Research Article

Paragraph Writing Enhancement of Intermediate ESL Learners through Dialogic Interaction

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ABSTRACT: The present study was conducted to explore the effect of dialogic interaction on the writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners. In order to achieve this goal, a quasi-experimental pretest posttest design was utilized. Besides this quasi-experimental design which was responsible for answering the first research question, the researcher used an interview in order to obtain the data for answering the second research question of the present thesis. A total number of 32 participants were selected and assigned to an experimental group (n= 17) and a control group (n=15). They were homogenized using Oxford Placement Test (OPT). They took a pretest and a post test and undergone a nine-session treatment. Since the distribution of the data was normal an independent sample t test was used to compare the mean scores of the groups. The results of the study showed that the dialogic group, the experimental group, outperformed the control group in terms of their achievement in their writing. Moreover, the results of the interview conducted with the learners showed that the attitude of the learners to the dialogic group was positive toward the use of this technique in the writing class.

INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been discussed as an important skill and expression of thinking, emotion, and needs. Students would be exposed to a great challenge if they are not able to express their thoughts through the written language. Emig contends that the "teaching and learning of writing has a particularly important role in the development of children's education: Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process- and product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies" [1] (p.122).

Writing is a cognitive process and works as a means of learning and expanding idea. Almost all agree that a good language learner is metacognitively aware of the process of language learning and applies the relevant strategies [2]. The process writing occurs as a result of the interaction between the students and the teacher in the form of dialogic interaction.

One theory that takes into account the interaction as a whole is called Activity theory. Activity theory is based upon the work of Vygotsky and his student Leontiev from their studies of cultural- historical psychology in the 1920s. Human activity is a set of actions through the use of tools which can be physical or psychological. The interactions are realized either in teacher's use of dialogue as a means for scaffolding learners [3] or peer group interaction and talk as another means of support.

There are many works about dialogic interaction and metacognitive strategy related to the writing instruction [4]. In spite of recent advances regarding dialogic interaction, it is still required to have further theoretical and empirical work to increase our understanding of how instruction in writing is enacted through the dialogic interactions among participants in diverse educational contexts, and how these processes enhance students' development and learning. Therefore, this study investigates the effect of paragraph writing as a dialogic interaction between in writing process of Iranian EFL students.

Second/Foreign language writing has been studied for centuries across a variety of languages. Success in the academic areas, communication, and self- expression relies heavily on the mastery of this skill and researchers offer their valuable research insights regarding the investigation of the nature of the writing process in foreign language writing [5]. Acquisition of the effective writing skill is necessary to participate and communicate in contemporary society. Therefore, education is found accountable for preparing children to be socially active by giving them high quality writing instruction and by doing so, supporting them to develop essential writing skills [6].

There are important theoretical influences in this study including activity theory, sociocultural theories of language learning [4] and theories of situated learning. Language learning as a dialogic phenomenon takes into account the social context which is at the heart of the sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT proposes that language use and the relevant cognitive process need to be examined within a social context [5]. According to Vygostsky [7], all higher psychological processes were developed as the result of the interplay between an individual's basic cognition and the society to

which individual belonged.

Dialogic interaction occurs as a result of the communication between teachers and learners in the classroom. Theoretical thinking exists for the development of writing in order to connect the thinking process with the relevant activity.

Although there are many research studies considering the effect of metacognitive strategy on writing performance in EFL contexts, most of these studies take into account the product of writing without considering the thinking process during writing. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the writing process through dialogic interaction between the students and the teacher.

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

    1. Does dialogic interaction affect paragraph writing enhancement of L2 learners?

    2. What is the attitude of students towards the application of dialogic interaction in paragraph writing?

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The English terms dialog and dialogism often refer to a concept used by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his work of literary theory, The Dialog Imagination. In a dialog process, various approaches coexist in a normal interaction. Recent research in the field of educational practices has emphasized the key role played by the dialogic interactions among teachers and students in supporting children's development, reasoning and learning [8]. The concept of dialog learning has been linked to the various perspectives and disciplines, such as theory of dialog action, the dialog inquiry approach [9], the theory of communicative action, the notion of dialog imagination [1] and the dialogic self. The concept of dialog is deeply rooted in various disciplines such as philosophy, rhetoric, psychology and rational communication [8].

