

The Impact of Using Hyland's Mitigation Strategies on EFL Learners' Writing Ability: A socio-cultural perspective

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Abstract

This research chiefly focused on the application of mitigation strategies and traditional form of feedback in writing development of the fifth semester University students majoring in TEFL and English Translation fields based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in general and the notion of "Zone of Proximal Development" in particular. To that end, this study relied on a pre-posttest experimental design which was mediated by different written types of feedback such as mitigation strategies vs. error correction to find out if any gains in writing development of participants could be achieved. It is to be noted that participants of this inquiry were 125 fifth semester university students who were chosen and assigned to four experimental and one control groups. The materials of this study consisted of a textbook called Writing Power by Nancy White (2002) that the teacher taught during the course of instruction; a standard writing test of IELTS (2007) as a pretest; another standard writing test of IELTS (2007) as a posttest. The results showed that although homogeneity among the groups was observed on the pretest, writing scores of those groups which received corrective feedback and paired comments outscored those of the other groups. On the other hand, the interrogative forms and personal attributions had the least increase from the pretest to the posttest. Hence, it is recommended that some teacher training courses regarding the appropriate use of these strategies be held in educational settings in a way that teachers can apply these techniques in the best possible ways in their writing classes.

Keywords: Mitigation strategies, sociocultural theory, writing proficiency

Introduction

Writing is considered very important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second and foreign language education. Weigle (2002) states that the ability to write effectively allows individuals from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate whether used in reporting analyses, business reports, letters, or e-mail messages. According to Hendricson (1978, p. 387), "making errors is a necessary and natural process of language learning. Inevitably, learner errors and feedback towards errors have been of great interest to language teachers and researchers." Nevertheless, there has been little agreement on how teachers must respond to L2 learners' errors.

Hyland and Hyland (2006) regards feedback as essential for the development of second language writing skills, both for its potential for learning and for students' motivation. Keh (1990, p.294) defines feedback on writing as "input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision." Hence, feedback is supposed to show learners what is right or wrong in order for them to produce better texts in future (Ham-Lyons & Heasley, 1987). In spite of there being several studies done on different forms of written feedback such as error correction, peer feedback and so on by researchers and their strong ideas that these types of feedback are important and influential on student writing, no real conclusions can be made based on the interpretations of their findings on the effectiveness of them in improving students' writing.

As a matter of fact, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) refers to the theory of mental development and functioning formulated by Vygotsky (1978), who introduced the term Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under an adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers"(p. 86).

The present study is going to study the effects of interpersonal aspects of written feedback or mitigation strategies on Iranian EFL learners' writing development based on the concept of the zone of proximal development in Vygotsky's SCT. This framework was chosen because receiving different forms of feedback students might move from reliance on teachers' feedback to the independence performance where they can write essays alone without any help.

Literature Review

Praise, Criticism, and Suggestion (Mitigation Strategies)

According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), there are three broad types of written feedback: praise, criticism, and suggestion. Praising encourages the reoccurrence of appropriate language behaviors where writers are accredited for some characteristics, attributes or skills (Holmes, 1988). However, Praise needs to be credible and informative as false praising is likely to discourage their good writing (Cardelle&Corno, 1981, cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Moreover, premature and too much praise, especially at early stages of the writing cycle, may confuse writers and discourage their self- revisions (Hyland, 2008).

On the other hand, criticism is a negative comment used by reviewers in expressing their dissatisfaction with the text. Suggestion is the third category of feedback which is related to criticism but has a positive orientation. Suggestion differs from criticism in containing commentary for improvement. Productive suggestion is also known as constructive criticism which includes clear and achievable actions for writers. In general, students remember and value encouraging remarks, but they also welcome constructive criticisms rather than false positive appraisals (Ferris, 1995).

Research on praise and criticism in feedback is fairly sparse. Several L1 studies suggest that teachers attend to error more than excellence and tend to focus their feedback on the negative aspects of the writing. Dragga (1986, cited in Daiker, 1989), for example, analyzed 40 student essays and found that 94% of comments focused on what students had done poorly or incorrectly. Experimental studies have often gone further to examine the different effects of focusing on positive and negative aspects of texts.

Taylor and Hoedt (1966), for instance, failed to find any difference in the quality of writing produced by students receiving either positive or negative feedback, although they did show that negative feedback had a detrimental effect on writer confidence and motivation. Gee (1972) also reported no significant differences in quality of writing, but more positive attitudes from those whose writing had been praised.

