

for prioritizing the given feedback. The comments on student writings ought to be clear, pertinent, and selective (Ferris, 1999). Prioritized feedback makes the teacher response a time-saving and pedagogically fruitful action:

*Erroneous Production*

Most of the people are worry about...

*Written Feedback*

→ Check the category of this word (noun, verb ...).

*Revised form*

Most of the people are worried about...

*Erroneous Production*

Most of the people are worried about...

*Written Feedback*

→ Change this word with a more formal one to fit the level of formality of your writing.

*Revised form*

Most people are concerned about...

By and large, findings of the present study can have implications for EFL teaching practice from several aspects. These implications are not merely bound to particular institutional or school settings. Writing is practiced at all language education levels. Teachers can tune into the writing skill needs of their learners and recognize the linguistic boundaries to which they are entitled to respond. Teacher written feedback is an effective medium as of the only applicable sources for the students to improve their EFL writing ability, specifically in Iranian language institutes or in secondary and high schools.

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Afterwards, the students received the commentaries as the treatment on the first drafts of their compositions and wrote the revised drafts based on the commentaries. Then, the participants sat for the posttest composition. The inter-rater reliability of the two sets of ratings was relatively high ( $r=0.82$ ). Another *t-test* was employed to explore the significance of the mean differences of the experimental and control groups.

As displayed in table 2, the mean difference of the post-test compositions (1.82) was significant with alpha set at 0.05 level of significance ( $t=4.26$ ,  $df=38$ ,  $p=0.00<0.05$ ). This verifies that the post-test composition scores indicate a dramatic improvement on students' writing ability after receiving the written commentaries and using them for revision purposes.

## Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The critical domain of research within EFL writing pedagogy is linked to exploring the best and the most viable methods of providing feedback to EFL learners' written production. There exist several techniques to provide feedback to students' compositions including peer response groups (Berg, 1999; Zhu, 2001), teacher-student conferences (Perpignan, 2003; Shin, 2003), audiotaped commentary (Kroll, 2001), reformulation, and computer-based commentary on students' diskettes or via e-mail (Matsumura & Harnn, 2004). Still, for many writing teachers,

handwritten commentary on student drafts is the primary method of response (Ferris, 1997).

The positive response to the research question of this study, along with the findings of other similar empirical studies, reemphasizes the need for EFL teachers to consider more elaborate use of written commentaries as means of providing feedback to students' writings. Written feedback is of utmost significance due to its interpersonal nature; it reflects teachers' attitude toward writing and initiates a social relation between the teacher and learners which is applicable to all levels and contexts of language education. Teacher written feedback helps EFL writing instructors systematize their instructions in order to give this opportunity to student writers to achieve specific goals and expected products at different stages of learning to write in English through problem-solving skills. These expected goals and products need to be introduced and reviewed for students in all drafts and through several revisions.

Speaking of the implications for the classroom, one that can be drawn from this study, therefore, is that teachers need to allocate some time during the composing processes to negotiate feedback issues in face-to-face discussions with individual students. This assists the students not to misinterpret the commentaries and clarifies the ambiguous or illegible points in the feedback.

Another implication would be the need

end of each class. However, the teachers did not directly explain the erroneous points or provide the students with the correct alternatives. Those participants in the control group were encouraged by the instructors to revise their drafts based on their classmate's comments, their textbook, or other outside sources.

Once the treatment was over, the students were asked to write another expository composition on the same topic as the pretest to examine whether there had been any improvement in their writing ability. After computing the inter-rater reliability of the two ratings, *t-test* of the two groups was calculated to find out whether the difference between the scores of the pretest and post-test essays had been significant.

## Results

The standardized PET was administered to the initial pool of this study and the participants whose scores

lay between one standard deviation above and below the mean were included in the investigation ( $M=41.50$ ,  $SD=7.65$ ).

To insure the homogeneity of the two groups prior to sitting for the pretest, an independent *t-test* was run. The result ( $t=0.29$ ,  $df=38$ ,  $p=0.76>0.05$ ) indicated that the difference between the means of the two groups was not statistically significant with the alpha set at 0.05.

At the next stage, the two groups were compared based on the scores of their pretest compositions. The inter-rater reliability was computed to be 0.87. The following independent *t-test*, as can be seen in table 1, revealed that the mean difference of the pretest compositions (0.42) was not significant at 38 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance and the students seemed to be at the same level of composition writing ability before receiving the teacher feedback ( $t=0.93$ ,  $df=38$ ,  $p=0.35>0.05$ ).

