



## The effect of written corrective commentary on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability and its relationship with writing anxiety

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore the impact of teachers' commentary feedback on EFL learners' writing skill and writing anxiety. Moreover, it sought to provide a greater understanding of this effect on different elements of writing such as structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. The study adopted a quantitative research design, in which 60 participants were selected from a private language institute in Shiraz through convenience sampling. The results demonstrated that teachers' corrective feedback assist students' writing ability. Besides, the results indicated that written corrective commentary feedback led to improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance in respect to elements of structure and vocabulary, but not that of mechanics. Moreover, this research declared that giving written corrective feedback can decrease the participants' writing anxiety to a significant amount. The findings of the present study are of value to EFL teachers and learners who are involved in teaching and learning writing skill.

**Keywords:** commentary feedback, writing skill, writing anxiety, writing elements

### 1. Introduction

Many EFL teachers are not satisfied with their students' improvement in writing despite the fact that they check the students' writing assignments thoroughly and return them to the students. This deficiency may be due to the weak and ineffective strategies used in proposing commentary and feedback to the students on the part of teachers.

Writing correction feedback should take place in a strategic framework; bombarding learners with discouraging remarks works in a reversal way. Besides, learning occurs while cognitive processes are carried out in the students' mind. Correction feedbacks provided for learners' writing allow students to think about committed errors. It makes them aware of the frequent errors they may commit in their writing.

Furthermore, anxiety disorders are more prevalent than any other mental health disorders in EFL learners worldwide in general, comprising the majority of lifetime mental health disorders (Kessler et al, 2009), and Iranian ones specifically. Anxiety also can negatively affect writing performance. Based on what mentioned above, there is a dearth of study in investigating the effect of teachers' written commentary feedback on writing samples in context of Iranian EFL learners and its relationship with writing anxiety, therefore, the present study will try to shed more light on these issues.

Although, various factors play roles on the effect of feedbacks on writing, there is little consensus about these issues in the field of EFL writing. Careful consideration of the nature of feedback on writing may offer a vivid image of the influence of feedbacks on writing.

Besides, the findings of the present study can have several important pedagogical implications for both learners and teachers. The results can contribute to devising fruitful classroom situations to teach writing. Discussion of the influential elements of writing corrective commentary can familiarize EFL learners with their own deficiencies and

weaknesses in writing performance which may lead to the improvement of this skill. As well, the findings could bring insight to instructor for assigning remedial tasks according to the learners' abilities. In addition, identifying the errors committed by learners in writing tasks and informing novice ones with corrective feedbacks can compensate for their writing skill weaknesses.

In sum, doing any experimental research in the vein of writing skill is really valuable and fruitful for Iranian EFL learners, because findings of such studies can lead us to standard decision makings and necessary analyses. In L2 process, it seems essential to improve EFL learners' writing ability and it will be equally important to examine the effective factors on writing skill and analyze the present state of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance, to identify the problems in this part and address those to improve the overall situation.

The major issue examined in this study is whether teacher commentary feedback assist EFL learners' writing skill. Besides, this research tried to investigate different comprising elements of writing including: structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Finally, the current study aimed at investigating written commentary feedback relationship with writing anxiety. The present study will set out to find answer for the following research questions:

1. Does written corrective commentary have any significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?
2. Does written corrective commentary have any effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance improvement regarding elements of structure, vocabulary, and mechanics?
3. Does written corrective commentary have any significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing anxiety?

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1 Design of the Study

The present study is a quantitative survey study, which has used

descriptive and inferential statistics to reveal the effects of English teachers' written corrective feedback on EFL learners' writing skill. The methodology used in the current study is survey research which is a quantitative method, whereby a researcher poses some set of predetermined questions to an entire group or sample of individuals. This study attempted to find out if teachers' commentary feedback assist EFL learners' writing skill improvement and also to investigate written commentary feedback relationship with writing anxiety.

## 2.2 Participants and Sampling

A total of 60 female EFL learners participated in the present study. They were learning English at private language institutes in Shiraz. They were all at upper intermediate level. Their age range was from 16 to 24 with an average age of 21.34 (SD =0.62). They were all Persian native speakers. They were selected based on availability and their English proficiency level.

They were studying all English Language skills in the term when they were selected for this study e.g., Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. The students had studied writing in the previous levels, yet they were learning it at the time of the present study, too, so they were required to write paragraphs on different topics. It should be added that both the teacher and the rater of the present research was the researcher who conducted the research on the learners and also she herself taught writing to the participants and rater their writing samples.