One problem with these studies is that praise and criticism were contextually disembodied, simply given mechanically according to the group writers were assigned to, with no relationship to the quality of the writing, or teachers' perceptions of students' needs. Other work has recognized that to be effective praise needs to be credible and informative, and that insincere praise is unlikely to encourage good writing (Brophy, 1981). Studies of L2 students' reactions to teacher feedback show that learners remember and value encouraging remarks but expect to receive constructive criticism rather than simple platitudes (Ferris, 1995).

One feature which may influence the patterns of praise and criticism in written feedback is teacher response style. Anson (1989), for instance, has argued that the ways teachers judge writing and define their role when giving feedback are influenced by their belief system. Such beliefs are partly the result of personal constructs, but they also originate in the social context in which teachers work.

Teacher response style may also be influenced by other factors, which can include the language ability of students, task type, and the stage at which feedback is given. Feedback offered at a draft stage will often be different from feedback on a final product, intended to perform a different function. Many teachers view feedback on drafts as more developmental and offer more critical comments on specific aspects of the text, while feedback on a final product is likely to give a holistic assessment of the writing, praising and criticizing more general features. Thus, any study of teacher written feedback must take into account the interplay between teachers, students, texts, and writing purposes and so consider written comments as "multidimensional social acts in their own right" (Sperling, 1994, p. 202).

To sum up, there is no doubt that positive remarks can be motivating and that many L2 learners attach considerable importance to them (Hyland and Hyland, 2001, cited in Hyland, 2008). Furthermore, suggestion and criticism can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum ranging from a focus on what is done poorly to measures for its improvement, so while criticism is a negative comment on a text, suggestions contain a retrievable plan of action for improvement, a do-able revision of some kind (Hyland, 2008). However, one important point to consider, as mentioned above, is that when using these strategies, the quality of writing, the teachers' perceptions of students' needs, and also teacher response style must be taken into account (Brophy, 1981; Anson, (1989).

Interpersonal Aspects of Written Feedback: Mitigation Strategies

English second language writers are often insecure about their writing and can be heartened by positive comments or devastated by criticism. Because of this, teachers often soften the force of their comments using the various mitigation strategies, i.e., paired comments, hedged comments, personal attribution, and interrogative forms (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). That is, they use praise, criticism, suggestion or the combination of them to achieve this purpose. Praise is viewed as an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the person giving feedback. It, therefore, suggests a more intense or detailed response than simple agreement (Holmes, 1988).

Hyland (2000 a, p.44) defines criticism as "an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment" on a text. This definition thus emphasizes commentary which finds fault in aspects of a text, and it is different from suggestion, which is regarded as coming from the more positive end of a continuum. Suggestions differ from criticisms in containing an explicit recommendation for remediation, a relatively clear and accomplishable action for improvement, which is sometimes referred to as "constructive criticism." To know what these strategies are, the following table is provided (Hyland, 2008, p.191).

Table 1. *Different Types of Mitigation Strategies*

<p>Paired comments: Combining criticism with either praise or a suggestion</p> <p>Vocabulary is good but grammar is not accurate and often makes your ideas difficult to understand.</p> <p>Good movement from general to specific, but you need to make a clearer promise to the reader.</p> <p>Hedged comments: Modal verbs, imprecise quantifiers, usuality devices</p> <p>Some of the material seemed a little long-winded and I wonder if it could have been compressed a little.</p> <p>There is possibly too much information here.</p> <p>Personal attribution: teacher responds as an ordinary reader rather than as an expert.</p> <p>I'm sorry, but when reading this essay I couldn't see any evidence of this really. Perhaps you should have given me your outline to look at with the essay.</p> <p>I find it hard to know what the main point of each paragraph is .</p> <p>Interrogative forms: express elements of doubt or uncertainty in the comment.</p> <p>The first two paragraphs-do they need joining?</p> <p>Did you check spelling carefully? Why not make a spelling checklist of words you often get wrong and use this before handing in your final?</p>
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Mitigation strategies in end comments

The use of such mitigation strategies can help moderate the teacher's dominant role and tone down what might be seen as overdirective interventions in students' writing. In addition, mitigation allows teachers to minimize the risk of demotivating students or of taking over their texts, but it is possible to forget that students are reading feedback in a foreign language and that being indirect may actually result in significant misunderstandings (Hyland, 2008).

