The Impact of Teachers vs. Peers Corrections and the Explicit Instruction of DMs on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Scores

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of two independent variables including Discourse Markers' (DMs) instruction as well as teacher and peers' corrections on the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing scores. The participants of the study were 60 EFL male learners. To examine the impacts of explicit instruction of DMs, the participants were divided into two groups of 30. One of the researchers as the EFL teacher taught the key DMs including consequences, reasons, additions and contrastives to the experimental group, while no DMs were taught to the control group. Independent sample t-test results showed a significant difference in EFL learners' post-test writing scores in two groups. In fact, the experimental group outperformed the control group due to DMs' use. Also an independent sample t-test was applied to compare the teacher's and peers' ratings in 3 writing tasks. These writings were scored analytically according to Jacobs et al. (1981) scale. The results of the independent sample *t*-test showed a significant difference between the gain scores of the mean of DMs' use across two groups. In fact, the experimental group outperformed the control group in their use of DMs, with a medium Cohen's *d* effect size. The findings also showed a significant difference between two groups' ratings; peers had given higher ratings than what the teacher had given. The conclusions of this study revealed that: 1) cooperative learning activities could improve the writing skills in EFL classes, and 2) All of the components of an acceptable piece of writing, that is, content,

organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics could be enhanced through cooperative learning activities. The implications and suggestions for further research were also formulated.

Keywords: DMs; explicit instruction; teacher's correction; peers' correction; EFL learners

1. Introduction

The production of a coherent piece of discourse is an interactive process that entails speakers and/or writers to pay attention to different ways of communication as well as the grammatical knowledge (Sanders & Noordman, 2000). Communicative knowledge is related to the way one expresses his thoughts and ideas in addition to the capability of being socially connected to others. In other words, using language is a way which shows one's personal and social communicative capabilities, attitudes and actions and it is in fact a platform helps building up interpersonal relationships between participants by means of using discourse (Rahimi, 2011). Other forms; however, are related to the cognitive abilities which appoint various notions and ideas through language along with other textual abilities which aid organizing forms and transfer meanings in the extended discourse (Schiffrin, 2001). Discourse markers (DMs) are a collection of language objects which work with items functioning with cognitive, expressive, social, and textual domains (Schiffrin, 2001). As it put forward by Schiffrin (1987), they are verbal and, sometimes, non-verbal devices which help to the completeness of the discourse. As far as writing is concerned, DMs help the learners produce an effective and successful piece of writing and this plays a facilitating role in communication as well. In the L2 settings, if DMs are not applied properly or not used at all, it might cause unsuccessful communication or may even lead to the lack of comprehension.

At the same time, teachers' feedback or correction is another important variable needs to be taken into account in producing a proper piece of writing. Many researchers have been questioned the efficiency of this strategy (Altena & Pica, 2010; Randolph & Lea, 2010). It is a difficult topic and needs to be investigated completely. Scholars such as (Getchell, 2011; Clement, 2010) worked on the methods that teachers use to react to their learners' written works. Some others worked on some models of feedback like form against content (Kazuya, 2012). The latter was found to be more practical and useful though. While it is a public model of feedback, many types of feedback have been introduced by Saito (1994) including teachers' corrections, errors' identification, commentaries, teacher-student conferences, peers' corrections, and self-corrections. Zacharias (2007) explains as far as language and knowledge

are concerned, teachers are the most capable ones who can provide feedback to their students. Lee and Schallert (2008) state that although teachers' feedback is quite important in determining the learners' problems, in most of cases learners do not have any idea how to relate them to their own writing. On the other hand, it is impossible to expect that teachers read and modify all learners' writing since it's a time consuming activity. Teachers' reactions to learners' writing tasks have been studied in different ways, regardless of various approaches such as product-based, process-oriented or genre-based approaches. Based on different models of feedback, teachers' response occasionally seems to be useful, sometimes harmful and rarely found to be neutral and having no impact at all (Silva, 1997). An alternative strategy to teachers' feedback has appeared to operate by L2 teachers and has closely been studied by second language acquisition investigators through the last two decades. From a socio-cognitive aspect, peers' review can be defined as a formative developmental trend which presents learners chances to talk about their writings and share their ideas (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In order to raise the learners' independence, teamwork, communication and participation, peer correction is normally used in classroom settings (Sultana, 2009). Whether the teachers have the required knowledge of the learning theories, they use this technique in their classes most of the time. Main capabilities of peer feedback based on McDowell (1995) are the enhancement of the evaluative and critical abilities, improvement of learners' skills, use of more combined knowledge, and increase in learners' co-operation and thus their interest and satisfaction. It is presumed that knowing the principles of a writing and monitoring peers' work may lead to better understanding of the quality of one's own job (Falchikov, 1995; Freeman, 1995).

