

## Contrasting Audio-taped Feedback with Minimal Marking Feedback in EFL Writing

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, the researchers contrasted audio-taped feedback (ATF) with minimal marking (MM) among 82 EFL female pre-intermediate learners at Kish Air English Language Institute in Tehran-Iran. These 82 students were selected from among 126 pre-intermediate students according to their scores in a pre-intermediate version of Nelson English Language Test. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups of ATF and MM, each with 41 eligible subjects. In each group, they were assigned to write expository paragraphs of about 120 words during 8 sessions, one session for the pre-test, and another one for the post-test; the remaining sessions were allocated for the treatment. One of the groups received ATF and the other MM. A pre-test and a post-test were used before and after the treatment so as to contrast writing performances of the post- and pre-treatments. The results showed that the ATF subjects performed better than the MM in the post-test, while the MM subjects in post-test did not show any progress.

**Keywords:** Error feedback, audio-taped feedback, holistic method, minimal marking

### INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady argument among scholars and teachers all through the history of teaching writing to second language (L2) learners with regard to the role of error feedback in helping students learn how to write (Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1999; Lalande, 1982; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996). Although numerous studies have been conducted in this area, a lot of uncertainties remain, particularly regarding the type of error correction that helps learners to progress in the writing process. As a result, many English as a Second/ Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) writing teachers are often confused about how to help their students.

Meanwhile, many research projects have shown that corrective feedback in the classroom situation is a real need (Bitchener, Young and Cameron, 2005). Nonetheless, limited research has been undertaken to discover if error correction techniques are more effective with regard to the different cognitive styles of the language learners. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) argue that:

*“students can be positively motivated to explore many areas of knowledge and personal creativity through supportive and constructive responses to their writing” (p. 377)*

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It has been stressed that proper feedback can be very helpful in producing “a sense of reader awareness” in the learners as well as “a sense of audience” (Muncie, 2000, p. 52; Boughey, 1997, p. 131) which students seem to lack. In fact, by providing learners with appropriate and fostering feedback, teachers can play a crucial function in facilitating learners’ progress.

Lalande (1982) concluded that making students aware of their errors and using guided learning as well as problem solving techniques did result in a reduced number of errors in students’ writing. This system eliminates many of the unproductive aspects of typical approaches to correcting errors in compositions. Students need to realize that the purpose of marking and correcting compositions is to eliminate those errors when they write in the future.

Audio-taped feedback is defined as the teacher’s tape-recorded comments and suggested changes to written drafts. Boswood and Dwyer (1995) propose that “audio-taped feedback employs technology to humanize the marking

process, which can often be machinelike when technology is not used” (p. 20). Based on this suggestion, alternative methods of feedback on writing, such as audio-taped feedback, are worth examining to see the effects of this emerging feedback technique.

**THE CONCEPTS OF AUDIO-TAPED FEEDBACK AND MINIMAL MARKING**

Hyland (1990) explains two efficient styles of giving feedback, namely minimal marking and taped commentary, which he advocates as two interactive feedback styles. He believes these is because “feedback must be interactive to be genuinely effective” (Hyland, 1990, p. 285).

MM manipulates a set of marking codes, some symbols and alphabet letters that are representative of the error types the students had in their pieces of writing. It is important to mention here that these symbols are quite conventional and any teacher can develop his or her version of the correction codes (Gray,

Morphological	
Verbs	
Verb Tense	vt
Verb Form	vf
Subject-verb agreement	sv
Nouns	
Articles/determiners	art/det
Noun endings (plural/possessive)	pl/pos
Lexical Errors	
Word choice	wc
Word form	wf
Informal usage	inf
Idiom error	id
Pronoun error	pr
Syntatic Errors	
Sentence structure	ss
Run-ons	ro
Fragment	frag
Mechanical	
Punctuation	punc
Spelling	sp

(Source: Ferris *et al.*, 2000; Research corpus by Ferris, 2002, p. 53)