## 2.3 Instrument of the Study

The instrument employed for the study was the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) developed by Cheng (2004) which is utilized as a questionnaire to assess the participants' writing anxiety. (Appendix A)

The SLWAI measures the degree to which an individual feels anxious when writing in an L2, and contains 22-items, all of which are answered on a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. SLWAI has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha of .91. (Cheng, 2004). The Cronbach alpha for the present study was measured after a pilot study done on 10 participants and it was .89.

The corpus and topic used in this study was based on their book (Appendix B). Besides, the teacher used IELTS independent writing task rating scale. Also, in order to provide the learners with written corrective feedback, she resorted to the model presented in Table 1.

## 2.4 Data Collection Procedure

The study took place in the summer semester of 2016. Totally, there was a population of 60 students. The researcher classified the students into two classes, 30 participated in the experimental group, and 30 participated in the control group. The participants in both control and experimental groups were selected from upper intermediate Level.

One of the classes was selected as experimental group in which the teacher gave corrective feedback and the other class was selected as the control group whose students received no corrective feedback. Both groups received writing instruction during the 10-week summer semester. At the beginning of the semester, the SLWAI questionnaire was distributed among the students of both classes in order to assess their level of writing anxiety. Besides, at the beginning of the semester, the participants took part in a writing test which was regarded as

their pretest. During the 20 sessions of the semester the teacher taught the writing task based on their book, but in rating their writing sample, the teacher wrote written corrective feedback for the experimental group, while she only wrote a score on the control group's sample. At the end of the semester both groups took part in writing test, which was regarded as post-test. The anxiety questionnaire was also distributed at the end of the semester among all 60 participants in order to check the changes in the participants' writing anxiety after the treatment.

## 2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The SLWAI was analyzed by summing the subjects' ratings of the 22-items. When statements of the SLWAI were negatively worded, responses were reversed and recorded, so that in all instances, a high score represented high anxiety.

To answer the present study questions, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation, and variance were used in order to present information about writing anxiety and writing scores of each group. Besides, a series of paired and independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether students differed in their writing anxiety and writing ability after the treatment.

## 3. Results

As cited before, this study sought to explore the impact of teachers' commentary feedback on FL learners writing skill improvement. Besides, In order to yield a clear picture of this change, this effect is investigated in respect to different comprising elements of writing, including structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Furthermore, this research scrutinized written commentary feedback relationship with writing anxiety. To reach these aims, four research questions were examined in this study. This study tried to answer the following four research questions. The following sections present the results.

### Research Question 1. Does written corrective commentary have any significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?

The first research question aimed at assessing the effect of commentary feedback on the participants' writing ability. As mentioned in chapter three, the participants were classified into control and experimental groups; and just the experimental group received commentary feedback. The table below, compares the two groups' writing pre-test scores to make sure that both groups were at the same level of writing ability before receiving any instructions or commentary feedbacks.

As Table 2 signifies, there were 30 participants in each group, and the mean score of the experimental group was equal to 13.30 and that of the control group was 12.70. The mean scores were different. In order to make sure whether these incontinuity was statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was run, the result of which is presented in Table 3.

According to the obtained results of Table 3, the two groups' mean scores were not statistically different (Sig. (2-tailed) = .251  $\leq$  0.05). Therefore, it can be stated that both groups' pre-test mean scores were not different.

Tables 4 and 5 try to report the post-test scores of both experimental group (who received commentary feedback) and control group. The post-test mean score of the experimental group was 15.46 and that of control group was 13.06. According to this mean scores, the experimental group outperformed the control group. In order to assess if this difference is statistically

significant or not, an independent samples t-test was utilized, the result of which is reported in Table 4. As Table 5 indicates, there is a statistically significant difference between the post-test mean scores of these two groups (Sig. (2-tailed) = .000  $\leq$  0.05).

### **Research Question 2. Does written corrective commentary have different effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance improvement in respect to the elements of structure, vocabulary, and mechanics?**

The second research question tries to inspect the effect of written commentary feedback on the experimental group participants' different elements of writing such as structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. Table 6 reports descriptive statistics of pre and post-test structure mean scores of both groups. Based on Table 6, the pre-test mean score was equal to 5.10, while this score in the post-test increased to 6.03. Although there was an increase in this mean score from pre-test to post-test, to assess its significance statistically, a paired sample t-test was required.

According to Table 7, the result of the paired sample t-test indicates that (Sig. (2-tailed) = .004  $\leq$  0.05) the pre-and post-tests scores of structural elements of the experimental group participants' writing samples have statistically significant difference; in other words, compared to pre-test structure scores, the scores of structural elements in post-test increased.

