

THE EFFECT OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED FEEDBACK ON SECOND LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION

Parisa RAZAGIFARD
Islamic Azad University of Meshkinshahr, IRAN

Abdolkarim GHABELNEZAM
Islamic Azad University of Meshkinshahr, IRAN

Vida Razzaghi FARD
Payamnour University of Meshkinshahr, Meshkinshahr, IRAN

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess the potential of computer-mediated feedback for improving second language (L2) reading comprehension. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 60 upper-intermediate learners of English were randomly divided into two groups as experimental and control groups. The subjects of the experimental group were asked to read 8 prose passages, which ranged between 280 and 310 words in length, and answer multiple-choice questions after they have read each passage. Participants received immediate feedback in the form of Answer-Until-Correct (AUC) feedback for multiple-choice items. Results indicated that the students who received the computer-mediated feedback improved their reading comprehension significantly compared to their peers in the control group who did not receive feedback.

Key words: Multiple-choice test, Answer-Until-Correct feedback, L2 reading comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is an essential component in the learning and it explains the gaps in knowledge and understanding, providing for reflection and development. Feedback at its best is pivotal in the learning and assessment process (Orrell, 2006). Research on how students perceive feedback and what aspects of feedback are most valued by students, is providing insight into how best to provide feedback to maximize its usefulness in evaluation and in transforming learning (Orsmond et al., 2005).

For feedback to be most effective, it should be appropriate and timely (Ramsden, 1992). In the context of feedback on assessment tasks, this means within a timeframe that allows students to recall their responses and the understanding that informs their decisions. Shute (2008) defined feedback as the information communicated to the learner to modify his or her thinking or behavior for the purpose of improving learning, and then agreed that providing students with timely feedback is important.

Now, with our electronic age, most feedback is converted to digital and online environments. Feedback provided through online assessment programs offers several advantages over the feedback provided by instructors. Specifically, computer-mediated feedback can provide immediate feedback on individual responses regardless of class size or the time at which an assignment is completed, and this feedback can remain unbiased, accurate, and non-judgemental, irrespective of student characteristics or the nature of the response (Mandernach, 2005).

Despite the fact that models and guidelines recommending pedagogically sound practices for incorporating Internet-based materials exist (e.g., Brandl, 2002; Chun & Plass, 2000) major concern is that the number of such examples remains limited. Likewise, guidelines for offering a reading course via the Internet are similarly few. However, evidence exists to support the assumption that integrating reading with computer-mediated support improves ESL students' reading skills (e.g., Chun & Plass, 1996; Williams & Williams, 2000). Accordingly, this study attempts to bridge this gap by examining the impact of computer-mediated feedback on improving reading comprehension among upper-intermediate ESL students.

FEEDBACK IN CALL

Wager and Wager (1985) defined feedback in computer-based instruction as "any message or display that the computer presents to the learner after a response". Two commonly used feedback formats in CALL studies are verification feedback and elaborative feedback (Kulhavy & Stock, 1989). Verification is the simple judgment of whether an answer is correct or incorrect while elaboration is the informational component providing relevant cues to guide the learner toward a correct answer (Mandernach, 2005).

The verification feedback can be given in the form of knowledge of response (indication of whether the answer was received and accepted by the system), knowledge of results (KR) (information about correctness or incorrectness of the response), or knowledge-of-correct response (KCR) (presenting of the correct answers) feedback.

The elaborative feedback can address the topic and/or the response, discuss the particular errors, provide worked examples or give gentle guidance. In the elaborated feedback (EF) the system presents not only the correct answer, but also additional information – corresponding learning materials, explanations, parts of problem-solutions etc.

Answer-Until-Correct (AUC) is a common form of elaborative feedback which provides students with the correct response by having them continue responding until they select the correct answer. Answer until correct feedback is also known as multiple try feedback (MFT). MFT requires students to make multiple tries at answering the same item if and with the added knowledge that their previous or initial response was incorrect.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are a number of studies that investigated the effectiveness of computer-based feedback on L2 acquisition. Nagata (1996), for example, investigated the impact of intelligent computer feedback and paper-based feedback on developing learners' grammatical skill in producing Japanese particles and sentences. The results of the study indicated significant differences in the performance of students who received intelligent computer feedback in comparison to students who received paper-based feedback.

Research conducted by Persky and Pollack (2008) also found significant differences in performance (test scores) between students who received Elaborative computer-based feedback in the form Answer-Until-Correct for their errors in comparison to the students who did not receive feedback. However, Clariana's (2000) study in contrast to Nagata (1996) and, Persky and Pollack (2008), found no significant learning effect for students who received Elaborative computer-mediated feedback on their errors. Nevertheless, Ferris (2003) explains how indirect feedback, or Elaborative feedback from a CALL perspective, is generally thought to be conducive to long-term student development; it forces students to think about their own errors and self-correction, thereby leading to: " ... increased student engagement and attention to forms and problems" (p. 52).

ANSWER-UNTIL-CORRECT METHODOLOGY

To gain a picture of readers' understanding of a text, researchers and instructors measure comprehension after the reading is complete, and some of the most widely used comprehension assessment measures are multiple choice questions, written recalls, close tests, sentence completion, and open ended questions. The most common comprehension test is multiple-choice questions (Brantmeier, 2003).

