# Effects of Receiving Corrective Feedback through Online Chats and Class Discussions on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Quality

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**Abstract**
Giving corrective feedback (CF) is an essential part of the teaching and learning process, and the way it should beneficially be done has been the focus of attention for numerous researchers especially when traditional ways of CF provision are not possible, particularly in rare situations such as outbreaks of diseases. This study investigated how different ways of giving feedback; namely, through online chats and class discussions can help language learners in benefitting from their instructors' CF provision. To this purpose, the effects of two ways of feedback provision were tested on the participants writing quality. Three hundred and seventeen Iranian EFL learners took a TOEFL test, 132 of them (53 males and 79 females) scoring between 477 and 510 were asked to deliver a 200-word writing task. Then, they were randomly put into 4 experimental and control groups to undergo different treatments, i.e. receiving CF through online chats and class discussions for 10 one-hour sessions. After the treatment, they were required to deliver another 200-word piece of writing. The results of statistical data analysis showed that the writing quality of the participants receiving CF through online chats was significantly higher than that of those who received CF through class discussions. The findings of this research have practical implications for Iranian educational system to update its instructional methods and for the nature of teaching and learning processes and practices.

**Keywords**: EFL learners, corrective feedback, writing quality, online chats, class discussions

## Introduction

Mobile applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp in addition to other social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and Instagram have enabled people around the world and language learners in particular to communicate with people and other language learners more easily than before. According to Kerwin (2012), the mentioned sites can give teachers and learners another alternative way of delivering educational materials, besides, working through these sites can help them work from home and the people involved do not have to attend a special place. We should also bear in mind that not in all countries and cultures the mentioned sites and applications have the same degree of popularity. For instance, while Facebook and Twitter are enticing in America and European context, WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram are more welcomed in Iranian context and have attracted the attention of so many users from different social and educational classes. In fact, in the last few years, use of technology, especially, the use of social networking sites and mobile applications has been investigated by several researchers to a great extent in different fields of education. The aforementioned use has even made teaching, learning and doing projects easy and fun for teachers and learners. One of

the reasons of such heavy usage is, undoubtedly, the user-friendliness nature of the mentioned applications and social networking sites.

One of the upsides of using mobile applications and social networking sites by language learners has been the effective nature of them on language learners' writing skill. They have paved the way for the language learners to communicate and negotiate with each other about any aspects of life. Through these applications and sites, language learners can share their feelings and experiences, and considering the social nature of human beings, we understand why these applications and sites have reached such popularity among people and language learners in particular.

Several studies show that the Internet-based language teaching and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have been increased in the last several years. In his undertaking, Rassaei (2017) showed the corrective feedback that is provided through computer can have a positive effect on the writing quality. In another study carried out by Bataineh (2014), it was revealed that students who studied writing and used text chat and word processors performed better in the post-test. This comparison was made between the aforementioned students and those who learned writing in the traditional way. According to Chen et al (2016), error correction or corrective feedback is an important tool for correcting second language learners' errors. In fact, corrective feedback works on the erroneous utterances made by learners (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). Of the corrective techniques identified in the literature, recast, elicitation or prompts, meta-linguistic feedback, repetition, clarification requests, translation, and explicit negative feedback are the most important ones which were used in the present undertaking.

Like other three skills in language teaching and learning process; namely, speaking, reading and listening, writing is important too. But how much importance is given to this skill in our teaching and learning programs? Is the writing quality of our learners' written production acceptable or good enough in language institutes or at academic levels? Can what the language learners write communicate with the reader? To answer these questions some criteria based on which the quality of a piece of writing can be measured are introduced. In the present study, writing quality refers to complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) for each of these criteria there are some accepted formulas.