2000). The symbols and alphabet letters are chosen mostly in a way that can best symbolize the error types. The error types and responding symbols can be represented as follows:

The above symbols or any other correcting codes as such can be written in the margin of the students' writing or above the error. According to Zeny (2003), the benefit of using correction codes to carry out self-correction is that students tend to pay closer attention to their work, considering different possibilities for choice of lexis, for instance. In order to advocate the inspiring and productive achievement of a newly-developed method, i.e. audiotape feedback (ATF) on writing, Boswood and Dwyer (1996) state that, "the medium [and the method] that teachers choose for giving students feedback have far-reaching effects on the impact of their comments" (p. 20-21). Kröll (as cited in Celce-Marcia, 1991) points out that:

*"Some teachers provide all their feedback orally by asking students to submit a cassette tape with their draft. This method probably works best when the teacher silently reads a student's paper and makes comments directly into the tape recorder while making some accompanying numbers or symbols on the student's text. For ESL students, this method has the advantage of providing more extensive feedback than that likely to be made in writing, as well as allowing the student to replay the tape as many times as necessary to understand and benefit from the teacher's comments. Once the teacher has learned to use this technique, it probably takes less time to complete taped remarks about a paper than it would to put them in writing."* (p. 259)

As mentioned by Hyland (1990), the technique of recorded comments is helpful when learners' reactions to feedback are preferred. The significance of the ATF has been stressed by many researchers (e.g. Hays, 1978; Clark, 1981;

McAlpine, 1989; Patrie, 1989; Hyland, 1990; Boswood and Dwyer, 1996) who emphasize the efficacy and constructiveness of teachers' taped commentaries. (Note that in the present study, the focus was on comparing only two methods, namely the MM and ATF).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This study intended to answer the following research questions:

- Q1: Does the writing act of the subjects receiving ATF (audio taped feedback) on their writing assignments differ on the pre-test and post-test?
- Q2: Does the writing act of the subjects receiving MM (Minimal Marking) on their writing assignments differ on the pre-test and post-test?
- Q3: Is there any significant difference between the writing act of the subjects receiving ATF and that of those receiving MM on their writing assignments?

In order to examine the three aforementioned research questions empirically, the following null hypotheses were acknowledged:

- H0 (1): There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test of the subjects who received ATF on their writing assignments.
- H0 (2): There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test of the subjects who received MM on their writing assignments.
- H0 (3): There is no significant difference between the post-test of the subjects who received ATF and of those who receive MM on their writing assignments.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The design of this research involved the pretest-posttest non-equivalent groups design, i.e. one of the quasi-experimental designs. After the 82 subjects were assigned into two groups (ATF

TABLE 1  
Correlation of the two raters' scores on the pre-test and post-test

	Pre-test	Post-test
Raters	Holistic	Holistic
R1	.76	.82
R2	.82	.82

TABLE 2  
The MM and ATF groups' homogeneity test means and standard deviation

Groups	Number of students	Mean	Standard deviation
Group A (MM)	41	48.35	5.41
Group B (AFT)	41	48.90	5.12

and MM), the one-way ANOVA was carried out to ensure the homogeneity of the two groups in relation to their general English proficiency. The general descriptive statistics related to the distribution of the subjects in the two groups according to their performance in the Nelson English Language Test are presented in Table 2.

The subjects of this research were randomly selected among pre-intermediate EFL learners studying at Kish air English Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. The type of sampling employed in this research was cluster sampling. The consequential sample consisted of classes with pre-intermediate EFL female students. Out of 126 language learners who took the test, 82 learners met the requirement and were selected as the sample of the study.

### RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

This study used three instruments.

- a. a pre-intermediate version of Nelson English Language Test which was administered to select a homogeneous group out of the available population;
- b. two one-paragraph expository compositions of about 120 words each, one serving as the pre-test and the other as the post-test; and

- c. a tape recorder for commenting directly students' writings and providing the subjects with feedback to give them the opportunity to revise the parts in which communication breakdown may occur.