Considering ZPD and how its notion is congruent with the assumptions of potential and actual development toward receiving feedback in L2 writing, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) concluded that feedback might prove helpful if it is graduated and contingent. Put it differently, it should be started from an implicit level and move on toward an explicit one. Hence, consulting different panel of experts and filed specialists as well as teachers of writing, the researcher came

up with the following categorization of mitigation strategies from the most implicit to the less implicit one:

Table 2. *The Categorization of strategies from the most implicit to the less implicit one*

Strategy	Categorization
1	Personal attribution
2	Hedged comments
3	Interrogative forms
4	Paired comments

Hence, this study aims to answer the following research question:

1. Do mitigation strategies (paired comments, hedged comments, interrogative forms and personal attribution) have any statistically significant effects on participants' writing development?

Method

In the present study, the data were gathered and analyzed quantitatively. The design of this experimental study was pre-posttest oriented which was mediated by different written types of feedback so as to find out if any gains in writing development of participants could be achieved concerning the application of mitigation strategies in comparison to traditional form of written feedback (Error Correction).

Participants

Participants of the quantitative phase of this study were selected based on a convenience sampling from B.A. students of TEFL who were studying at the fifth semester and had taken the Essay Writing Course. The researcher planned twelve extra-curricular sessions for the randomly selected students of each class. It is to be noted that 125 students were assigned to four experimental groups and one control group. Each group consisted of 25 participants.

Materials

The materials of this study consisted of a textbook called Writing Power by Nancy White (2002) that the teacher taught during the course of instruction; a standard writing test of IELTS (2007) as a pretest (Appendix A); another standard writing test of IELTS (2007) as a posttest (Appendix B). With respect to the fact that IELTS tests of writing are of two types, i.e., task 1 (describing graphs, charts, and tables) and task 2 (writing about a topic), it is to be mentioned that the researcher used two different forms of the task 2 as the pretest and posttest of this study.

Inter-rater reliability of the posttest

Because the scores assigned to students were rated by two more raters and the purpose was to find the correlation among three or more raters, the use of correlation coefficient is not recommended as it explored the relation between two continuous variables. To this end, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used as a measurement of intra-class correlation.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.938	.939	3

As Table 3 depicts, Cronbach's alpha value in the Reliability Statistics table is .93 indicating a high degree of correlation among the raters.

Table 4. Inter-Item Correlation Matrix

	Rater1 posttest	rater2 posttest	rater3 posttest
Rater1 posttest	1.000	.842	.828
rater2 posttest	.842	1.000	.838
rater3 posttest	.828	.838	1.000

The extent of correlation between the raters as Table 4 depicts ranges from .83 to .84, which is satisfactorily high.

Data collection procedure

In order to carry out this study, four classes were selected randomly as the experimental groups and also one class as control group from the universities which offer B.A. program in TEFL. One week before starting the instruction, the five groups took the pretest. Then, the teacher teaching a textbook called *Power Writing* by Nancy White (2002), used mitigation strategies in experimental groups; that is, paired comments in class A, hedged comments in class B, Personal attribution in class C, and interrogative forms in class D. Furthermore, in class E, i. e., control group, he used the traditional form of giving written feedback which is referred to as error correction.

The teaching period consisted of twelve sessions, during which time the researcher worked on three types of essays, i.e., argumentation, cause and effect, and comparison and contrast. Four sessions were dedicated to working on each type of the essays mentioned. After that, participants in all classes took the posttest. The results of both pretest and posttest were compared to see if the use of mitigation strategies had any statistically significant effects on subjects' writing in comparison to the use of the traditional way of giving written feedback in control group or not.

The point which is essential to mention is that since four criteria of writing, i.e., grammar, relevance to the main topic, vocabulary and coherence were considered by the researcher in his scoring which was based on IELTS scoring procedure. To get more objective results, in addition to the scoring that was done by the investigator himself, the students' exam papers were rated by two other outside raters preferably university teachers. In this way, the inter-rater reliability of both pretest and posttest's results were determined. Moreover, after a 20-day period of time, they

were asked to rate the scripts again to see if there were any changes in their ratings or not to get the intra-rater reliability of both tests.

Data analysis

Regarding the statistical analyses, since there are five independent variables (mitigation strategies and the traditional form of written feedback) and one dependent variable with different levels (writing and its four criteria, i.e., grammar, the depth of vocabulary and ideas, coherence, and the relevance of content to the main topic), one way ANOVA was used for the analysis of the results of both the pretest and the posttest.

Results and Discussion

This section encapsulates the results of data analysis in line with the research question ; that is, if mitigation strategies have any statistically significant effects on participants' writing development As a result, a series of one-way ANOVAs was run and the results of which were then summarized in the following tables.