**Types of Corrective Feedback**

As far as positive corrective feedback is concerned, determining what the teacher does after the students give a correct answer is intended rather than acknowledgement or acceptance of the correct answer. Lyster and Ranta (1997) divided CF types into six categories of recasts, explicit correction, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. Ellis (2003) discusses two additional types of positive corrective feedback as follows:

a) Repetition: in repetition, the teacher repeats the student's correct answer. For example, student: "she goes to school every day."; teacher: " she goes to school every day."

b) Rephrasingl in rephrasing, the teacher accepts the student's answer but intends to spread the learner's knowledge, to improve the structure of their utterance, or to show a new structure that reformulates the answer produced by the student using different vocabularies, and in a few cases, adds new information (Ferreira et al., 2007). For example, student: "a lot of people watched the video and passed it to other people." Teacher: "yes, the video went viral."

In SLA studies, corrective feedback strategies are classified into two groups:

**Giving-Answer Strategies (GAS):** these strategies are targeted to a student's wrong answer and show the place of the error in the erroneous sentence and which is provided directly by the instructor. They include:

(a)Repetition: by using a rising intonation, the teacher repeats the learner's error to attract the learner's attention to the erroneous part in the utterance.

(b)Recast: Ellis (2003) and Sheen (2006) claim that recast is the most common type of correction in which all elements in the student's utterance or answer are reformulated.

(c) Explicit correction: in this type of corrective feedback, the student's utterance is corrected directly and explicitly by the teacher. In their study, Ghahari & Piruznejad (2017) report Rassaei's research on the effects of explicit correction on writing. Rassaei demonstrated that language learners of the experimental and control groups who were provided with explicit error correction could perform better in post-test (2013).

(d) Give answer: it is used in recast and when the student is not sure of their answer.

**Prompting-Answer Strategies (PAS):** In this type of corrective feedback, students are pushed to pay attention to the erroneous parts of their utterances to correct or repair them. These strategies are classified into three types:

(a)Meta-linguistic cues: without explicit provision of the correct form, the teacher gives some information about the student's utterance.

(b)Clarification requests: in this type of corrective feedback, the teacher asks some questions such as pardon me? Excuse me? or what? to indicate that what the student has uttered is not comprehensible and contains some errors.

(c)Elicitation: in elicitation, the teacher allows the student to complete the teacher's utterance. In other words, the teacher repeats the student's utterance but pauses before the wrong part and encourages the students to complete the utterance.

These strategies emerged from Lyster's work (1998) in which he grouped four feedback strategies (elicitation, meta-linguistic cues, clarification requests, and repetition of error) under the rubric of Negotiation of Form. He differentiated between Negotiation of Form from recast and explicit correction because it provides learners with signals that enhance peer- and self-repair, while rephrasing or correction of student utterances do not do such a thing (Ferreira et al 2007).

### Literature Review

Although in learning a foreign language all skills are equally important, among the four skills the least attention has been paid to and the least time has been allocated for teaching and practicing writing skill so far. Unfortunately, in Iran, both in general educational system and private institutes, the high importance is given to other three skills; namely, speaking, reading and listening. Consequently, after finishing designed courses such as TOEFL, it is observed that language learners' written products are not qualified and numerous grammatical and lexical mistakes exist in their written output.

On the one hand, writing skill teaching for language teachers and on the other hand, writing for language learners have been a challenging job (especially in contexts like Iranian one in which English language is treated as a foreign language). According to Gen (2005), a great number of non-native English speakers have major problems with teaching and learning writing skill. What contribute to poor pieces of writing, he adds, are knowledge of grammar, lexis, pragmatics, mechanics of writing etc. whether one of them or a combination of them.

Koosha & Yakhabi (2013) believe that learning environment, teachers, content knowledge, affective factors, and material and contextual factors contribute to low or high written output by language learners. There are other factors affecting the writing quality of the texts produced by language learners as Biria and Jafari (2013) note in their study-- factors such as the fear of making errors, feeling inferior in the class, demotivation to write in English, grammar-based classroom practice, and not practicing writing much in Iran.

Considering different factors affecting EFL learners' learning through receiving corrective feedbacks, the impetus to carry out the present study is gained. Hence, different factors and conditions affecting the quality of written output produced by Iranian EFL learners are going to be sought through this study. Here,, writing quality refers to complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF).