In general, eight topics were assigned to the selected subjects. Two topics were exploited as the pre-test and the post-test topics with a time limit of 20 minutes, and the remaining six were the writing topics on which the subjects composed their paragraphs and received the appropriate feedback throughout the treatment stage.

The holistic approach to marking was applied for the pre-test and post-test in this study. Consequently, the assessment of the writings was completed by two raters. Meanwhile, the marking processes were carried out separately. The reliability for the marking of the writings through the procedure (i.e. holistic method) was computed using average correlations between the two raters in the pre-test and the post-test (see Table 1).

TABLE 3  
F-test result - a comparison of the ATF and MM groups' means

F observed	df	F critical
1.10	1 & 80	4.00

TABLE 4  
MANOVA - Pre-test, post-test by groups

Source of variation	Sum of squares	DF	Mean squares	F observed	P	F critical
Test	2236.80	1	2236.80	61.21	.000	4.00
Group × Tests	1035.12	1	1035.12	28.19	.000	4.00
Within cells	2983.70	80	36.30	-	-	-

**RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

One hundred and twenty six female pre-intermediate students at Kish Air English Language Institute were chosen from the pre-intermediate classes. Based on the students' scores in the Nelson English Language Test, 82 students were selected out of the total number of 126 students on the basis of the normal distribution of their scores. To be more accurate, the students whose scores were between ±1.5 standard deviation were selected as the homogeneous subjects in the first phase and the other students whose scores did not fall within this range were removed.

In Table 3, the F-observed value was 1.10, which at 1 and 80 degrees of freedom was lower than the critical value of F, i.e., 4.00, at the .05 level of significance. The results of this statistical test proved that there was no statistically significant difference between the ATF and MM groups from the beginning in term of their language proficiency level.

The present study was conducted over 8 sessions in 4 weeks; one session for the pre-test, one for the post-test, and the remaining sessions were the treatment. The treatment process was carried out within the 6 sessions. Throughout the 6 sessions, the subjects in both groups wrote paragraphs on expository topics under no time limit. The only difference between the treatment

of the ATF and MM groups was, essentially, in the kind of feedback they received on their writings.

The subjects in the ATF group received audio-taped feedback on their writings. This process required every member of the group to submit a blank cassette tape, together with the individual writing. After collecting the writings and the tapes, one of the researchers read the writings and gave comments directly into the tape recorder. While giving comments, the teacher made sure that the subjects were provided with cues, such as verb tense and spelling, so as to enable them to fix the parts in which communication breakdown had occurred. At the end of the term, i.e. when the subjects in both groups had already presented the modified versions of their writings on the previous topic, they took part in the post-test. In fact, the subjects wrote their paragraphs under a situation identical to the pre-test. After the post-test, the 82 writings were scored holistically by the same two raters who had marked the scripts separately.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A multivariate analysis of variance was utilized to display the possible differences between the ATF and MM groups on the pre-test and post-test scored holistically (refer to Table 4).

TABLE 5  
Scheffe's test for the comparison between the pre-test and post-test by group

No.	Comparisons	Mean	Observed difference	Critical difference	Significance
1	Post-ATF Vs Pre-ATF	71.43, 59.15	12.28	6.88	*
2	Post-ATF Vs Pre-MM	71.43, 61.77	9.66	6.88	*
3	Post-ATF Vs Post-MM	71.43, 64.10	7.33	6.88	*
4	Post-MM Vs Pre-ATF	64.10, 59.15	4.97	6.88	NO
5	Post-MM Vs Pre-MM	64.10, 61.77	2.35	6.88	NO
6	Pre-MM Vs Pre-ATF	61.77, 59.15	2.66	6.88	NO

Table 4 shows the F-observed value for the effect of the tests, i.e. the pre-test and the post-test, which is 61.21. This particular value of F at 1 and 80 degrees of freedom is much greater than the critical value of F at .05 level of significance. It can be concluded that the difference between the pre-test and the post-test is significant. In other words, the subjects performed better during the post-test.