Table 5. Totality of Descriptive statistics on the Pretest

Pretest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
					paired comments	100		
hedged commnets	100	2.8675	1.28042	.12804	2.6134	3.1216	.75	6.00
personal attributes	100	3.1000	1.02494	.10249	2.8966	3.3034	1.00	5.00
introgative forms	100	3.1600	1.13902	.11390	2.9340	3.3860	1.00	6.00
corrective feedback	100	2.8450	1.26020	.12602	2.5949	3.0951	.50	5.00
Total	500	2.9635	1.18326	.05292	2.8595	3.0675	.50	6.00

As Table 5 denotes, the highest mean score is associated to the interrogative forms (M=3.16, SD=1.13). The Personal attribution and hedged comments with the mean scores of 3.10 and 2.86 stand at the second and third positions, respectively. The lowest mean score, however, is attributed to the paired comments and the corrective feedback (M=2.84, M2.84).

Table 6. ANOVA Table concerning Totality of Pretest

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
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Between Groups	9.454	4	2.364	1.698	.149
Within Groups	689.192	495	1.392		
Total	698.646	499			

To evaluate if the totality of mitigation strategies and corrective feedback groups scores differed on the pretest, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted. There was not a statistically significance difference at the $p > .05$ level among the five groups on the pretest [$df_{4,495} = 1.69, p = .14$].

Table 7. *Totality of Descriptive statistics on posttest*

Posttest	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
					paired comments	100		
hedged commnets	100	5.7550	1.07660	.10766	5.5414	5.9686	3.00	8.00
personal attributes	100	5.6010	1.00850	.10085	5.4009	5.8011	2.00	8.00
introgative forms	100	4.6900	1.07961	.10796	4.4758	4.9042	2.00	7.00
corrective feedback	100	6.9225	1.17352	.11735	6.6896	7.1554	4.00	9.00
Total	500	5.8622	1.31232	.05869	5.7469	5.9775	2.00	9.00

As depicted in Table 7, the corrective feedback with the mean score of 6.92 had the highest improvement from the pretest to the posttest. The Paired comments ($M=6.34, SD=1.06$) also had the second highest mean score. On the other hand, the interrogative forms and personal attributions had the least increase from the pretest to the posttest.

Table 8. *ANOVA Table concerning Totality of posttest*

Posttest	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	280.869	4	70.217	60.083	.000
Within Groups	578.496	495	1.169		
Total	859.366	499			

To investigate if the totality of mitigation strategies and corrective feedback groups scores differed on the posttest, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance was run. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level among the five groups on the posttest. [$F_{4,495} = 60.08, p = .001$].

Table 9. *Multiple Comparisons of Totality of Posttest Mean Scores*

		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
(I) group	(J) group				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Bonferroni paired comments	hedged commnets	.58750*	.15288	.001	.1564	1.0186
	personal attributes	.74150*	.15288	.000	.3104	1.1726
	introgative forms	1.65250*	.15288	.000	1.2214	2.0836
	corrective feedback	-.58000*	.15288	.002	-1.0111	-.1489
hedged commnets	paired comments	-.58750*	.15288	.001	-1.0186	-.1564
	personal attributes	.15400	.15288	1.000	-.2771	.5851
	introgative forms	1.06500*	.15288	.000	.6339	1.4961
	corrective feedback	-1.16750*	.15288	.000	-1.5986	-.7364
personal attributes	paired comments	-.74150*	.15288	.000	-1.1726	-.3104
	hedged commnets	-.15400	.15288	1.000	-.5851	.2771
	introgative forms	.91100*	.15288	.000	.4799	1.3421
	corrective feedback	-1.32150*	.15288	.000	-1.7526	-.8904
introgative forms	paired comments	-1.65250*	.15288	.000	-2.0836	-1.2214
	hedged commnets	-1.06500*	.15288	.000	-1.4961	-.6339
	personal attributes	-.91100*	.15288	.000	-1.3421	-.4799
	corrective feedback	-2.23250*	.15288	.000	-2.6636	-1.8014
corrective feedback	paired comments	.58000*	.15288	.002	.1489	1.0111

hedged comments	1.16750*	.15288	.000	.7364	1.5986
personal attributes	1.32150*	.15288	.000	.8904	1.7526
interrogative forms	2.23250*	.15288	.000	1.8014	2.6636

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni adjustment indicated that paired comments group mean score differed from those of hedged comments, personal attribution, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Also, hedged comments mean scores as another group varied from those of paired comments, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Moreover, personal attribution means score was discrepant from those of paired comments, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Ultimately, interrogative mean score and corrective feedback mean score were different from the other groups.

