram, Whatsapp, etc. to improve and enhance the teaching and learning process at any level of education and synchronize itself with what is happening globally. The teaching and learning process especially second language teaching and learning should be more modern and livelier for both learners and instructors and encourage them to communicate more and pave the way for the instructor to provide CF more easily. This facilitation leads to the second implication. As it was brought up earlier, teaching and learning language without CF provision are not imaginable and it can be fruitless. If teachers do not show any reaction to students' mistakes, learning would not happen. The only thing teachers nowadays do is provide CF traditionally but if they are encouraged and allowed to use modern ways of providing CF, it can be hoped that shortly we see more advancement in the teaching and learning languages area in Iran.

In several ways, there were some constraints for doing the present undertaking which is hoped that they would be removed for further research. For example, we could not have all participants present and gathered at the exact, expected, and scheduled time so that other

present participants felt to get bored before embarking on the online sessions. Another limitation was the fluctuating Internet speed in Iran which has made doing such research requiring the Internet quite bothersome.

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### Biodata

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