



The Attitudes of Iranian Female EFL Learners towards Peer Feedback

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Abstract

This study investigated the Iranian female EFL learners' and teachers' preferences toward peer feedback. The participants of this study were 60 females intermediate EFL learners and 15 female TEFL teachers studying/teaching in different language institutes in Tehran. Learners' attitudes toward peer feedback Questionnaire were administered to determine the learners' attitudes towards peer feedback. In addition, a semi-structured interview was given to the teachers to explore their attitudes towards peer feedback. Furthermore, two independent t-tests were run to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between the efficacy of feedback given by teachers and peers. The study results showed that most participating teachers think peer feedback is fruitful. It also revealed that most students believe that peer feedback is more effective than teacher feedback. In addition, the data analysis result showed a statistically significant difference between the feedback given by teachers and the ones provided by students.

Keywords: EFL learners, Teacher's preferences, Iranian female teachers, English test, Peer feedback, Teacher feedback.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study has contributed to the current body of knowledge by recognizing the efficacy of teacher and peer feedback among Iranian female EFL learners.

1. Introduction

Today, enhancing the learners' writing ability is one of the main goals of EFL teachers. There are a lot of techniques that are considered instructional tools for this purpose. One of the most significant ones is feedback. It reveals the errors in writing tasks.

Many have supported the benefits of giving feedback so far. For instance, Liu (2008) finds that student writing accuracy improves after receiving feedback. However, the effectiveness of feedback is mainly agreed upon by many researchers. The question of who should correct the errors is raised because feedback can be either by peers or teachers. Some people believe that the Teacher should provide the correct form for the students. The teacher is seen as the authority and the source of knowledge in the classroom, so students prefer to be corrected by their teacher.

Giving the students the correct answers does not make a long-term memory pattern (Walz, 1982). In other words, students always make the same mistakes while teaching writing skills, although the feedback is continuously given to them. The students never learn from the errors they make in their writing. After receiving the papers by discouraging red pen, they look at the mark and never look at it again. As mentioned above, the primary way of giving feedback is not known as an appropriate process for teaching writing skills. So, peer feedback is recommended as it seems more specific than the teacher's feedback.

In peer feedback, learners have a chance to read each other's drafts and comment on them. Peer feedback will be beneficial both for student writers and commentators. It helps the writers get feedback on their writing and utilize it in subsequent writing drafts. This process will make them aware of their writing problems and notice their progress. By reading the other students' drafts, learners become critical readers and become revisers of their writings (Rollinson, 2005). Rollinson (2005) wrote, "in recent years, the use of peer feedback in EFL writing classrooms has been generally supported in the literature as a potentially valuable aid for its social, cognitive, affective, and methodological benefits" (p. 23).

Moreover, peer feedback seems to be different from that of teacher feedback because it may serve as more constructive feedback and sound less criticizing to the learners. Villamil and Guerrero (1998) state that peer feedback fits the learner-centered process because it helps learners become active learners. Allowing them to read their friends' writing will increase their interaction.

This study aims to determine the efficacy of both teacher and peer feedback. The significance of including peer feedback in the regular assessment procedures have been reviewed by some researchers (see, for example, Burnett & Cavaye, 1980; Earl, 1986). Peer feedback is claimed to allow students to enhance abilities and skills they have gained in a learning environment in which the teacher takes on the responsibility of giving feedback. In other words, teachers provide learners with a chance to take on analyzing and monitoring aspects of both the learning process and the product of their peers. Thus, such studies can shed light on the role peer feedback can play in improving the learners' linguistic and non-linguistic skills.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Feedback

2.1. Output Hypothesis

Swain suggested the output hypothesis in 1985, focusing on the contribution output could make to learning and acquiring a second language. This hypothesis drew on observing classes using immersion programs to teach the French language, and the courses were content based. Swain observed that the students in these classes faced very few difficulties grasping teachers' instructions, which were given in French. However, the students' speaking, and production performance often were inaccurate. As a result, Swain suggested the Output Hypothesis, stating that comprehensible input proposed by Krashen (1985) is insufficient to improve learners' acquisition of structural forms and syntax. According to the hypothesis, producing output in the light of input is a requirement for higher levels of language development.