Discussion

This study investigated the differences in the totality of the effectiveness of mitigation strategies and the traditional form of written feedback. Its results of the pretest showed that there was not any statistically meaningful difference at the $p > .05$ level among the five groups on the pretest [$F_{4,495} = 1.69, p = .14$]. The results of the posttest, on the other hand, depicted that corrective feedback with the mean score of 6.92 had the highest improvement from the pretest to the posttest. Paired comments ($M=6.34, SD=1.06$) also had the second highest mean score. On the other hand, the interrogative forms and personal attributions had the least increase from the pretest to the posttest. Also, paired comments group mean score differed from those of hedged comments, personal attribution, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Also, hedged comments mean scores as another group varied from those of paired comments, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Moreover, personal attribution means score was discrepant from those of paired comments, interrogative forms and corrective feedback. Ultimately, the interrogative and corrective feedback mean scores were different from the other groups.

The findings of the present study corroborate that of Chandler (2003) in that direct feedback is the best way of correcting students' errors. The results also affirm Ferris and Roberts (2001), Bitchener and Knoch (2010), and Rassaei and Moeinzade (2011) studies. Also, Similar findings are shown in the studies conducted by Ferris and Roberts (2001), Nagata and Hawisher (1995), and Nagata (1997). Moreover, the results showed that paired comments strategy was highly effective after the corrective feedback. Gee (1972) also reported no significant differences in the quality of writing, but more positive attitudes from those whose writing had been praised. Hence, the results of the current study are congruent with that of Gee (1972). Furthermore, several more recent studies have been conducted with the evidence in support of written corrective feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis et al., 2008; Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

Considering ZPD and the relationship between its notion with the different types of feedback used in this work to develop the participants' writing, this study showed that corrective feedback as the most explicit way of correcting students' errors proved quite helpful. Paired comments, as the Table 15 shows, was the most implicit way of correcting students' errors among the other strategies and its efficacy was approved in the second place to improve writing ability.

Table 10. *The Categorization of strategies from the most implicit to the less implicit one*

Strategy	Categorization
1	Personal attribution
2	Hedged comments
3	Interrogative forms
4	Paired comments

On the other hand, the results of this study refuted that of Rob et al. (1986) who used direct feedback vs. 3 types of indirect strategies. He concluded that there was no difference among the feedback types. Part of this incongruence might be explained in terms of cultural divergence and various educational systems according to which students were instructed. Iranian learners are less exposed to target-like English outside the classes as it might be opposed to Japanese learners. Hence, Iranian students would like to receive the feedback explicitly since there is no chance of being exposed to the correct form after leaving the classroom, but Japanese might have more exposure to English even after the classroom.

Conclusion

As the participants of this study show positive attitudes toward teachers' corrective feedback, the educational settings (the Ministry of education and universities) which offer writing courses might consider adding this kind of feedback as a technique in teaching writing. Furthermore, it is highly recommended that teachers be involved in training courses to show them the importance of different feedback strategies specially the corrective one.

Regarding mitigation strategies, criticism is not acknowledged well by participants because it bothers them; nonetheless, they admit that it helps them identify weaknesses in their writing. That is, criticism is important but simultaneously needs to be mitigated by the use of polite words (praise). Moreover, teachers must sidestep impetrative forms and instead use hedged comments. The only problem in using hedging is that participants may not understand it very well. To overcome the very problem, students can ask their teachers for more elaboration if demanded.

The methods teachers select to express their feedback can influence both participants' reactions to it and the extent to which they use it in their revisions. This especially can be observed among EFL learners whose linguistic abilities and cultural expectations may have an effect on the way they accept or process a feedback type.

Although the results of this study showed that the corrective feedback had the first place among Iranian EFL learners in comparison to mitigation strategies, some of these strategies such as paired comments and hedged comments were also favored by them. Hence, it is recommended that some teacher training courses regarding the appropriate use of these strategies be held in educational settings. As a result, teachers can apply these techniques in the best possible way in their writing classes. In this case, keeping Vygotsky's ZPD in mind, EFL learners can move smoothly from the potential to the actual level where they themselves can solve their writing problems independently without the help of teachers.

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Appendices

Appendix A (IELTS Writing Task 2)

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

There is evidence that inhaling cigarette smoke causes health problems not only for smokers but for non-smokers who inhale other people's smoke.

In view of this, smoking should be banned in all public places, even though this would restrict some people's freedom of action.

What are your views?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words.

Appendix B (IELTS Writing Task 2)

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Write about the following topic:

Modern technology now allows rapid and uncontrolled access to and exchange of information. Far from being beneficial, this is a danger to our societies.

What are your views?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words.