While most multiple-choice testing requires test takers to select one answer and move on to the next question, the answer-until-correct method forces learners to select answer choices until the correct answer is chosen. A positive aspect of this method is that the last answer the learner makes is the correct one and the ability to continue through the instruction may function as reinforcement. Also, the learner may engage in more effortful thinking before the first response because it avoids the item being re-presented and delaying progress through the program.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of computer-mediated feedback on the reading performance of L2 students. The results of this study will be of crucial importance in ESL teaching by equipping teachers and students with computer-mediated feedback knowledge to promote learning process.

The research was designed to answer the following question:

RQ: What is the effect of computer-mediated feedback on the reading performance of L2 learners?

Experimental Design

Participants

The study was conducted in a foreign language education department at an Iran university. Sixty upper-intermediate students (60 females) participated in the study. They volunteered to participate in this study. The participants were randomly assigned either to the experimental group or to the control group. Each group consisted of 30 subjects. They ranged in age from 18 to 20.

Procedure

One week before the study, an Oxford Placement Test was administered to the volunteers. This test was administered to 98 ESL learners to indicate their English proficiency level of which 60 upper-intermediate ESL students were selected and divided into two groups (i.e., experimental group, $n=30$ and control group, $n=30$). A thirty minute session was held prior to the main research to familiarize the experimental group with the process of taking computer-based tests and receiving feedback. The treatment sessions were held twice a week.

During the treatment sessions, the participants in the experimental group were required to read 8 passages which were selected from GRE, TOEFL, and SAT study guides. Microsoft Word was used to display information about the reading level of the reading passage. Readability of the passage was administered in order to be able to determine the appropriate readability of the passage for the upper-intermediate level. The readabilities within the ranges of 30-49 were considered as appropriate for the participants on the basis of the readability level of their English book.

Each passage consisted of 280–310 words of text organized into four paragraphs. Four facts were identified in each passage (one fact per paragraph) to serve as the to-be-tested information. For testing purposes, each fact was transformed into a question and correct response and three plausible incorrect responses were developed

to serve as multiple-choice lures. The "eGrade On-Line Assessment System" was used to present all the materials and collect responses. Participants received immediate feedback in the form of answer-until-correct feedback for multiple-choice items. After 4 treatment sessions, for investigating the effect of computer-mediated feedback on the comprehension of the texts during treatment sessions, all students were given 15 minutes to complete a final comprehension test.

Immediately after the administration of the final test, a background questionnaire was administered to gather demographic information about the subjects. The questionnaire also had a section asking the subjects to rate the usefulness of computer-mediated feedback. Within 2 days after the administration, semi-structured interviews of 6–8 min were conducted with the subjects. The goal was to gather supplementary data about their experience with computer-based tests and receiving feedback. The researcher asked for clarification and elaboration when the subjects responded with short answers or nods.

Computer-mediated Feedback: Participants received immediate computer-mediated feedback in the form of AUC feedback for multiple-choice items. The AUC feedback treatment provided for an incorrect answer, "No, try again" and for the correct answer, "That's correct". This feedback was displayed at the bottom of the screen. After the third try, the learner was told "Right" if correct or "Wrong" if incorrect, and then the student was shown the correct answer by means of an arrow.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results obtained by participants in the final test were compared for the both experimental and control groups in order to determine the effect of computer feedback on reading comprehension outcomes. The final test scores, the means and standard deviations of the experimental and control groups were calculated and a t-test was used to test the significance of the difference between the performance averages of the groups.

Table 1
 Means and Standard Deviation Obtained in Final Tests

	groups	N	Mean	Standard. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Group 1	30	7.73	1.50	.27
	Group 2	30	6.26	1.59	.29

Table 1. shows group statistics. From this we can see that \bar{X} = 7.73 and SD = 1.50 (experimental group), and \bar{X} = 6.26 and SD = 1.59 (control group).

Table 2
 Independent Samples T-Test in final tests

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
Score	Equal variances not assumed	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
			3.09	.95	3.66	58	.001	1.46
	Equal variances assumed			3.66	57.81	.001	2.46	.40

The results of the t-test, provided in table 2, revealed the difference between groups was statistically significant at the significance level of .05. Since the two-tailed significance value of .001 is less than alpha = .05, there is a significant difference between the two groups. This difference is graphically indicated in Figure 1.