Based on what was mentioned above, it is comprehended that the written output produced by Iranian EFL learners, by noticing its importance in all levels of education, does not have the required quality and consequently, there must be some theoretical and practical underpinnings and recommendations to fix this problem. Thus this study intends to find the barriers and to remove them in order to create an ideal situation for EFL learners to produce higher quality writing.

As for digital environments, Kerwin (2012) claims that the number of adolescents writing in digital environments is increasing and it is important to notice that this technology has been affecting the writing skills of teachers, students and language learners. In fact, technological writing tools the student use in preparing their tasks are helpful and motivating, and so, we cannot ignore the radical changes the digital world has made in all aspects of human life.

In the present research, a combination of factors affecting the quality of written output produced by advanced and intermediate Iranian EFL learners have been investigated, not just in the classroom situation through corrective feedback, but in different teaching and learning contexts such as the network channel. In other words, the oral discussion and online chatting were practiced in the classroom tutoring context as well as through the social communication networks. There are obviously several reasons and questions for carrying out this study--the views and attitudes of language teachers towards the use of live discussions and chats in the classroom contexts, the exploitation of dominant communication technologies in L2, the reason why different individual language learners benefit differently from corrective feedback provided to them, and the way individual cognitive and personal differences can lead to high quality, standard written output. Another issue which has been investigated is whether practicing writing through online tasks can be more beneficial than practicing it in the traditional and offline existing ways; namely, in class through homework assignments, for instance. Finally, the study aimed to see if the learning context is controlled ideally, if intervening variables are eliminated, and how much this ideal situation can be effective on the quality of the writing produced by the EFL learners.

**Corrective Feedback in Previous Studies**

According to previous research, the use of various kinds of technology in language learning enhances and facilitate communication. Communication through technology can increase confidence and decrease anxiety; it can also develop the writing-thinking connection (Weininger & Shield, 2003; Abrams, 2002 and Salaberry, 2001). In similar studies such as Hertel (2003), LeLoup (1997) and Warschauer (1995) it was revealed that writing skill could be improved through the use of technology. In their studies, they revealed that instructors who used email communication with their students in their teaching process observed major development

in the writing skill of their language learners in contrast to those who did not participate in email communication activities.

Some scholars (e.g., Banaruee & Askari, 2016; Ruegg, 2010, 2017, 2018) suggested that providing whether direct or indirect feedback from teachers or peers on every language element can be influential. After early studies carried on the effectiveness of corrective feedback on L2 acquisition, some experts such as Brock et al., (1986); Chaudron (1977, 1988); Chun et al. (1982) and Day et al. (1984) asked this question of whether corrective feedback was effective on L2 learning or not. For example, in a study by Chun et al. (1982) on adult native speaker-nonnative speaker (NS-NNS) non-instructional conversations, it was found that only 8.9% of NNS erroneous utterances were under the influence of the feedback provided and this resulted in this assumption that corrective feedback would be ineffective. In 1986, Brock et al. investigated the results of the aforementioned study and reached the same theory.

What the present undertaking is going to highlight and emphasize is not the effectiveness of applying corrective feedback during teaching and learning process; instead, it is trying to highlight the canals through which corrective feedback is provided and received. In fact, the present study is going to compare two paths for providing and receiving corrective feedback; something that seems to be overlooked in the previous studies in the field of teaching and learning languages. With a quick look at the literature we can observe that providing corrective feedback has been very normal in traditional ways such as in speaking or on the paper but less research has been conducted on the effectiveness of corrective feedback provision through online chats. This gap was the impetus to carry out this research.

## Research Questions

In order to achieve the purposes of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by Iranian EFL learners who receive corrective feedback through online chatting and those receiving corrective feedback through class discussions?

RQ2. Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by Iranian EFL learners who receive corrective feedback through class discussion and those who do not?

RQ3. Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by Iranian EFL learners who received corrective feedback through online chatting and those who do not?