The dialogical approach to language learning and teaching has a long history stretching back to Socrates and it is highly related to the sociocutural theory. It is worth mentioning that Vygotsky and Bakhtin has contributed substantially to our understanding of the social foundation of learning and thinking. (Renshaw, 2004).

Classroom Interaction and foreign language learning Interaction are highly significant for language teachers. In the area of communicative language teaching, interaction is at the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about [10].

After several decades of research in language teaching and learning it has been discovered that the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself. Rivers [11] states that through interaction students can increase their language store through listening or reading authentic linguistic material, or even through the output of their fellow students in discussion, joint problem- solving tasks or dialog journals. In interaction, students learn language through expression of real meaning in real life.

Vygotsky [7], a psychologist and social constructivist, laid the foundation for the interactionist's view of language acquisition. According to Vygotsky [7], social interaction plays an important role in the development of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where learners construct the new language through socially mediated interaction. Learning is viewed as a variable that can be partly explained by the characteristics of interaction and social context [12].The individual and his/her environment (physical and social) have a dialectical relationship with each other. Consequently the individual's action is seen as part of the social construction of shared understanding (intersubjectivity) [13]. Teachers play a key role in the communicative interaction of the students by teaching them how to ask and answer, how to learn, how to engage in argumentation in order to investigate topics, explain their own thinking and problem solving together to reach consensus on an agreed topic.

According to Alexander (2008), in a dialogic classroom teachers use more high-level questions that probe student's thinking and encourage them to analyze and speculate on ideas. Student-teacher exchanges are longer when the students build on the idea of others or challenging different propositions with evidence. Students learn how to develop their analytical and critical thinking skills through dialogic exchanges with the teacher. The paradigm for this form of learning, as De Larios and Murphy [14] contends, is "apprenticeship learning in which the craft of writing is learned by an apprentice writer from a more experienced and knowledgeable writer" (p. 278).

Within the expanse field of research on dialogic interaction, sociocultural theory is now commonly used as a clarifying conceptual framework. In this research, we start by necessary components of this theory, which aimed at understanding educational functions of classroom writing. The sociocultural theory provides the main explanatory framework for our research and from basis of Vygotsky's work [7]. It is known as cultural – historical activity theory. It is a theoretical framework and relationship between the person's agent and objects of environment shaped by the history of each individual's social and cultural experience.

METHODOLOGY

A.   *Participants*

In this study, a group of Iranian EFL students aged 19-24 participated in the research project. All of the participants were female and at intermediate level. Two groups learning English as a foreign language in an institute in Babol were randomly selected and divided into two groups of experimental and control. Their native language was Persian. The experimental group consisted 17 EFL learners and the control group included 15 learners of English as a foreign language. The learners were mostly university students and BSc holders in different majors. In addition the learners were all from middle-class families living in the urban area.

B. Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study. The following paragraphs describe the each in details:

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to determine language proficiency of the intermediate students. This test contains 60 items including vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension and those learners who score 28-37 are considered to be intermediate learners according to the test manual. Moreover, the participants were required to write an English paragraph about a topic on the time constraints. This writing task is adopted from the Task Two of Writing Section of The Academic IELTS Exam. Moreover, the writing tests were administered twice, for pretest and posttest. The topics were different; however, the correction was done according to the same rubric which was provided by the British Council as the public rubric for assessing IELTS Writing Task II essays. Moreover, the essays were assessed by the same examiner. In order to answer the second research question of the present thesis an interview was administered among the learners of both groups. This interview consists 10 close-ended items and is adopted from Lee's study on learner's reaction to feedback. In other words, learners are not going to provide their attitudes and ideas in their own words, but choose from the options available to them. Since a number of items in this inventory repeat themselves, the researcher merged the items of the interview into 6 items for the interview to conduct a structured interview.

C. Procedures

In order to have two homogeneous comparable groups, the researcher administered OPT, a placement test. The learners who scored in the intermediate range were selected for this thesis and divided randomly into a control group and an experimental group. The following session a pretest was administered to both groups under the same administrative conditions which were according to the IELTS administration manual.