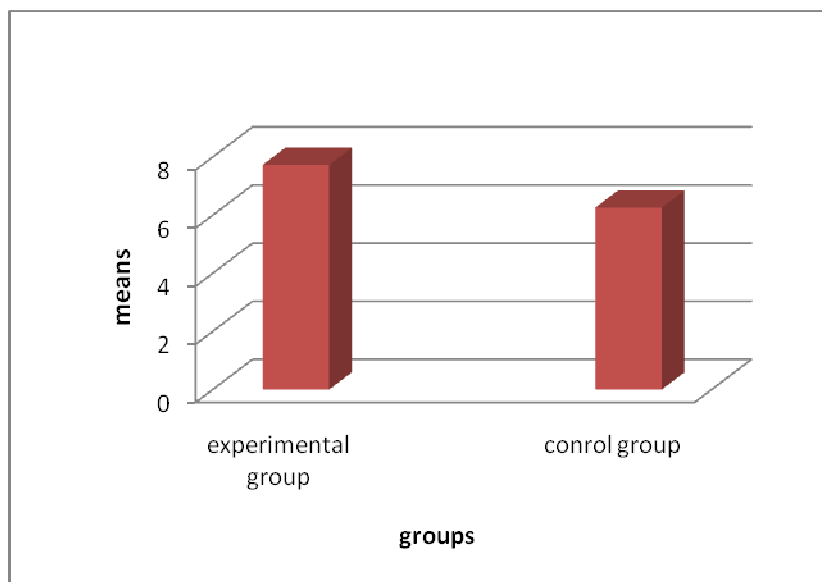


Figure 1: Comparison of means obtained in final tests by two groups

In sum, the quantitative analysis of the results in this research showed that the students who received the computer-mediated feedback improved their L2 reading comprehension significantly compared to students who did not receive any feedback. The results of the study confirmed previous research conducted by several researchers that providing computer-mediated feedback has a positive effect on the performance of students (e.g. Nagata, 1996; Persky & Pollack, 2008).

The findings of the study also suggest that feedback can be a valuable tool for supporting student learning when used properly. Research stresses the need to provide timely and appropriate feedback that can help a student improve reading comprehension. A computer, which allows instructors to provide immediate feedback in a variety of ways may be used to enhance instructor's ability to provide useful and timely feedback to students in future.

The qualitative analysis of data also suggested that the students preferred the immediate feedback format, and that they preferred it over almost every other testing method to which they had been exposed previously. The two main reasons cited for this preference was the immediate knowledge of success or failure and the ability to make multiple attempts to ascertain the correct answer. The students also indicated that the format of the examination forced them to rethink some problems and therefore increased their comprehension of topics for which they did not demonstrate initial mastery, that is, corrected any misinformation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results of the study indicated that the group who received the computer-mediated feedback in the form of AUC feedback improved their reading comprehension significantly compared to the students in the control group who did not receive any feedback. The results also indicated that providing timely and

appropriate feedback was effective in student's L2 reading comprehension. Furthermore, through the study it became evident that the students preferred AUC method because it allows students to re-work or re-think their mistakes, potentially resulting in deeper learning.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study poses several limitations; thus, the findings should be considered with caution. First, the target population of the study consisted of upper-intermediate level language learners of English. This study should be replicated in other learning contexts with students from different proficiency levels to generalize findings to a larger target population and to different learning environments. Second, this study was conducted with female students. A similar study could investigate the effect of computer-mediated feedback on L2 reading comprehension of male students. Third, the study only considered one type of computer-mediated feedback (AUC) and not other types of computer-based feedback. It is suggested that similar studies be conducted with other types of computer-mediated feedback. Finally, the present study was conducted with a small sample size and short duration of the experiment. Future studies are needed to replicate this study with larger sample size and longer periods of time.

BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESSES OF AUTHORS



Parisa RAZAGIFARD graduated from Islamic Azad University of Ardabil with an M.A. degree in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Her research interests are online learning, multimedia learning environment, and distance education. She has published papers in international journals. She is a tutor at the Islamic Azad University of Meshkinshahr. Islamic Azad University is a private chain of universities in Iran. Headquartered in Tehran, Iran, the Islamic Azad University was founded in 1982 and currently has an enrollment of 1.3 million students; making it the world's third largest.

Parisa RAZAGIFARD

M.A. of teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL),
Islamic Azad University of Meshkinshahr, Meshkinshahr, IRAN
Phone: 00984525234045
Cell: 00989141591386
E mail: razagifardp@yahoo.com



Abdolkarim GHABELNEZAM received his M.S. degree in Mechanical Engineering at Industrial University of Sharif. He is at the Islamic Azad University (Meshkinshahr Branch) in Iran.

Abdolkarim GHABELNEZAM

Mechanical Engineering (MS degree) from Industrial University of Sharif
Islamic Azad University of Meshkinshahr, Meshkinshahr, IRAN
Phone: 00982148972314
Cell : 00989125645786
E mail: aghabelnezam@tam.co.ir



Vida RAZZAGHI FARD graduated from Islamic Azad University of Karaj with M.S. degree in Inorganic Chemistry. She is a tutor at the Payamnour University of Meshkinshahr. Payame Noor University (PNU) is a state distance education university with the headquarters based in Tehran, 30 provincial centres, 485 local centers study and campuses all around the country and one International Study Center located in the headquarters. Established in 1988, PNU is a legal body under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. <http://www.pnu.ac.ir>.

Vida RAZZAGHI FARD

Inorganic Chemistry (MS degree) from Azad University of Karaj

Payamnour University of Meshkinshahr, Meshkinshahr, IRAN

Phone: 00984525222616

Cell: 00989125695933

E- mail: vrazzaghifard@yahoo.com

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