## Method

### Participants

The participants of this study were 132 intermediate (male and female) EFL learners from 3 English institutes in Tabriz. They had been studying English for at least 7 years at the institutes. Their age ranged from 16 to 22 years. They were selected from among a larger population; i.e. 317 language learners. As the first step, the participants took a TOEFL. 197 of them scored between 477 and 510. To make them homogeneous, those participants whose scores fell between ±1 standard deviation were chosen to take part in the main study. They came out to be 132 EFL learners (53 male and 79 female learners) whose first language was Turkish. They were randomly put into 4 experimental and control groups to undergo the treatments.

**Material and Instruments**

The instrument used in the present study was TOEFL as a proper screening test. It was administered to 317 English language learners who were available and willing to take part in the study. After administering this test and selecting the final participants, the researcher asked the participants to deliver a 200-word written text (material) on a topic provided by the researcher. The topic was a descriptive one: What is one of your bad experiences and what lessons did you learn from it? Their compositions were gathered, treated as a pre-test and were examined in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity.

Another piece of material used was the results of the corrective feedback the participants received through online chats and class discussions. Actually, after the participants received corrective feedback through online chats and class discussions, they were asked to produce and deliver another written text (material), i. e. a 200-word on the same topic which was used in the pretest phase.

**Procedures**

As a first step in this study, to measure the English proficiency level of the participants, a version of TOEFL was administered to the participants, and 197 EFL learners who scored between 477 and 510 were selected. They were labeled as intermediate learners. Then to have a homogeneous group, the participants whose scores fell between ± 1 standard deviation (No.=132) were chosen to undergo other procedures of the study. These participants were asked to write a 200-word text on a topic provided by the researcher (pretest). After they did the writing task, their written texts were typed in Microsoft word and analyzed in terms of grammatical complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF). How the texts were analyzed will be explained in the posttest phase. Then, the participants were randomly divided into 3 experimental and 1 control groups. The first experimental group received corrective feedback through class discussions for 10 one-hour class sessions in which they received proper corrective feedback on their erroneous utterances. For example, if a participant said, "They promised going to the party", the researcher would ask, "Can we use a gerund after promise?" or if a participant said, "They had finished having dinner before I arrived." The researcher would repeat the participant's utterance to assure that it was correct.

For the second experimental group, 10 one-hour chatting sessions were held; during which the participants chatted/typed but they did not receive any kinds of corrective feedback. The third experimental group received corrective feedback through online chatting for 10 one-hour chatting sessions; in other words, when the participants chatted/typed, the sentences which contained any errors/mistakes received proper corrective feedback from the researcher. For example, if a participant typed, "I have been to Tehran last year.", the researcher gave a metalinguistic corrective feedback such as, "Do you think time expressions for past tense can be used for present perfect?" or if a participant typed, "They didn't see me since I was 15". The researcher typed, "They didn't?"

The fourth group (control group) participated in 10 one-hour class discussions. They did not receive any kinds of corrective feedback, in case they produced erroneous utterances.

After holding these sessions, the participants were asked to do another 200-word writing task (posttest) on the same topic they had written on in the pretest phase. The topic was the same because it was assumed that after 2 months and a half (treatment duration), the participants had forgotten what they had written in the pretest phase. Their written texts were typed in Microsoft word and analyzed in terms of CAF. The results of the pretest and posttest were then compared (based on the measures proposed by Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998, table 1 below) to see the

potential effects of the treatments; namely, corrective feedback provided to the participants through online chats and class discussions.

**Table 1.** *Wolfe-Quintero et al's CAF measures*

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

Based on the above, to measure the grammatical complexity of a participant's composition, the dependent clauses and the clauses were counted first; then, the number of dependent clauses was divided by the total number of clauses. The result would show the grammatical complexity of the composition. For the reliability of the results, two experts rated each composition and the mean of their scores was accepted for final calculations. To measure the accuracy of the compositions, the error free T-units were counted and were divided into the number of T-units. The result would show the accuracy of the composition. Again, two experts rated each composition for the issue of reliability. To measure the fluency of the compositions, the number of words was divided into the number of T-units of each composition. The result would show the fluency of the composition. Two raters again rated each composition in terms of fluency.