In the same context, Swain attached great importance to the part played by modified output, asserting that it is required for mastering a foreign language. Moreover, Swain argued that modified output could derive from many opportunities containing work and from teachers and classmates providing helpful feedback. Swain argued that modified output manifests "the leading edge of a learner's interlanguage" (Swain, 1995).

As for the interactions between teachers and learners, the modified output can become uptake or the form of learners' response to instructors' feedback in reaction to errors made. For example, corrective feedback is an educational way of giving modified input to learners, which could finally result in modified output on the part of the students.

2.2. Interaction Hypothesis

Reviewing and examining the Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1985) delineated the connection between input, interaction, and acquisition as follows: (1) input is made understandable through making modifications to interactions, (2) acquisition is enhanced and promoted by comprehensible input, and (3) getting engaged in interaction results in acquisition. Drawing on Long's elaboration, feedback and uptakes can be valuable for developing language, particularly when feedback and uptake act as a tool for modifying interaction.

Another theoretical evidence for substantiating the beneficial effect of feedback is that learning both first and second language may need negative evidence or data showing that the utterance or sentence is ungrammatical (Suzuki, 2012).

Regarding the learnability argument that comprehensible input may not be sufficient for acquisition, researchers such as White (1987); White (1989) have argued a need for negative evidence if second language learners aim to attain nativelike proficiency. Negative evidence is considered adequate when learner hypotheses

based on L1 structure led to EFL overgeneralizations that are impossible to overcome based on positive evidence alone.

Since negative evidence is presented as a reaction to erroneous forms produced by learners, it has the shape of corrective feedback embedded in interactions and conversations.

Logan asserted that while learning a language, the learner needs to focus on extracting items (i.e., linguistic input) from a stimulus set. Similarly, Schmidt (1995) put forward the concept of noticing as a subjective materialization of attention, arguing that converting information to intake requires seeing as a condition.

Regarding Schmidt (1995) suggestion that acquisition of input is made more accessible by noticing, Long (1996) probed the setting in which notice may occur, concluding that during negotiation for meaning, learners can engage in the adequate attention that selective one. In addition, Long (1996) argued that feedback gained during the negotiation of meaning might facilitate the development of EFL in terms of vocabulary, syntax, and morphology. Negotiating and solving the difficulties experienced in interaction result incomprehensible input, consisting of salient structural features of the language. Consequently, learners can notice more rapidly compared with other components.

Corrective feedback has been investigated in the context of classroom research. An important reason for studying the order of feedback and uptake was to find the patterns of handling and treating errors in various language classroom settings.

The study carried out by Carroll, Swain, and Roberge (1992) investigated the adult French learners who learned the use of rules concerning French suffixation, receiving feedback on their erroneous use.

In the same vein, Carroll and Swain (1993) examined English learners who received various types of feedback while learning the English dative alternation rule. The investigation aimed to explore the effect of feedback on learners' erroneous use of specific linguistic forms. Still, because of the nature of the study, they failed to yield any possible influence resulting from error treatment in communicative language classrooms.

In a study conducted by White (1991) the impact of feedback and form-focused teaching materials was examined. The study included constructed experiments with pre-tests and post-tests dealing with particular linguistic forms.

Similarly, Spada and Lightbown (1993) focused on question formation, while the study carried out by White (1991) dealt with adverb substitution. These studies indicated positive effects for EFL learners whose native language was French; however, the findings did not indicate the usefulness of error correction when done separately in the highly controlled experiments dealing with intensive form-focused teaching.

DeKeyser (1993) also examined the impact of correcting errors alone on the use of grammar. In contrast to the mentioned studies, no particular linguistic form was targeted for providing corrective feedback during the study. At the same time, the post-tests aimed to find the enhancement of learners' grammar learning. The learners' second language proficiency was tested by administering pre-tests and post-tests. At the same time, the researcher also gathered information on the students' motivation, anxiety, and language aptitude.

Although the results did not indicate an overall positive impact of error correction on the students' second proficiency, they showed the relationship between error correction and learner features such as motivation and level of anxiety. DeKeyser (1993) indicates that there may be an interaction between the usefulness of feedback and learner characteristics.

