Online Interactional Feedback in Second Language Writing: Through Peer or Tutor?
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the implementation of e-collaboration and e-tutoring will have any effect on students' writing proficiency. It is argued that interactional feedback (peer or tutor) including negotiation and recasts can facilitate writing skill development in L2 (Lynch, 2002). 83 male and female EFL students, taking English courses in a language school in Bojnourd-Iran, formed the participants of this quasi-experimental intact-group study. The participants were assigned into experimental and control groups. A couple of instruments were employed to collect data: the TOEFL Writing Test, researchers-made pre and post tests, and an Information Technology Questionnaire (2009). Data analysis through one-way ANOVA and Duncan Method revealed significant differences between e-partnering and e-tutoring groups ($p<0.05$). The results also showed that though both e-partnering and e-tutoring enhanced writing proficiency, learners in e-partnering group outperformed those in e-tutoring group. The study findings indicate that e-collaboration/e-partnering can improve learners writing skill if integrated into the EFL curriculum designed for pre-intermediate level.

Keywords: E-collaboration, E-tutoring, E-partnering, Writing Proficiency, Negotiation

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1. Introduction

Online communication tools have been recently employed by more and more foreign language teaching communities. According to Motallebzadeh & Ghaemi (2009), the internet is a global network which enables all kinds of computers to communicate and share services around the world. They pointed out the internet is so valuable that it is considered as a global resource of information, knowledge, and means for collaboration and cooperation among different communities. "For many internet users, electronic mail (e-mail) has practically replaced the postal service for short written transactions. Electronic mail is the most widely used application on the Net" (Motallebzadeh & Ghaemi, 2009, p. 66).

As it is stated by Harless et.al (1999) computer programs offer students opportunities for interaction and help learners begin to use the language more effectively and consider how to use the language in real environments. The present study examines whether asynchronous CMC is able to provide an interactional forum for learners to expand such skills than a traditional interactive writing task.

1.1 Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Collaborative Learning

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been taken up to allow foreign language learners to interact with each other in target language (Lee, 2001). He maintained that learners get input, attend to feed-back, and produce output. During online interaction learners take modification devices, such as comprehension, confirmation and clarification checks, requests for help, and self-repairs to clarify unclear messages.

As Pena-Shaff & Nicholls (2004) report, CMC has been employed in a variety of contexts to replace face-to-face communication. They believed that in schools, colleges and universities all around the world, CMC has been employed by teachers as electronic exchanges, e-mails, bulletin boards and real time chats in communication.

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CMC can be divided into synchronous and asynchronous modes. In synchronous communications all participants work online at the same time. Synchronous discussion includes the use of programs, such as chat rooms, instant messengers or audio and video programs, in which all participants exchange messages in real time. Messages appear on the screen immediately after they are typed, and many threads can occur at the same time. In asynchronous discussions students can take part at any time and from any location, with nor regard to what other discussants are doing. Asynchronous CMC allows participants to contribute to the discussion more equally because none of the customary limitations enforced by an instructor or class schedule apply. Asynchronous discussions, which can happen via e-mail or threaded Web discussion, provide more time for considered ideas (Kaye, 1992) and are more useful for deeper discussion of ideas (Smith, 1994) (As cited in Ingram, 2004, p. 219).

Kiatde (2008) pointed out:

> Asynchronous computer-mediated communication (ACMC) enables language learners to actively engage in interactions with a wider range of interlocutors because the interactions are both place-independent and time-independent. In addition to the accessibility for learners' engagement in real online communities, the unique interactional features of ACMC are considered to facilitate second language (L2) learning. (p.64)

Collaborative is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as "to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor". Brody and Bruffee (1995) believe that collaborative learning literature suggests collaborative learning be a social-intellectual exercise related to the creation of new knowledge. In addition, according to Torres and Vinagre (2007) collaborative language learning is supported by a pedagogical framework that can be traced back to Vygotsky's (1981) sociocultural theory. As it is suggested by various authors (e.g., Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978) it has roots in social constructivism and is related to creating new knowledge and the teacher is able to help as a

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facilitator (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998) or guide (Dewey, 1916) to the social process of discovery.

There are many studies based on Long and Robinson's (1998) interaction hypothesis in the online environment. "Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) is aimed at facilitating knowledge sharing and at enhancing the interaction of students engaged in group work"(Prinsen , Monique & Fakkert , 2008, p. 133). Researches (Ware & O; Dowd, 2008) have investigated that how online interaction can play a part in learners' grammatical competence and syntactic complexity comes from the literature foundation of task-based learning, focus on form, and negotiation of meaning in second language acquisition. Ware & O'Dowd (2008) report that "this hypothesis proposes that negotiation of meaning in interaction exposes learners to input that is both linguistically and interactionally modified"(p. 44).