**Table 1** *t-Test Results for the Pretest Compositions*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means		
Equal variances assumed	F	sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	.606	.441	.935	38	.355	.50	.534

**Table 2** *t-Test Results for the Posttest Compositions*

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means		
Equal variances assumed	F	sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	1.89	.17	4.26	38	.000	1.82	.42

- Organization: introduction, body, and conclusion
- Content: logical development of ideas
- Grammar (i.e. structure)
- Mechanics: punctuation and spelling
- Style and quality of expression

In order to reach a partial consistency in the rating of the participants' pretest and post test compositions, the two raters compiled their expected behaviors in the form of *rater protocol* to increase the conformity of their ratings. Considering the categories and score levels specified in the analytic scale, the purpose of the protocol was to elucidate the overall focus of the ratings (see *Appendix*).

### ***Procedure***

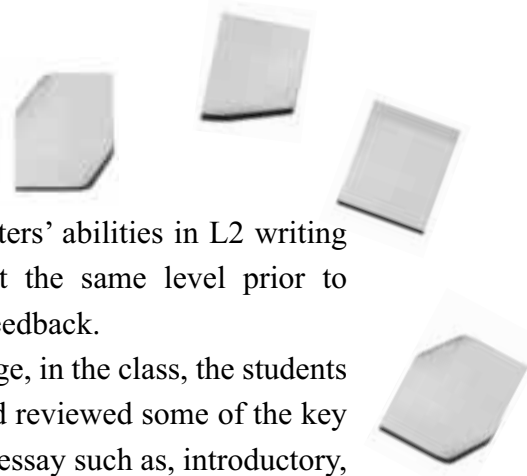
After piloting the proficiency test (PET) for its suitability for the subjects of the present study the test was administered to the initial pool of subjects of this study to insure their homogeneity. Then, the participants were to write a five-paragraph essay on an IELTS-based topic which was common for all three classes. The topic of the pretest composition was: *If you had the authority to change the education system at your school, what would you change about it?*

The students were encouraged to preferably type their essays. Handwritten essays were acceptable though. The collected compositions were then rated by two experienced raters based on Brown's (2005) rating rubric. A *t-test* was run after rating the compositions and the difference was found not significant, indicating that

the student writers' abilities in L2 writing were almost at the same level prior to receiving the feedback.

Up to this stage, in the class, the students had learned and reviewed some of the key elements of an essay such as, introductory, concluding, and body paragraphs, blueprints and thesis statement, and a few points on mechanics and structure of English formal writing. To start the treatment, students were asked to write their drafts on different topics including distance education, advantages and disadvantages of the technological life, and advantages of using subway in public transportation; the collected drafts were then commented on. These comments were imperative sentences (Sugita, 2006) and were not only on the *content* but also on the *form* of the essays. Coupled with points on grammar, comments on form also included points in mechanics. Comments on content consisted of text organization, choice of words and style of writing. Both *praise* and *criticism* were central to the comments. Moreover, these imperative commentaries were of *direct* and *indirect* nature. The process of commenting on the drafts took at least 8 minutes for each composition and the average number of comments on each essay was 10 sentences.

Subsequently, the participants had to revise their drafts based on the commentaries a week later. Students could discuss the content of the comments or illegibility of them with the instructors in teacher-student oral conferences at the



showed that Iranian students managed to experience improvement in their writing accuracy regardless of whether they received feedback or not. Finding of Rahimi's (2009) study suggests that making progress had been more extended and larger in the group who received written feedback and this stresses the salience of teacher feedback in EFL contexts where this method of feedback provision is one of the only available tools.

Accordingly, in this study, the researchers attempted to investigate the impact of the effectiveness of teachers' handwritten comments on Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' revisions in a multipledraft writing class. To this end, the following research question was proposed:

*Does teacher written commentary as a means of feedback provision have any impact on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' writing ability?*

## Method Participants

Initially, a sample of 50 undergraduate English Translation Training and English Literature majors from Islamic Azad University at North Tehran Branch participated in this study. The participants were within the age range of 20 to 27. After administering the test of homogeneity, 40 students (10 males and 30 females) received the treatment.

The participants were all enrolled in two classes of the Essay Writing course. In