2.3. Sociocultural Theory

Peer assessment is mainly based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind, which strongly proposes that cognitive development is best understood within social and cultural contexts. It attempts to account for the processes through which learning and development occur.

To Vygotsky, learners need the help of another person to perform a new task, and then after internalizing it, they can perform the task independently. Social interaction, therefore, mediates learning. The sociocultural theory has profound implications for research about the mind, mental development, and educational practices. As Nassaji and Cumming (2000) justly conclude: defining the dialogic nature of teaching/learning processes within the zone of proximal development and designing research that exemplifies its nature is central in sociocultural theory.

However, thanks to Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory, this form of learners' language ability was called into question due to its underestimation of learners' abilities by calling attention to the developmental differences among the learners and, therefore, more accurately accounting for their abilities. This was along with the recognition that interaction is an important and powerful language assessment tool.

Researchers have also begun to draw out the implications of EFL task-based research and pedagogy for language assessment (Skehan, 2001). According to Skehan (2001): the advantages ascribed to task-based assessment include: that it promotes the "test-takers individual expression" and provides the opportunity for test-takers to use "background knowledge and experiences" as "active and autonomous participants in a given communicative interaction"; if one accepts that a task reflects real-life communication, it is possible to generalize beyond the "learning/testing situation" (p.180).

Shohamy (2001) argues that task-based assessment can inform pedagogical practices, but only if scores are accompanied by appropriate diagnostic information on the learners' abilities.

Although bringing tasks into the assessment picture is certainly a positive step, the task-based framework continues to separate assessment from instruction. However, the curriculum segregates learning tasks from assessment tasks, as seen in the following excerpt taken from the curriculum: "the major difference between assessment tasks and learning tasks is that in learning tasks, teachers need to conduct appropriate pre-task, while-task, and post-tasks activities to ensure that learners can complete the tasks satisfactorily" (Candlin, 2000). Thus, while a given task could be used for either learning purposes or assessment purposes, these are still different activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The current study participants comprised 60 females intermediate EFL learners in one of the language institutes of Tehran and 15 female TEFL teachers teaching in different language institutes in Tehran, namely Shokouh and Safir institutes. The learners were mainly university students and were within the age range of 18 to 30. The gender of the study participants was female because the researcher found it very difficult to find male participants since the researcher teaches only female students in the previously mentioned institutes.

Concerning the teachers, it should be said that they were all experienced teachers who had teaching experience for at least ten years. The teachers are aged between 28 to 40.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments utilized in this study include:

1) Preliminary English Test (PET). The Cambridge Preliminary English Test, or PET, is a qualification test in English as a Foreign Language awarded by Cambridge ESOL. The test has these sections:

A- Reading and writing are taken together - 90 minutes.

B- Listening - 30 minutes.

C- Speaking - an interview, 10 minutes.

2) Scoring scheme: to analyze writing samples produced by learners, the raters used a scoring scheme comprising 5 criteria: Content, Organization, Mechanics, Grammar, and Style. These criteria are mainly used to score the writing parts of standardized tests such as TOEFL and IELTS. Each criterion was assessed, ranging from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 10 (outstanding). The scores given by each rater on different writing sections were correlated to assure the reliability of the scoring scheme. The high correlations between the scores indicated the reliability of the scoring scheme and writing scores.

3) The Questionnaire on learners' attitudes toward peer feedback. The attitude questionnaire, based on [Liao and Wong \(2010\)](#); [Tuan \(2010\)](#) was in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to disagree (1) strongly, and it consisted of 16 items.

4) A semi-structured interview comprised six questions to explore the teachers' attitudes toward feedback.

3.3. Procedure

At the outset, 15 English teachers teaching at the intermediate level in 4 language Institutes were identified. Ten teachers reported that they had already read about peer feedback and were familiar with the relevant activities, and showed their willingness to participate in the interview. The interview questions were given to each Teacher two days before the interview. At the interview session, the selected teachers provided their responses to the questions and elaborated on them, giving explanations and examples from their classes.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was used to elicit the teachers' perspectives about peer feedback, their experiences of implementing peer feedback in their classes, the reasons for using or not using peer feedback, and the effectiveness of peer feedback. This stage was conducted to explore the teachers' attitudes towards feedback.