According to various authors (O'Sullivan, 1987; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Strasma & Foster, 1992; Reinertsen & Wells, 1993; Arredondo & Rucinski, 1994; Leppa¨nen & Kalaja, 1995), one form of interactive learning is group writing. It has been used to teach ESL, train teachers, and promote literacy skills in composition courses. These researchers found that during interactive learner-to-learner writing, students expressed their ideas more freely and extensively in L2, negotiated meaning more effectively, produced more output and more discourse functions, and negotiated a more equalized power-distribution than during face-to-face interactions (Abrams, 2001, p. 491).

1.2 Feedback in Online Environment

In online environment, feedback may be more important than in traditional classrooms (Lynch, 2002). Ko & Rossen, (2001) claimed that students in online courses are more interested in disconnecting from the material or environment than students attending face-to-face courses. Teacher feedback is often mentioned as the catalyst for student learning in

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online environments and lack of feedback is most often cited as the reason for withdrawing from online courses.

A number of recommendations have been made for boosting its usefulness due to the vitality of feedback in online environments. Notar, Wilson, and Ross (2002) call for feedback that is "diagnostic and prescriptive, formative and iterative, and involving both peers and group assessment" (p. 646). As Schwartz and White (cited in Mory, 2004) report, students expect feedback in an online environment to be: 1) prompt, timely, and thorough; 2) ongoing formative (about online discussions) and summative (about grades); 3) constructive, supportive, and substantive; 4) specific, objective, and individual; and 5) consistent.

Ertmer & Stepich (2004) found that the use of constructive feedback can increase the standard of student discussion responses that is direct, consistent, and continuous. However, instructors must spend a noteworthy amount of time and effort to reach this level of feedback in online courses. Dunlap (2005) has argued that in order to meet students' needs for direct and continuous feedback an instructor would have to be online almost continually.

Ertmer et al. (2007) argue:

One possible solution is for instructors to focus on peer feedback as an instructional strategy, requiring students to provide feedback to one another while at the same time encouraging greater levels of interaction. Depending on how the peer feedback process is structured, instructors could be spared from assessing large numbers of student postings, yet still provide enough instances of formative and summative feedback. Students, on the other hand, would get the feedback they require in order to evaluate their progress in the online environment (p. 10).

1.3 Electronic Communication for Teaching Writing

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Olshtain (2001) believes that within the communicative framework of language teaching, the skill of writing enjoys special status- it is via writing that a person can communicate a variety of messages to a close or distant, known or unknown reader or readers. Such communication is extremely important in the modern world, whether the interaction takes the form of traditional paper-and-pencil writing or the most technologically advanced electronic mail. Writing as a communicative activity needs to be encouraged and nurtured during the language learners' course of study. He adds:

> Viewing writing as an act of communication suggests an interactive process which takes place between the writer and the reader via the text. Such an approach places value on the goal of the writing as well as on the perceived reader audience. Even if we are concerned with writing at the beginning level, these two aspects of the act of writing are of vital importance; in setting writing tasks, the teacher should encourage students to define for themselves the message they want to send and the audience who will receive it (p. 207).

In the 1980s, the use of electronic communication started to become popular in the United States in the teaching of composition. This was based on claims that it (1) provided more writing practice (DiMatteo, 1990; DiMatteo, 1991) ; (2) encouraged collaborative writing (Barker & Kemp, 1990); and (3) facilitated peer editing (Boiarsky, 1990; Moran, 1991). In addition, composition teachers also found computer-mediated communication to have the same kind of equalizing effects mentioned above. Flores (1990) and Selfe (1990) report that computer networking served to equalize womenís participation in courses they taught. Mabrito (Mabrito, 1992) found that students who were more apprehensive about writing tended to benefit most from peer critique conducted electronically (As cited in Warschauer, 1996, p.8).

Accordingly, this study pays particular attention to how peer feedback through online collaboration can contribute to writing skill development.

2. Research Questions and Hypotheses:

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As mentioned previously, this quasi-experimental study aims to shed light on the effect of e-collaboration on writing proficiency of EFL learners by addressing the following major questions:

> 1-Does e-collaboration have any effect on writing proficiency of the EFL learners?
>
> 2-Is e-partnering effective in writing proficiency of EFL learners?
>
> 3-Is e-partnering more effective than e-tutoring in writing proficiency?