The control group was instructed via traditional product-oriented approach while the experimental group received the dialogic interaction as a treatment. The treatment lasted for 9 sessions. Finally, the post test was administered in the tenth session in order to determine whether there is any significant difference between the mean score of the control group and the experimental group after providing the treatment. Moreover, the learners answered the interview after the final test. The data were obtained and the scores were gathered for further analysis.

RESULTS

Analysis of Data for Research Question One

In order to analyze the data, there is a need to clarify if the data are distributed normally. In order to test the normality of the distribution of the data Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used. The results are shown in table 4.1.

According to the results shown in Table 4.1, the distribution of OPT scores are normal since the observed significance levels are above .05. However, the distribution of the pretest and posttest scores are not normal since the observed significance levels are below .05. According to the results, parametric tests can be conducted for the OPT scores while non-parametric test should be applied for the pretest and posttest scores.

Table 4.2 shows the descriptive statistics for the OPT scores of both groups. According to this table, the observed mean score is 32.62 and the standard deviation is 2.33. Moreover, according o the table the maximum score is 28 and the minimum score is 36.

According to Table 4.3, the observed t is equal to 1.44 and the observed significance level is .15 which is higher than the accepted level .05. Therefore, it can be argued that the difference between the mean OPT scores of both groups are not statistically significant. In other words, the groups are considered equal in terms of their proficiency level.

According to Table 4.4, the observed mean score for the experimental group is 3.41 and the standard deviation is .44. Moreover, the observed mean score for the control group is 3.30 and the standard deviation is .36.

As mentioned earlier in Table 4.1, the distribution of pretest scores is not normal. Hence, Mann-Whittney test is used to compare the pretest score of the two groups. The results are shown in table 4.5. According to this table, the observed Mann-Whitney U is equal to 111.00 and the observed significance level is .49 which is above the accepted level of .05. Hence, it can be argued that there is no significant difference between these two groups in terms of their pretest scores.

According to Table 4.6, the observed mean score for the experimental group is 4.70 and the standard deviation is .35. Moreover, the observed mean score for the control group is 4.00 and the standard deviation is .37.

As mentioned earlier in Table 4.1, the distribution of posttest scores is not normal. Hence, Mann-Whittney test is used to compare the posttest score of the two groups. The results are shown in table 4.7.

TABLE I: TEST OF NORMALITY

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
OPT	Experimental Group	.190	17	.103	.907	17	.089
	Control Group	.142	15	.200*	.978	15	.955
Pretest	Experimental Group	.295	17	.000	.760	17	.001
	Control Group	.326	15	.000	.755	15	.001
Posttest	Experimental Group	.307	17	.000	.837	17	.007
	Control Group	.367	15	.000	.754	15	.001

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

TABLE II: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR OPT SCORES

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
OPT	32	32.6250	2.33832	28.00	36.00
Group	32	1.4688	.50701	1.00	2.00

TABLE III: INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T TEST FOR OPT

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
OPT	Equal variances assumed	.234	.632	1.445	30	.159	1.17647	.81418	-.48630	2.83924
	Equal variances not assumed			1.452	29.915	.157	1.17647	.81020	-.47837	2.83131

TABLE IV: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR PRETEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Experimental Group	17	3.4118	.44142	.10706
	Control Group	15	3.3000	.36839	.09512

TABLE V: MANN-WHITNEY TEST FOR PRETEST SCORES

	Pretest
Mann-Whitney U	111.000
Wilcoxon W	231.000
Z	-.679
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.497
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.551a

TABLE VI: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR POSTTEST

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Experimental Group	17	4.7059	.35614	.08638
	Control Group	15	4.0000	.37796	.09759

TABLE VII: MANN-WHITNEY TEST FOR POSTTEST SCORES

	Posttest
Mann-Whitney U	75.000
Wilcoxon W	228.000
Z	-2.186
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.029
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.049a

a. Not corrected for ties.

b. Grouping Variable: Group

According to this table, the observed Mann-Whitney U is equal to 75.00 and the observed significance level is .02 which is below the accepted level of .05. Hence, it can be argued that there is a statistically significant difference between these two groups in terms of their posttest scores. According to the mean scores reported in table 4.6, it can be concluded the learners in the experimental group outperformed the on-task group in terms of their writing performance on the posttest.