To explore the efficacy of teachers' feedback and peer feedback and to explore the learners' attitudes to peer feedback, the following procedure was employed:

PET was initially administered to ninety female intermediate learners. Sixty of them whose scores fell between 1 standard deviation above and below the mean were selected. Only those learners whose scores fell under the normal curve were chosen for the study. The participants were then randomly divided into two groups of 30. This was followed by conducting a writing exam in which the learners were asked to write an essay on a selected topic. This aimed to ensure that all students were homogenous concerning their writing ability.

The learners in both groups participated in 10 sessions as follows:

Learners in Group 1 received training on peer-reviewing the writing work in the first four sessions. To this end, the Teacher sat down with the learners and assumed the role of a student. Then s/he demonstrated how to evaluate their classmates' work in a supportive and informative manner.

This group focused on learning to write an essay through giving and receiving peer feedback. From the fifth session onward, the learner's in-group 1 allocated a part of the instruction program (30 minutes) to practicing writing. Each learner wrote the first draft and passed it on to their classmate, who read it carefully and wrote down her comment on the quality of writing on the blank side of the draft.

Group 2 also participated in 10 sessions where they were taught how to write an essay. In each session, the Teacher taught the guidelines for writing a persuasive essay. The students were required to write essays and then deliver them to the Teacher.

The Teacher read the essays carefully, provided due comments and feedback on each essay, and handed them in the following session to the learners. They proceeded with the draft on which the Teacher had given comments.

It is worth mentioning that groups 1 and 2 followed a similar lesson plan and were asked to write the essays on the same topics. For example, in both groups, one session was allocated to explaining how to write a paragraph, using the main and supporting ideas.

Having completed the course, the learners in both groups took a writing post-test, and the results were used to determine the efficacy of peer feedback in contrast with the teacher feedback.

To address another concern of this study, the learners' attitudes towards peer feedback, a peer-feedback attitude questionnaire adapted from [Liao and Wong \(2010\)](#); [Tuan \(2010\)](#) was administered to the participants. To this end, the questionnaire was piloted on a group of learners similar to the study participants. The results gained from this pilot administration were drawn on to make some slight revisions to the questionnaire.

Some parts of the questionnaire were challenging to understand for the learners in this pilot study. These parts were thoroughly elaborated on during the questionnaire administration to group one. Before the administration, the participants were instructed to read the items one by one, and the Teacher assured that all the learners knew what the things meant. To accomplish this Teacher employed comprehension and concept check

questions for each item. Moreover, instruction check questions were also drawn on to remove any ambiguities regarding how to respond to the articles.

3.4. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design. This design is a procedure for collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to understand a research problem.

3.5. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as percentage counts, standard deviation and means, and inferential statistics (T-Test) were used to determine the efficacy of peer feedback and report the learners' and teachers' attitudes towards peer feedback.

4. Results and Discussion

The present study investigated Iranian female EFL learners' and teachers' preferences toward peer feedback. the following null hypothesis was raised to do this:

H1: There is no significant difference between the efficacy of feedback given by teachers and those provided by peers.

There were three research questions in this study, but only one null hypothesis since the other two were qualitative.

Concerning how the subjects were chosen, they were 60 females intermediate EFL learners in one of the language institutes of Tehran and 15 female TEFL teachers teaching in different language institutes in Tehran. The learners mainly were university students aged between 18 and 30.

To answer the first research question, which was about the attitude of female Iranian EFL teachers towards peer feedback, a semi-structured interview including six questions was given to the participants to explore their attitudes towards feedback.

What follows are the gained results after giving the interview:

The interview data indicated that most of the participating teachers think peer feedback is fruitful, but they also show concerns about how to use it in their classes. For the many teachers, peer feedback is helpful for their students to 1) become aware of the errors they make in their writing, 2) share ideas with their peers, 3) improve their writing quality, and 4) raise interest and motivation in L2 writing.