The F-observed value for the effect of the group by test factor, i.e. the interaction between the two variables, is 28.19, in which at 1 and 80 degrees of freedom is much greater than the critical value of F, i.e. 4.00 at .05 level of significance. As a result, a Scheffe's test was carried out to identify the accurate location of the differences. The results of the post-hoc Scheffe's test indicated that the subjects in the ATF group performed better than those in the MM group on the post-test (see Table 5).

Analysis of Null Hypothesis 1. With reference to the result of the first contrast, it is obvious that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test of the subjects in the ATF group who have received audio-taped feedback on their writing assignments. Nonetheless, this judgment is not in agreement with the argument of Null Hypothesis 1. Therefore, this hypothesis is rejected. Considering the mean score of the ATF group on the pre-test and the post-test (i.e. 59.15,

and 71.43, respectively), one can see that the subjects have had much better products during the post-test. This evident significant change in the writing of the ATF group from the pre-test to the post-test can, therefore, be attributed to the type of feedback they received on their writings in the course of this study.

Analysis of Null Hypothesis 2. Considering the fifth comparison of the Scheffe's test, it can be stated that the null hypothesis 2 cannot be rejected. In other words, there is no significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores of the members in the MM group whose writing assignments were minimally marked. Hence, it can be mentioned that the MM technique does not lead to a higher writing achievement.

Analysis of Null Hypothesis 3. The third comparison of the Scheffe's test reveals the difference between the post-tests of the subjects in the ATF group (i.e. 71.43) and that of the subjects in the MM group (i.e. 64.10) which were proven to be significant. Consequently, it can be concluded that the ATF group, which had received audio-taped feedback outperformed the MM group whose writing assignments were minimally marked. This finding is against the suggestion of null hypothesis 3 which rejected the existence of any difference in the two groups on the post-test; therefore, this null hypothesis is also rejected.

The sixth comparison of the Scheffe's test (see Table 5) demonstrates that no significant difference exists between the two groups in their initial writing performances on the pre-test. However, a comparison made between the ATF group and the MM group on their post-test writing performance shows that there is a difference in the type of feedback the ATF group have received on their writings. In addition, it can be mentioned that the inadequacy of the MM group is probably the result of the inefficiency of the type of feedback they received.

The researchers conclude that revision should form a fundamental part of writing pedagogy. Receiving audio-taped feedback seems to have encouraged the subjects to write reader-based text (McAlpine, 1989). In early experimental article, providing feedback as a reader was suggested as beneficial to the second language writer. McAlpine (1989) describes her process of providing audio-taped feedback, or as she defines it, "a think-aloud protocol" to ESL writers. She claimed that the technique facilitates the negotiation of meaning between the writer and reader. In addition, building the ATF into the instruction of writing might be helpful since the subjects found ATF encouraging as well as a refreshing departure from traditional writing feedback methods, frequently explained throughout a symbol system.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to establish the comparison between audio-taped feedback and minimal marking feedback on the writings of Iranian EFL learners. The results of the study showed that the ATF could have significant effect on the students' ability to write, but the MM is not very efficient in this regard. Boughy (1997, p. 128) asserts that the correction carried out by the students is within a process approach. She believes that in order for this process of writing, revising, and rewriting to be developmental, "some forms of constructive feedback to the successive piece of writing are desirable, and often necessary." She goes on to say that in large mainstream

classes, peer reviews may suggest itself as an obvious means of alleviation of the workload of the teacher. At any rate, the students must first be trained in taking this responsibility. Self-correction can serve as a preliminary practice for this responsibility. The explanation made throughout the study prepared the researchers to the fact that ATF could both direct a higher writing performance and could indirectly help and improve learners' listening skills as well.

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