Analysis of Data for Research Question Two

As described in chapter three regarding the second research question, an interview was conducted to explore the attitudes and reactions of the learners in each group regarding the type of feedback they had received during the course. This interview was originally based on the interview developed by Icy Lee and consisted of ten items which helped the researcher to conduct the interview consistently from every participant to the other. The results are shown below according to each item posed in the interview.

1- Was you teacher feedback legible and comprehensible to you? To what extent did you find the feedback useful?

Regarding the first question of the interview it should be mentioned that the learners in the dialogic group found the feedback constructive and 12 out of 17 participants explicitly stated that they had never had such an experience of receiving feedback in writing classes. Although the participants in the control group perceived the feedback they received to be common, as it was the intention of the study, the ones in the experimental found their feedback to be comprehensible and easy to follow. Some of them (8 participants) stated the feedback to be supportive. This refers to the scaffolding provided during dialogic experience and the zone of proximal development held during the feedback period.

2- To what extent could you correct your errors according to the teacher's feedback?

13 out of 17 learners believed that they could fully understand the source of their errors. They mentioned that through dialogic interaction with their teacher they could understand the grammatical points better. They understood that how meaning of a sentence affects the grammatical elements in a given sentence. 10 participants in the experimental group stated that the role of feedback was highly essential for them regarding the vocabulary use. They believed that the feedback they received on word usage affected their attitude on the way they should learn lexical points in order to be fully applicable to their writing tasks in future. They believed that it affected the way they would use dictionary and other learning strategies they would use in future. Moreover, 5 learners stated that their attitude to English writing structure has changed since they received such feedback. They started to grasp the underlying structure of the English paragraph and what is the role of the main idea, topic sentence and supportive sentences are.

3- In the following compositions, which would you prefer to receive, grade, comments, written error correction?

Among the learners in the control group, 9 learners stated that grades are not clear to them and questioned the function of grade regarding writing assignments. Although 11 of the learners in the control group found grades to be necessary for final achievement judgment, most of them believed that the grades given in class are not useful for learning. The same attitude existed among the learners in the experimental group. Most learners in the experimental groups, like the ones in the control group stated that the grad and written error correction are not useful for them. They believed that teachers, due to time shortage or the number of students in a class, are not able to provide them sufficient feedback regarding their sources of errors. They believed they are provided with grades or written feedbacks nut they do not understand why they should use a specific form. This makes them to commit the same mistake or error again in the coming assignments.

4- What are you most interested to find out in the future writing tasks?

Most of the learners in both the experimental and control group were interested in the exploration of the reasons behind their errors. The learners especially in the control group, were feeling ambiguous regarding the reason behind using a specific structure or a given word in a specific situation. They argued that if they are not given the source regarding the specific grammatical point such as the use of verb tenses as the examples given by most of the interviewees, they commit the same error in the future assignments. Moreover, some learners were interested in a brief review of the grammatical point which they could not use correctly in their writing assignment, especially those that were covered in the previous courses.

5- Which one do you like your teacher emphasize in future assignments, contents, organization, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation or anything else?

None of the participants in the experimental group and control group selected the content. However, the interviewees in both groups selected grammar and vocabulary. In the experimental group 11 learners emphasized the grammatical points and in the control group 8 learners. It should be noted that all the interviewees noticed the grammatical or lexical nature of the feedback they are interested in. moreover, the interesting point was that unlike the participants in the control group, 5 learners in the experimental group noticed the role of organizational feedback in writing and 3 of them highlighted the role of feedback they received regarding the punctuation and how important it is in English writing. It seems that receiving dialogic feedback could considerably make learners pay attention to organizational content of their writings in terms of coherence and cohesion.

6- To what extent the teacher should respond to your errors? Should she correct all the errors or some?