Peer review also helps the students learn from their peers' writing. They also try not to make the same mistakes in their writing. For some teachers, peer feedback is a process that can improve their learning.

Furthermore, some teachers believe that peer feedback could be more helpful to feedback givers than feedback receivers. Some of the teachers don't usually use peer feedback as they think the value of peer feedback is limited. For instance, one of the teachers maintained that it was a waste of time since he couldn't see the effectiveness of peer feedback. Another teacher responded that peer feedback mainly focused on spelling and grammatical errors rather than the contents and organization of the writing. Another teacher also doubted the students' ability to give comments on their peer's writing, "I never use peer feedback in my class, since I do not think students are able enough to comment on their peer's writing effectively."

To answer the second research question, which was about the attitude of female Iranian EFL learners toward peer feedback, the learner's attitudes toward peer feedback Questionnaire was administered. The attitude questionnaire was in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to disagree (1) strongly, and it consisted of 16 items.

The following table illustrates the results gained from the questionnaire given to the students:

Table 1. Students' attitudes towards peer feedback.

Questionnaire Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoy reading my partner's writing.	29(48.3)	14(23.5)	5(8.3)	7(11.6)	5(8.3)
I enjoy giving feedback on my partner's writing.	25(41.6)	18(30.2)	8(13.3)	4(6.6)	5(8.3)
I enjoy reading peer feedback on my writing entries.	32(53.3)	13(21.6)	4(6.6)	6(10.2)	5(8.3)
It is more fun to write for someone to read than not to be read.	22(36.6)	21(35)	6(10.2)	4(6.6)	7(11.6)
Peer feedback task is helpful in writing.	34(56.6)	17(28.3)	3(5.2)	4(6.6)	2(3.3)
My partner can give me helpful feedback on my writing.	14(23.3)	18(30)	12(20.1)	10(16.6)	6(10)
I feel more relaxed receiving peer feedback than teacher feedback in writing.	23(38.3)	26(43.3)	3(5.1)	5(8.3)	3(5)
I could learn more grammar points from peer feedback.	19(31.6)	24(40)	7(11.6)	4(6.6)	6(10.2)
I read and understood what my friend corrected and suggested.	17(28.3)	23(38.3)	8(13.3)	6(10.1)	6(10)
Peer feedback should be used to promote learners' English writing ability in English writing courses.	21(35)	26(43.3)	3(5)	6(10.1)	4(6.6)
I feel uncomfortable for my partner to read and give feedback on my writing.	12(20)	14(23.3)	8(13.3)	15(25.1)	11(18.3)
I find it challenging to give feedback on my partner's Writing.	13(21.6)	17(28.6)	7(11.6)	16(26.6)	7(11.6)
I prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback in writing.	9(15.1)	11(18.3)	6(10)	18(30)	16(26.6)
I think that my writing could be improved through teacher feedback	11(18.3)	7(11.6)	4(6.6)	23(38.34)	15(25.16)
I think I could learn more grammar points through teacher Feedback in writing.	14(23.3)	8(13.3)	4(6.6)	19(31.67)	15(25.13)
I feel that teacher feedback brings a negative attitude toward learning to write in English	15(25)	18(30)	9(15)	12(20)	6(10)

Most students thought that peer feedback was more effective than teacher feedback. When they were asked to choose the method, they would prefer to use in the future, the number of students who chose peer feedback (56.6) was higher than the number of students who chose teacher feedback (Table 1). The results showed that the effective teacher disadvantages feedback included students being more comfortable with their peers while they were given feedback. As the students stated, peer feedback was the most fruitful method because they felt comfortable talking to their peers. Moreover, they wanted to use their peers' comments to improve their future writing ability. They stated that they could get more benefits from peer feedback. However, some students didn't think so and preferred asking questions to the Teacher to solve their writing problems. Peer feedback had a positive effect on writing ability. The students felt that they had more ideas and motivation to improve their writing skills as they read their peers' work and got/gave feedback.

To answer the third research question, initially, based on the normal curve of PET score and the respective histogram, 60 subjects whose scores fell within 52-72 were selected (Figure 1).