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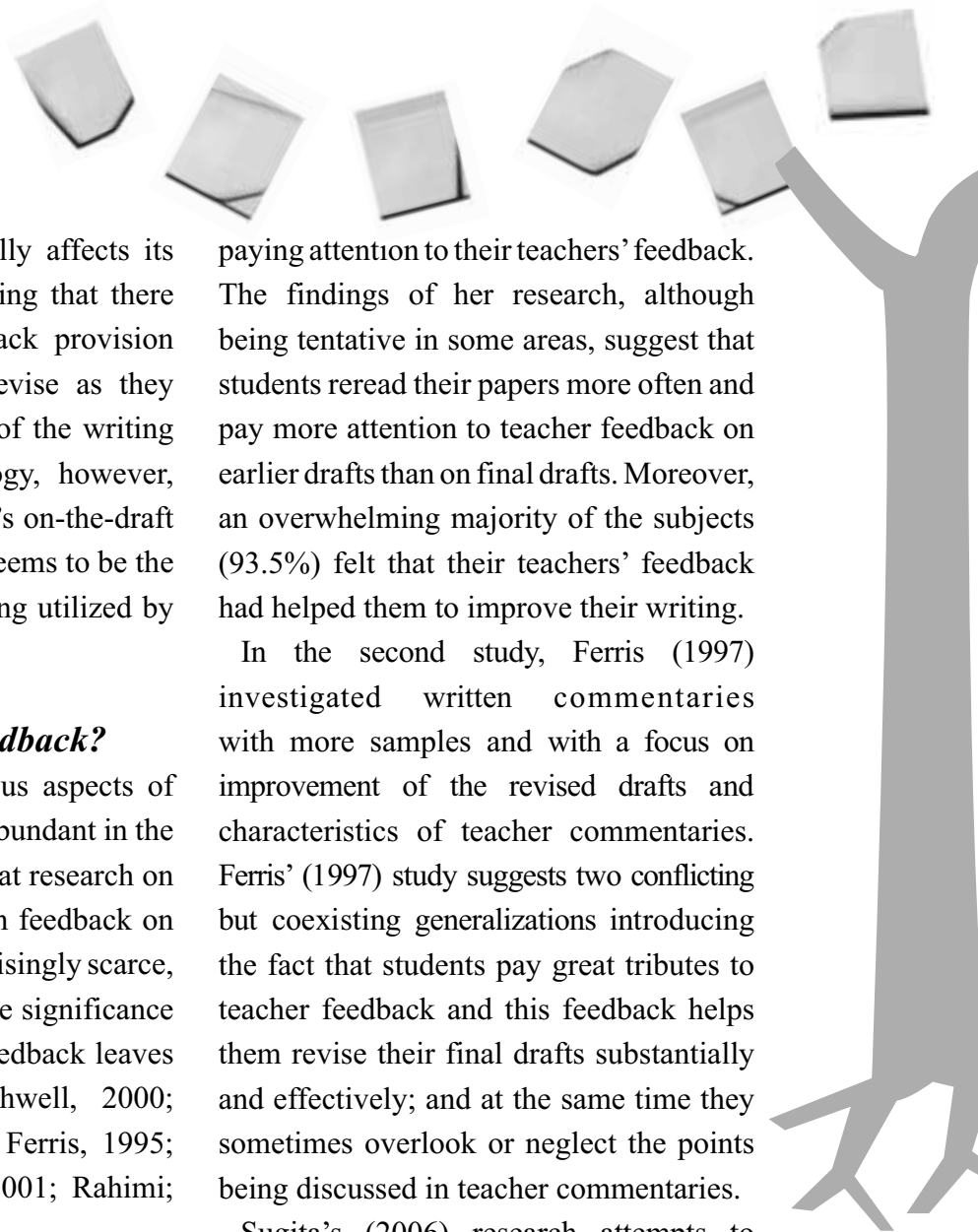
order to control the impact of instructor variable, each class was divided into two groups, one experimental and one control group.

Compositions of the experimental group were commented on by one of the researchers. The nature and type of the commentaries will be discussed in the following sections. The control group received zero feedback. The classes shared the same textbook which was utilized for teaching text structure, paragraph unity, and types of essays. In and out of the class, students were engaged in several writing activities and assignments.

## Instrumentation

The first instrument utilized in this study was the reading and writing subtests of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) to measure general proficiency of the participants and to insure that they all belonged to the same population.

The second instrument was the Analytic Scale for Rating Composition Tasks (Brown, 2005). The categories of the rating scale of the study were:

A decorative graphic at the top of the page features several pieces of paper or documents scattered across the top edge. On the right side, there is a stylized silhouette of a tree with its branches extending upwards and outwards, partially overlapping the papers.

given to learners dramatically affects its impact. It goes without saying that there are various ways in feedback provision which can help students revise as they proceed through the stages of the writing process. In writing pedagogy, however, written feedback, or teacher's on-the-draft response to writers' errors, seems to be the most frequent technique being utilized by writing instructors.

### ***Why teacher written feedback?***

Research reports on various aspects of L2/FL writing pedagogy is abundant in the literature. Despite the fact that research on the impact of teacher written feedback on students' texts has been surprisingly scarce, most of the findings yield the significance of the impact this type of feedback leaves on students' abilities (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ferris, 1995; 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Rahimi; 2009; Sugita, 2006).

McDonough (2002, pp. 145-148), utilizes the terms *feedback* and *correction* interchangeably and views feedback as a strong feature of pedagogical language. He believes that learners' errors are an indispensable part of language development. In spite of the role of errors in language development, we should not underestimate the role of feedback in language instruction.