## Results

The statistical results of the study are presented in the tables below:

**Table 2.** *The Mean and Standard Deviation in the Four Groups in Pretest and Posttest*

| Groups | Measures | Grammatical complexity | | Accuracy | | Fluency | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Pre-test | Post-test | Pre-test | Post-test | Pre-test | Post-test |
| EGA | Mean | 0.20 | 0.29 | 0.21 | 0.29 | 5.50 | 6.43 |
| | SD | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.25 | 0.26 |
| EGB | Mean | 0.20 | 0.29 | 0.20 | 0.02 | 5.35 | 6.44 |
| | SD | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.24 | 0.33 |
| EGC | Mean | 0.22 | 0.32 | 0.23 | 0.33 | 5.49 | 7.18 |
| | SD | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.27 | 0.27 |
| CG | Mean | 0.21 | 0.22 | 0.21 | 0.22 | 5.48 | 5.52 |
| | SD | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.22 | 0.31 | 0.26 |

**Table 3.** *Comparison of Posttest Mean Scores of Written Texts in Terms of Grammatical Complexity*

| Dependent Variable | Group | Group | Mean difference | SE | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Chat With FB | Chat Without FB | 0.010 | 0.005 | **0.727** |
| | | Chat With FB | -0.20 | 0.006 | **0.005** |
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 0.076 | 0.006 | **0.0001** |
| **Grammatical Complexity** | Chat Without FB | Chat With FB | 0.010 | 0.006 | **0.0001** |
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 0.085 | 0.006 | **0.0001** |
| | Chat With FB | Class Discussion without FB | 0.096 | 0.006 | **0.0001** |

**Table 4.** *Comparison of Mean of Posttest Scores of Written Texts in Terms of Accuracy*

| Dependent Variable | Group | Group | Mean difference | SEM | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Chat With FB | Chat Without FB | 0.003 | 0.005 | **1** |
| | | Chat With FB | -0.027 | 0.005 | **0.0001** |
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 0.075 | 0.005 | **0.0001** |
| | Chat Without FB | Chat With FB | 0.030 | 0.005 | **0.045** |
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 0.073 | 0.005 | **0.0001** |
| **Accuracy** | Chat With FB | Class Discussion without FB | 0.103 | 0.005 | **0.0001** |

**Table 5.** *Comparison of the Mean of Pos-test Scores in Written Texts in terms of Fluency*

| Dependent Variable | Group | Group | Mean difference | SEM | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fluency** | Chat With FB | Chat Without FB | 0.117 | 0.056 | **0.404** |
| | | Chat With FB | -0.758 | 0.059 | **0.0001** |
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 0.891 | 0.058 | **0.0001** |

| | Chat Without FB | Chat With FB | -0.641 | 0.061 | **0.0001** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Class Discussion without FB | 1.007 | 0.059 | **0.0001** |
| | Chat With FB | Class Discussion without FB | 1.649 | 0.059 | **0.0001** |

## Discussion

In this section, we will answer the research questions by referring to the obtained results. The first research question was, "Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by language learners who received corrective feedback through online chatting and those receiving corrective feedback through class discussions?" To answer this question, we should bear in mind that by writing quality we mean grammatical complexity, accuracy and fluency, and so, these three factors were examined separately. The results of analysis in Table 2 above illustrate the difference between mean scores of pretest and posttest administered to two groups who received corrective feedback. As it is shown, the mean and standard deviation of the CAF measures in the pretest are not significantly different from each other. However, in the posttest, we can observe that there are meaningful differences between the mean and standard deviation of the groups.