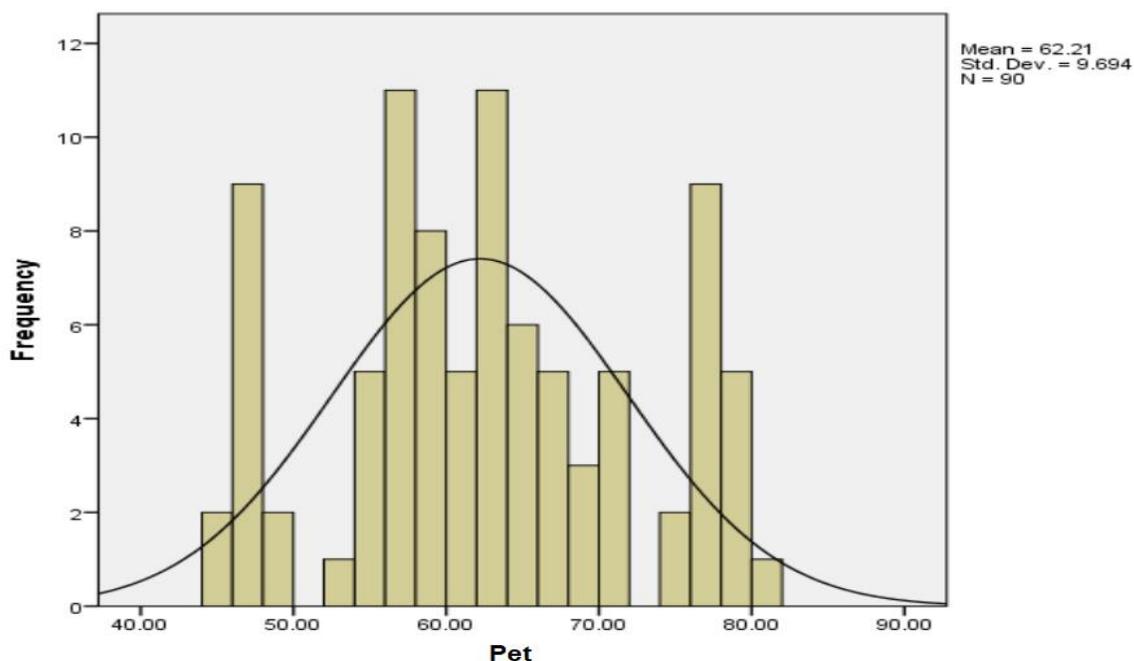


Figure 1. Histogram of PET with the standard distribution curve.

According to Figure 2, 30 participants who scored very high or very low were eliminated.