Table 8 demonstrates the descriptive statistics related to vocabulary scores of the writing samples of both pre- and post-tests of experimental group. According to Table 8, the vocabulary mean scores in pre-test was 2.10 and it was equal to 7.10 in post-test. A paired sample test was run to compare these two mean scores which are represented in Table 9. The t-test revealed that the mean scores had statistically significant difference (Sig. (2-tailed) = .004  $\leq$  0.05), meaning that the vocabulary mean scores had a significant increase in the post-test.

Tables 10 and 11 are allocated to descriptive and inferential statistics of the element of mechanics of pre- and post-test scores. The experimental group mean scores in the pre-test was 7.83 and it increased to 7.93 in the post-test. In order to assess this difference statistically, a paired sample t-test was utilized. Based on Table 11, there is no statistically significant difference between mechanics element in pre-test score and post-test score (Sig. (2-tailed) = .557  $\geq$  0.05).

### **Research Question 3. Does written corrective commentary have any significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing anxiety?**

Assessing the effect of written corrective commentary on the Iranian EFL learners' writing anxiety was one of the purposes of the present study. To reach this aim, all the participants answered to writing anxiety questionnaires both before and after the experiment. The results are summarized in Tables 12 and 13 that are dedicated to pre-test scores of both groups in order to support their similarity in writing anxiety before anticipating the experiment. Based on the Table 12, the writing anxiety of experimental group's mean score was 15.70 out of 20 while that of control group was 14.93.

An independent samples t-test was used to evaluate the difference between the participants in anxiety scores before the experiment. According to Table 13, there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups' pre-test anxiety scores (Sig. (2-tailed) = .557  $\geq$  0.05). Consequently, both

groups' writing anxiety scores were not statistically different before starting the experiment.

Table 14 represents the descriptive statistics of anxiety scores of participants in post-test. As the table makes clear, the experimental group mean was 8.06 and that of control group was 14.0. By comparing and contrasting these scores with the scores of Table 11, it is obvious that, the experimental groups' score is lower than the control groups'.

Table 15 is dedicated to the comparison of these mean scores through an independent sample t-test. This table signifies that the experimental and control group has statistically significant difference with regards to their anxiety post-test mean scores (Sig. (2-tailed) = .000  $\leq$  0.05), meaning that the anxiety of the experimental group was lower than the control group.

## **4. Discussion**

The first research question was if written corrective commentary has any significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. To answer this question, an independent sample t-test used and according to its results, as reported in Table 5, the experimental group participants, who received corrective feedback during their writing, outperformed their counterparts, who just received a score on their writing samples without any feedback. This difference can be attributed to giving written feedback to students' errors at the time of correcting them. Based on this finding, the first research hypothesis, "*Written corrective commentary has no significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability*", is rejected. On the contrary, it can be claimed that written commentary feedback has significant positive effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing ability. This finding is in line with other researchers (Fathman et al. 1990; Semke, 1984; Zamel, 1985) [2,4,6] who worked on the same issue, and found correcting feedback as an effective element in teaching and learning writing.

The second research question sought to see if written corrective commentary has different effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance improvement in respect to the elements of structure, vocabulary, and mechanics. The answer to this question was portrayed via three paired sample t-tests in Tables 7, 9, and 11. According to the result of these tables, written corrective commentary feedback lead to improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing performance in elements of structure and vocabulary, but there was no significant difference between experimental and control group in element of mechanics. Therefore, to assess the second research hypothesis "*Written corrective commentary does not have different effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing performance improvement in elements of structure, vocabulary, and mechanics*," it can be stated that this hypothesis is rejected with regard to elements of structure and vocabulary, but on the side of mechanics, this hypothesis is accepted since no significant improvement was observed in element of mechanics after giving written commentary feedback to experimental group.

The last research question was: "*Does written corrective commentary have any significant effects on the Iranian EFL learners' writing anxiety?*" As writing anxiety was another aspect of this study, this variable was examined before and after the experiment and the result, as reported in Table 15, obviously declared that giving written corrective feedback can decrease the participants' writing anxiety to a significant amount. As the last research hypothesis was "*Written corrective commentary has no*

significant effect on the Iranian EFL learners' writing anxiety", the finding of the study rejected this hypothesis. This result lends support in Daly (1991) <sup>[1]</sup> and Young's (1991) <sup>[5]</sup> research results,

emphasizing on eliminating learning and specially writing anxiety to increase the students' ability.

5. Tables

**Table 1:** Description of error categories used for feedback and analysis (Ferris et al., 2001)

Verb errors (V)	All errors in verb tense or form, including relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Noun ending errors (NE)	Plural or possessive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary, includes relevant subject-verb agreement errors.
Article errors (Art)	Article or other determiner incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary.
Wrong word (WW)	All specific lexical errors in word choice or word form, including preposition and pronoun errors. Spelling errors only included if the (apparent) misspelling results in an actual English word.
Sentence structure (SS)	Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, comma splice), word order, omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases, other unidiomatic sentence construction.