To come up with a reasonable result on the basis of the aforementioned research problems, the following null hypotheses were developed:

> H01. E-collaboration has no effect on writing proficiency of EFL learners.
>
> H02. E-partnering is not effective in writing proficiency of EFL learners.
>
> H03. There is no statistically significant difference between effectiveness of the two approaches (e-partnering and e-tutoring).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A group of 83 EFL students were selected from pre-intermediate EFL learners in Zabansara English Language School in Bojnourd, northeast of Iran. Both male (N=37) and female (N=46) students participated in this project, so the role of sex was not considered a distinctive variable. The average age of the participants was 22.13 years old, all being Farsi speaking students learning English as a foreign language.

3.2 Instrumentation

To collect the required data, several instruments were employed in this study:

3.2.1 Test of Writing Proficiency. To be sure of the homogeneity of the participants in terms of writing proficiency, a TOEFL Writing test was selected from Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test Book published by Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc (2001). Participants' writing performance was assessed according to TOEFL writing scoring guidelines published by ETS available in www.ets.org. The participants had 30 minutes to plan and write a paragraph for a given topic.

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3.2.2 Information Technology Inventory. An information technology (IT) inventory was employed to identify participants' computer and internet literacy required for electronic collaboration (e-collaboration). This blended questionnaire consisted of 28 items and was developed by Motallebzadeh and Ghaemi (2009) and Paran, Furneaux and Summer (2004).

3.2.3 English Writing Assessment Test (EWAT). This instrument, consisting of 20 items, was a writing test battery developed by the researchers to measure the effect of treatment. EWAT included several tasks as content (4 items), accuracy (3 items), language (6 items), organization (2 items), vocabulary (5 items), as well as items measuring process writing including outlining and revising. The results for the piloted EWAT showed an acceptable reliability (r=.719) estimated through Cronbach's Alpha.

3.2.4 Analytic Scoring Guide, a five-criterion rubric, was used for grading participants' final English writing test papers. This was an adaptation from the rubrics proposed by Jacobs et.al (1981). The selected rubrics included content (30 points), organization (20 points), language use (25 points), vocabulary and accuracy (20 points), and mechanics (5 points). To control bias, two raters were employed to rate the papers in both pretest and posttest.

3.2 Procedures

To be sure of the homogeneity of participants in terms of writing proficiency at the outset of the study, a TOEFL Writing test (PBT version) was administered. Out of 102 participants, 83 were found proficient enough to be included in this study. The iner-rater reliability of the test of homogeneity was estimated as .922 which showed a high correlation between the two raters. In addition, an information technology literacy (IT) inventory was employed to distinguish between IT literate and illiterate participants. Those who could not show required literacy (N=30) were assigned as the member of control group.

The treatment lasted 8 weeks, two sessions per week. Participants (N=83) were divided into 3 groups: control group (N=30), e-tutoring group (N=23), and e-partnering group (N=30). In control group, students had a topic to write about and got teacher's written feedback the next session. In the e-tutoring group, the teacher assigned the participants a task to write about with a short discussion in class. The participants were asked to email their

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written tasks to their teacher on a scheduled plan. The teacher provided feedback to her participants via e-mail. In the e-partnering group, the participants were assigned a similar task as other groups and were asked to email the assignment to their partner. They were required to provide corrective feedback to their partners' e-mails on language errors or, in the absence of errors, to provide suggestions for writing development. Participants in e-partnering group received one session training from their teacher on how to provide feedback and suggestions. The same writing assignments were given to experimental and control groups. The three groups were taught by the same teacher who was trained on e-tutoring and e-collaboration before the treatment begins. As the last phase of the study, an English Writing Assessment Test (EWAT) was administered as the study posttest.

4. Results and Discussions

Having collected the required data based on the above mentioned data collection instruments and procedures, the researchers conducted the analysis of data and tested the hypothesis formulated for the present study.

4.1 Results for Test of Homogeneity

To check the homogeneity of the participants (N=102), A TOEFL Writing Test was administered. Table 1 and figure 1 illustrate the descriptive statistics of participants' scores.

Table 1. Results of Descriptive Statistics for TOEFL Writing Test

N	Valid	83
	Missing	19
Mean		1.55
Std. Error of Mean		.055
Mode		2
Std. Deviation		.500
Variance		.250
Skewness		-.222

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Std. Error of Skewness	.264
Range	1
Minimum	1
Maximum	2
Sum	129

As the results of table 1 show, test mean score was 1.55 and standard deviation of .5. Here only 83 participants were found valid to be included in this study.