In Ferris' (1995) investigation, the subjects were surveyed on their reactions to teachers' comments on their preliminary and final drafts, in terms of their degree of

paying attention to their teachers' feedback. The findings of her research, although being tentative in some areas, suggest that students reread their papers more often and pay more attention to teacher feedback on earlier drafts than on final drafts. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of the subjects (93.5%) felt that their teachers' feedback had helped them to improve their writing.

In the second study, Ferris (1997) investigated written commentaries with more samples and with a focus on improvement of the revised drafts and characteristics of teacher commentaries. Ferris' (1997) study suggests two conflicting but coexisting generalizations introducing the fact that students pay great tributes to teacher feedback and this feedback helps them revise their final drafts substantially and effectively; and at the same time they sometimes overlook or neglect the points being discussed in teacher commentaries.

Sugita's (2006) research attempts to examine the relationship between the changes in the students' revisions and the influence of teachers' three comment types: statements, imperatives, and questions. Sugita's (2006) small scale study concludes that although teachers tend to avoid writing comments in the imperative form, imperatives are found to be more influential on revisions.

Conducted in an Iranian context, Rahimi (2009) examined the impact of feedback on writing accuracy over time and the relation between students' mother tongue and the feedback effectiveness. The results

### Abstract

Feedback in EFL writing pedagogy has always been central to many classroom settings. The role that teachers play in providing the most viable types of feedback to EFL compositions truly contributes to the improvement student writers experience in their language education whether this is at the school or university level programs. In this study, 40 EFL learners' composition drafts received written commentaries on both form and content. Prior to the study, the learners, who were members of two intact classes, were homogenized on their language proficiency as well as their writing ability and were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. The comparison of the means of the two groups on writing posttest revealed that the teacher written comments helped the students improve their EFL writing ability. The findings of this study emphasized the need for EFL instructors to provide feedback to their student writers with elaborate and clear written comments. The conclusion is that written feedback is still the primary method of response to EFL texts.

**Key Words:** teacher written feedback, student writing, writing improvement.

### Introduction

The role of writing instructors as coaches, judges, facilitators, evaluators, interested readers, proofreaders, and copy editors (Ferris, 1995) has always been emphasized in the literature on writing pedagogy. Responding, or providing feedback, to second or foreign language (L2/FL) compositions is another key responsibility of every L2/FL writing instructor. Nevertheless, the quest remains for the prominence and implementation of each of these roles.

Writing instructors' roles are mainly described as fruitful in process-oriented classes where composing processes are central to the curriculum (Kroll, 2001). The advent of process writing has paved the way for more constructive maneuver of the teachers who intervene at various stages of producing a piece of writing to orient student writers towards more accurate and fluent performances. Hence,

this crucial role of instructors in providing response to students' writing is primary. This response, mostly in the form of a constructing various feedback types, attempts to aid student writers reflect on their compositions, and helps them move through the stages of writing processes based on whatever feedback they receive from the teacher.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), teachers are usually conscious of the potential of feedback for creating a supportive teaching environment which can lead to better learning of the skill at hand. It is clear that writing is very much intermingled with personal attitudes and students' motivation and self-esteem as writers in the second or foreign language. Therefore, teachers' feedback realized in different ways may reinforce appropriate language behaviors and foster students' linguistic self-confidence.

So to speak, the way this feedback is

# Written Feedback:

## Still, a Strong Pedagogical Tool



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### چکیده

این تحقیق به بررسی تأثیر بازخوردهای نوشتاری مدرسان زبان انگلیسی به نسخه اولیه نگارش زبان آموزان می‌پردازد. هدف تحقیق آن است که نشان دهد، چنین بازخوردهایی در بهبود نحوه نگارش زبان آموزان ایرانی مؤثر هستند. ۴۰ نفر زبان آموز در دو کلاس مقاله‌نویسی به صورت تصادفی از میان دانشجویان رشته‌های ادبیات و مترجمی زبان انگلیسی در دانشکده زبان‌های خارجی دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد تهران شمال انتخاب شدند. پس از برگزاری آزمون تعیین توانش زبانی برای همگون‌سازی، از آزمودنیها آزمون نگارش نیز به عمل آمد و با استفاده از آزمون t، گروههای مستقل مشخص شدند که از نظر آماری، تفاوت معناداری بین توانایی نگارش اعضای آنها وجود نداشت. پس از آزمون نگارش و ارائه بازخورد به نگارش آزمودنیها در گروه آزمایش، نتایج به دست آمده از پس‌آزمون زبان آموزان و مقایسه میانگین دو گروه از طریق آزمون t نشان داد که بازخوردهای نوشتاری مدرسان زبان انگلیسی موجب بهبود توانایی نگارش گروه آزمایش و باعث پیشرفت در روند یادگیری نوشتاری زبان آموزان شده است.

**کلیدواژه‌ها:** بازخورد نوشتاری مدرسان زبان، نگارش، بهبود توانایی نگارش