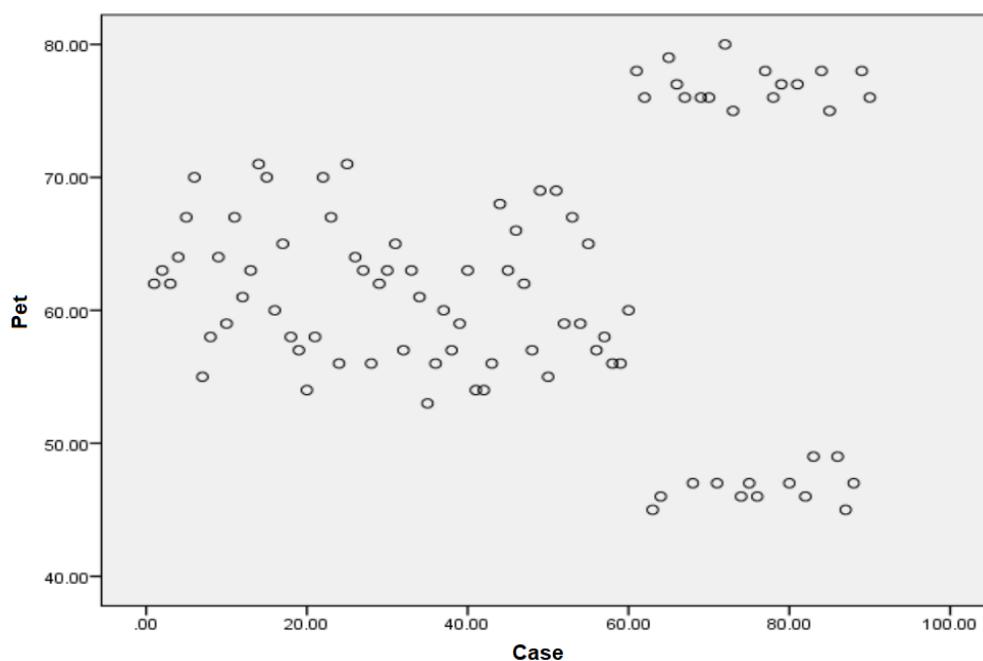


Figure 2. Dispersion of the participants' PET scores.

An independent T-Test was run to compare the pre-treatment scores of two groups to assure homogeneity in terms of learners' writing ability. Table 2 indicates the descriptive statistics for this test. It can be concluded that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of writing ability before the treatment.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for comparing pre-treatment scores of the two groups, A and B.

Type of Test	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Writing (pre-test)	Group A(Experiment)Peer feedback	17.65	2.08	0.742	0.460
	Group B(control)	18.08	2.70		

An independent T-Test was run to compare the post-treatment scores of the two groups, A and B, regarding writing ability. Table 3 indicates the descriptive statistics of the two groups, A and B, regarding writing ability after treatment administration.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of post-treatment scores of the two groups, A and B.

Type of Test	Group	Mean	S. D.	T	Sig.
Writing (post-test)	Group A(Experiment)Peer feedback	21.02	2.96	3.513	0.001
	Group B(control)	18.74	2.45		

Table 3 shows that the post-treatment means of the two groups in terms of writing ability are significantly different.

It is also worth mentioning that Group A has obtained a higher mean (21.02) which indicates that using peer feedback is more effective on students' writing ability than using teacher feedback.

As can be seen, the mean for Group A is higher than that for Group B. Thus, using peer feedback has a significantly positive effect on writing ability compared to when giving teacher feedback.

The study results showed that using peer feedback is more effective on the students' writing ability than teacher feedback. That is, students tend to use peer feedback more than teacher feedback.

Regarding students' attitudes toward peer feedback, it was revealed that the students mainly thought that peer feedback was more effective than teacher feedback. Also, they would prefer peer feedback since the number of students who chose peer feedback (56.6) was higher than the number of students who selected teacher feedback.

Concerning the teachers' attitude towards peer feedback, it should be said that most of the teachers who participated in this study think peer feedback is helpful, but they also show their concerns about how to make use of it in their classes. However, some teachers do not usually use peer feedback as they think the value of peer feedback is limited. Generally, according to the findings of this study, we can say that the teachers have a positive attitude towards using peer feedback in their classes.

This study confirmed the views held by some supporters of language learning. For example, some studies have relevant results to the present study (Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006; Zhang, 1995). They investigate the same thing discussed in this study and, to some extent, have the results in the same line as the ones gained here.

5. Conclusions

In this study, the researcher attempted to investigate the Iranian Female EFL learners' and teachers' preferences towards peer Feedback. Regarding the teachers' attitude towards peer feedback, the study results showed that most participating teachers think peer feedback is fruitful. Still, they also illustrated concerns about using it in their classes. For some teachers, peer feedback is a process that can improve students' learning. Furthermore, some teachers believe that peer feedback could be more helpful to feedback givers than feedback receivers. Some of the teachers do not usually use peer feedback as they think the value of peer feedback is limited. Concerning the learners' attitude towards peer feedback, the study results indicated that most students believe that peer feedback is more effective than teacher feedback. They would like to make use of it more than teacher feedback. Regarding the efficacy of feedback given by teachers and those provided by peers, the result of data analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the feedback given by teachers and those offered by the students. So, the peer feedback group outperformed the teacher feedback group on the post-test.

These findings remind us that the teachers' attitude towards peer feedback is primarily positive and that students benefit more from their peers' feedback than their teachers'. Generally speaking, students interact more with their peers during classroom activities. This interaction probably enables them to benefit more from their peers' feedback.

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