The second research question was, "Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by language learners who received corrective feedback through class discussion and those who did not?" Table 3, 4, and 5 provide the answer to this question. As we see in table 3, there is a significant difference, at the level of 0.05, between the means of the posttest of the group which received corrective feedback through class discussion and the group that did not received any corrective feedback. It means that providing corrective feedback through class discussion was effective on grammatical complexity. Comparison of the means shows that classroom discussion with corrective feedback is more effective than class discussion without corrective feedback. Table 4 shows that the effect of classroom discussion with corrective feedback in terms of the quality of text accuracy is significantly different at the level of 0.05, as compared to the class discussion without corrective feedback. As a result, corrective feedback through class discussion was effective on text quality (accuracy). To see whether corrective feedback was effective on text quality (fluency), we should have a look at table 5 in which we can see that there is not any significant difference between mean scores of posttests of the group which received corrective feedback and the group that did not receive corrective feedback. So, corrective feedback through class discussion was not effective on text quality (fluency).

The third question was, "Is there any significant difference between the quality of the written output produced by Iranian EFL learners who received corrective feedback through online chatting and those who do not? Again, the results in tables 3, 4, and 5 provide the answer. Table 3 shows that providing corrective feedback through online chatting is significantly effective on the text quality (grammatical complexity) as compared to the group that did not receive any corrective feedback through chatting. In table 4, it is observed that providing corrective feedback is significantly effective on accuracy, and table 5 reveals that corrective feedback provision was effective on text quality (fluency). All in all, we can claim that providing corrective feedback through online chatting was more effective than chatting without providing any corrective feedback.

**Concluding remarks**

In this paper, we examined the effects of providing corrective feedback on the writing quality of Iranian intermediate EFL learners due to the importance of writing skill in learning a new language. Therefore, different types of corrective feedback were provided in two different modes, i.e. online chatting and class discussions. These two methods were compared to see whether any of the two could be more effective than the other in providing corrective feedback.

The findings of the study showed that complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) generally improved in the posttest writings of the two treatment groups who received corrective feedback, yet the writing quality of the participants who received corrective feedback through online chatting improved more than that of those who received corrective feedback through class discussions. There might be several justifications for this as follows:

The first justification is assumed to be the nature of virtual situation. In other words, these days, people are habituated to online communication due to the anonymity that online chatting provides, thereby giving them comfort to talk freely and with less stress. Actually, in contrast to face-to-face conversation, online chatting is quite new and captivating. This situation can be generalized to the conditions of the present study, that is to say, Iranian EFL learners seem to enjoy chatting more than speaking in class discussions. As a result, they pay attention to the flow of conversation and the corrective feedback they receive more enthusiastically.

The second justification can be time availability. While chatting, the learners have more time to correct their mistakes or benefit from the corrective feedback the teachers provide. They can read their typed messages a number of times and even they have time to correct the errors and mistakes before they are provided with a corrective feedback. Also, in online chatting, the learners do not pay attention to the mistakes of other participants. They focus more on their messages and thus, they can feel more comfortable than when they talk in class discussions where all attention is paid to the mistakes of the speaker.

The third justification is that in class discussions, learners are often interrupted by their classmates to be corrected. But this case rarely happens in online chatting. It may be another reason why learners prefer online chatting to class discussions. Further, in online chatting, some part of learning can happen after online chatting sessions, while what is said and spoken in class discussions are not normally recorded and are gone and the learners do not have access to the necessary information after the discussion is finished.

As for the implications of the study, it should be mentioned that the findings might assist the Iranian educational system to update its instructional methods through such popular apps as Telegram, Whatsapp, etc. by which a great deal of communication is done these days. At the same time, teaching and learning process would be livelier for both teachers and learners who use these apps to communicate.

The second implication is related to the nature of teaching and learning process. As it was mentioned before, teaching and learning without giving corrective feedback and showing reaction to the learners' production are unimaginable and incomplete. In traditional methods, teachers can provide corrective feedback on the learners' writing or can give corrective feedback orally while the learners are speaking, but how is giving corrective feedback possible when face-to-face communication is impossible? For instance, when an outbreak of a disease occurs, almost everything should be done from afar, teaching and learning among them. Here, technology helps, i.e. providing corrective feedback online through social networking sites and apps.

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