4.2 Results for interrater Reliability in Pretest

Due to the practicality issues, the interrater reliability index was calculated only for analytic scores given by raters for the pretest in this study. The researchers employed Pearson Correlation Coefficient to calculate any probable significant difference between the scores given by different raters. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the interrater reliability results for control, e-partnering, and e-tutoring groups, respectively.

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation between Rater1 & Rater2 in Control Group (Pretest)

		Rater1	Rater2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.973(**)
Rater 1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
	Pearson Correlation	.973(**)	1
Rater 2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

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

As the results in table 2 indicate, there is a high correlation between the two raters, showing no significant difference between their ratings *(r = .973, p < .05).*

Table 3. Pearson's Correlation between Rater1 & Rater2 in E-partnering Group (Pretest)

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		Rater1	Rater2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.979(**)
Rater 1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
	Pearson Correlation	.979(**)	1
Rater 2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

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

As table 3 illustrates, a high correlation exists between both raters which entails no significant difference between their ratings in e-partnering group ((r = .979, p < .05).

Table 4. Pearson's Correlations between of Rater1 & Rater2 for E-tutoring Group (Pretest)

		Rater1	Rater2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.992(**)
Rater 1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	23	23
	Pearson Correlation	.992(**)	1
Rater 2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	23	23

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

As table 4 shows, no significant difference is found between the two raters in their scoring for e-tutoring group ((r = .992, p < .05).

4.3 Results for Pretest

ANOVA was employed to determine the homogeneity of three groups at the very beginning of the treatment. Table 5 shows the results of the ANOVA.

Table 5. Results for One-way ANOVA for Writing Scores in Pretest

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

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Between Groups	49.034	2	24.517	.189	.828
Within Groups	10382.622	80	129.783		
Total	10431.657	82			

** Significant at .001

As indicated in table 5 there is no significant difference (F = .189, P > .05) among three groups with regard to writing ability at the outset of the study. Indeed, this result was quite predictable considering the homogenized groups.

To ensure that the three groups are equal before the treatment begins, a Scheffe Post Hoc test was used. Table 6 shows the results.

Table 6. Results of Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Writing Scores in Pretest

Group	N	Subset for alpha = .05
	1	1
e-partnering group	30	37.2833
e-tutoring group	23	38.0217
Control group	30	39.0833
Sig.		.587

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 27.237.

b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used.

Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Table 6 illustrates no significant difference among the 3 groups regarding the writing mean scores before the treatment.

4.4 Results for Posttest

To investigate the effect of study treatment, writing scores are tested in posttests via ANOVA and the Scheffe method. Tables 7 and 8 show the results, respectively.

Table 7. Results of One-Way ANOVA for Writing Scores in Posttest

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	151.356	2	75.678	14.653	.000

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Within Groups	413.186	80	5.165		
Total	564.542	82			

** Significant at .001

Table 8. Results of Scheffe Post Hoc Test for Writing Scores in Posttest

Group	N	Subset for alpha = .05			
	1	1	2	3	1
control group	30	11.8500			
e-tutoring group	23		13.1957		
e-partnering group	30				15.0167
Sig.			1.000	1.000	1.000

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 27.237.

b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used.

Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

As the results of table 7 indicate, there is a significant difference (F = .14.653, P < .05) among three groups. This finding shows that the participants in e-partnering group performed better than the other groups.

Also, the results of table 8 illustrate, e-partnering group (mean: 15.01) was rated as the highest in writing proficiency. The e-tutoring group (mean: 13.19) received the second rank and the control group (mean: 11.85) received the lowest ranking in writing proficiency. In other words, while e-partnering seems more effective than the e-tutoring in developing writing proficiency of EFL learners, both approaches are significantly different from the conventional approach.

5. Conclusions and Implications

As the data illustrated, the e-partnering group benefited remarkably more from the study treatment than e-tutoring and the conventional groups. It is also concluded that e-tutoring group outperformed the conventional group in their scores on writing proficiency test. In other words, after 8 weeks of treatment, the participants in e-learning groups showed significant improvement in writing ability. Meanwhile, it can be concluded that integrating

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cooperation and collaboration, as in e-partnering group, can enhance writing skill development compared to e-tutoring approach.

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that using e-learning (e-partnering and/or e-tutoring) can be a practical approach for teaching writing to Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners provided that they are familiar with the basics of IT. The results of this study may also emphasize on the role of teacher's and peers' feedback via the Internet as a source of developing L2 writing proficiency.

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