4 learners in the control group had no specific idea about this question. However, the rest of the learners stated that the teacher should correct the "important errors". It is found that most learners in the control group were satisfied if the teacher corrected the global errors. However, the learners in the experimental group had a different idea. Although 6 learners

stated that the global errors are important and the minor ones should not be corrected since the great number of corrections make them hopeless, other participants in the group believed that the points already covered in the grammar in the current course or the ones taught in the previous levels should be highly emphasized. They believed that such writing tasks are good chances for reviewing the points that should be covered.

CONCLUSION

As stated and explained in the previous chapter, the researcher conducted a placement test, OPT in order to homogenize the participants in the experimental group and the control one. Then the treatment was conducted in the experimental group and the final phase was administered, that is, the posttest. The results of the test were analyzed through inferential statistical procedures and the findings showed that the dialogic approach to teaching writing led to better performance of the EFL learners. Moreover, in order consider the learners' attitude regarding the new method applied in the EFL classroom, an interview was conducted based on the questionnaire already developed by Icy Lee. The results showed that the learners in the dialogic group had positive attitude toward the technique used in the class and also it was found that these learners were willing to continue this approach in the following courses they have in future. Moreover, the results showed that they found this approach more supportive than the traditional one since it provided more scaffolded feedback in comparison to common approaches followed in language classes. Moreover, the learners in both groups were willing to receive the sources of their error than only receiving marks, grades and even written corrective feedback without being informed about the reasons behind their errors.

Another issue worth noticing is the fact that the learners in the experimental group were more aware of the learners in the control group in terms of the issues affecting good writing. They are aware of the role of organization and punctuation as reflected in the comments provided by a number of the learners in the experimental group. None of the learners in the control group paid attention to such issues and the importance of feedback regarding the teacher feedback. Most learners, however, were more interested in the correction of global errors.

Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism and interactional sociolinguistics, the results of the present study is in line with the ones found by Hong [15] who explored how young English language learners become writers over time. With a focus on the results of the two studies, it can be argued that dialogic writing processes rather than their products, learners go through a journey in becoming better writers and evolve their identity as writers. In this light, the interactive discourse in class within and across particular but connected literacy events improve the process of becoming a writer as they actively engage in multiple voices of their teacher, and others. Furthermore, the dialogic writing process opened possibilities for learners to discover different voices and selves and enhanced motivation relative to learning to write and writing to learn.

Using Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptions of dialogue, monologue,

and chronotope, the Myers and Kroeger [16] as well as this study argue for the creation of dialogic classroom spaces that afford learners' opportunities for multiple possible futures as whole persons. Moreover in line with Kuhn and Laura (2016) support the claim of dialogic argumentation as a productive bridge to individual argumentative writing and highlight the contribution of deep engagement with the topic in enhancing writing.

For children learning English as an additional language, dialogic teaching supports both learning content and learning language. Engaging language learners in dialogue offers special challenges, however. Kingelhofer and Schripegrell (2016) describes an instructional approach that focused on engendering purposeful and cumulative talk, supported by metalanguage from functional grammar. Similarly this study showed that the metalanguage enabled learners' exploration of an author's language choices.

Rish along with this study consider mediated discourse theory and related analytical tools helpful to explore how students write dialogically [17]. Considered within a sociocultural framework that conceptualizes writing as involving distributed, mediated and dialogic processes of invention, this this thesis presents a writing event as the ways authorship is distributed among the students, the resources that mediate their writing, the shifting social contexts they establish when writing and the relational and reflexive social positioning they enact. Dialogic writing approach and its related tools are found suitable for heuristic and methodological purposes for analyzing how the coordination of these complexities shapes students' writing.

Teacher trainers can help prospective teachers to master the essentials of sociocultural approach to language teaching in general and dialogic writing in particular. The results of this study shows that applying such a method in language classroom help learners develop a better writing ability. Hence, if teachers are trained to apply such a method in language classroom, it helps learners to develop their writing proficiency beyond what is expected from a traditional approach.

Moreover, since the results of the present study showed that the dialogic approach is more useful in terms of boosting learners writing ability, it is hoped that the material developers and syllabus designers engage more of this technique in their writing classrooms and materials they offer for instructional use.

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