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics of writing pre-test scores

groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
experimental	30	13.3000	2.00258	.36562
control	30	12.7000	2.00258	.36562

**Table 3:** Independent Samples Test of writing pre-test 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
Equal variances assumed	.005	.943	1.160	58	.251	.60000	.51707	-43502	1.63502
Equal variances not assumed			1.160	58.000	.251	.60000	.51707	-43502	1.63502

**Table 4:** Descriptive statistics of writing post-test scores

group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
experimental	30	15.4667	2.20866	.40324
control	30	13.0667	1.92861	.35211

**Table 5:** Independent Samples Test of writing post-test 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
Equal variances assumed	.234	.630	4.483	58	.000	2.40000	.53534	1.32840	3.47160
Equal variances not assumed			4.483	56.966	.000	2.40000	.53534	1.32798	3.47202

**Table 6:** Descriptive statistics of writing post-test structure scores of experimental group

structure	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	30	5.1000	1.95378	.35671
Post-test	30	6.0333	1.60781	.29354

**Table 7:** Paired Samples Test of writing post-test structure scores of experimental group

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
structure	-.93333	1.61743	.29530	-1.53729	-.32937	-3.161	29	.004	

**Table 8:** Descriptive statistics of writing post-test vocabulary scores of experimental group

vocabulary	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	30	5.8333	2.10227	.38382
Post-test	30	7.1000	1.64736	.30077

**Table 9:** Paired Samples Test of writing post-test vocabulary scores of experimental group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
vocabulary	-1.26667	1.38796	.25341	-1.78494	-.74839	-4.999	29	.000

**Table 10:** Descriptive statistics of writing post-test mechanics scores of experimental group

mechanics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	30	7.8333	1.62063	.29588
Post-test	30	7.9333	1.22990	.22455

**Table 11:** Paired Samples Test of writing post-test mechanics scores of experimental group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
mechanics	-.10000	.92289	.16850	-.44461	.24461	-.593	29	.557

**Table 12:** Descriptive statistics of writing anxiety pre-test scores

groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
experimental	30	15.7000	2.50723	.45776
control	30	14.9333	2.58555	.47205

**Table 13:** Independent Samples Test of writing anxiety pre-test 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
Equal variances assumed	.000	1.000	1.166	58	.248	.76667	.65755	-.54957	2.08290
Equal variances not assumed			1.166	57.945	.248	.76667	.65755	-.54959	2.08293

**Table 14:** Descriptive statistics of writing anxiety post-test scores

groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
experimental	30	8.0667	3.86793	.70619
control	30	14.0000	2.71649	.49596

**Table 15:** Independent Samples Test of writing anxiety post-test 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
Equal variances assumed	3.152	.081	-6.876	58	.000	-5.93333	.86295	-7.66071	-4.20596
Equal variances not assumed			-6.876	52.010	.000	-5.93333	.86295	-7.66495	-4.20172

**6. Conclusion**

This study showed that, the participants who received corrective feedback about their writing errors outperformed those participants who just received a score on writing samples without any corrective feedback. This difference signifies the positive effects of corrective feedback on writing ability of EFL learners. It can be concluded that direct corrective feedback is one of the most effective strategies to boost the participants' writing performance. This result suggests that EFL teachers to decrease and even eliminate their learners' writing failures by giving them written corrective feedbacks. The findings, further, showed that written corrective commentary feedback leads to improvement of Iranian EFL

learners' writing performance in respect to the elements of structure and vocabulary, but it did not have effect on the element of mechanics. It may be due to the fact that the focus of teachers has mostly been on vocabulary and grammatical points and also, that the students may have less problems in the element of mechanics. But it should be added that, even the element of mechanic (includes Capitalization, Punctuation, Spelling, Numbers, Contractions, Technical Abbreviations, Units of Measurement, and etc.) witnesses more improvement among learners who receive feedback. Furthermore, the results declared that giving written corrective feedback can decrease the participants' writing anxiety to a significant amount.

According to this results, it can be recommended that EFL teachers should not limit their teaching to controlled exercises and production-based writing which seems to cause anxiety in student. That is, students should be encouraged to express their ideas and knowledge in writing from the early stages of education. It seems crucial to establish a learning environment where students can write in their L2 without embarrassment, where every students' written contribution is adequately valued and where self-confidence is built up. To reach this aim, instructors need to offer more encouragement and positive feedback, and allow experimentation without evaluation.

## 7. References

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