This study concerned with the existence of the relationships between DMs instruction and learners' writing achievements. It was also intended to determine whether there was any significant difference between teacher and peers' ratings of EFL learners' writing scores. The research provided an insight into the implementation of an analytic scoring rubrics based on Jacobs et al. (1981) schemes for assessing learners' writing performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Discourse Markers (DMs)

DMs are linguistic elements which work with fields like textual, social, expressive and cognitive context (Schiffrin, 2001). In theory, DMs are verbal and non-verbal factors which provide the integrity of the text (Schiffrin, 1987). As Rahimi (2011) quotes, discourse markers

are the main section for the L2 learners to be communicatively experts and influential speakers of the language. Through the last decades, DMs have been studied from different perspectives and labeled differently. "There is a general agreement that discourse markers contribute to the pragmatic meaning of the utterances and thus play an important role in the pragmatic competence of the speaker" (Muller, 2005, p.1). DMs have been studied in a number of branches of applied linguistics and in a variety of languages like Chinese, Danish, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, etc. They have similarly been examined in different genres, such as descriptive (Jalilifar, 2008), political interviews (Wilson, 1993), healthcare consultations (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994), tutorial sessions (Moser & Moore, 1995), newspapers (Cotter, 1996a), radio talks (Cotter, 1996b), and classroom contexts (Chaudron & Richards, 1986). In a study handled by Assadi-Aidinlou and Shahrokhi mehr (2012), it was proved that if students know more about discourse markers, their texts are proved to be more efficient and cohesive, since results have shown that there were statistically significant differences between learners who received instruction and those who did not. In another study carried out by Sadeghi and Heidaryan (2012), it was confirmed that listening ability of the learners who got the instruction on meta-discourse was highly improved. DMs have been also studied in classroom oral discourse (Hays, 1992), informal settings (Lee, 1999; Muller, 2004; Trillo, 2002), reading (Abdollahzadeh, 2006; Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007), lectures (Dailey-O'Cain, 2000; Perez & Macia, 2002), academic genres (Abdi, 2002; Blagojevic, 2004; Bunton, 1999; Longo, 1994; Mauranen, 1993; Ventola & Mauranen, 1991), and student writings (Connor, 1984; Field & Yip, 1992; Intraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Johns, 1984; Johnson, 1992; Karasi, 1994; Norment, 1994; Steffensen & Cheng, 1996). These studies have all targeted the patterns of frequency in DMs use. Johns (1984) examined English essays by tertiary-level teachers based on Halliday and Hasan's Model (1976). The analyses indicated that conjuncts were overused and lexical cohesion was used by native speakers mainly. Connor (1984) compared six essays written by English native and ESL students based on the same framework. Field and Yip (1992) compared 67 Hong Kong students with 29 Australian students writing on an argumentative topic. The results showed that non-native students of English used more conjunctions than Australian students did, and they usually put all conjunctions at the beginning of the sentences. Norment (1994) studied 30 Chinese college students writing in Chinese and English on both expository and narrative topics following Halliday and Hasan's Framework (1976). He found that there was a difference between text types in the use of cohesive devices. Intraprawat and Steffensen (1995) analyzed the DMs in persuasive essays by ESL university students. They

concluded that differences between essays that received good ratings and essays that received poor ratings were found in the number of words, T-units, and density of DMs.

2.2. Teacher vs. Peers' Correction

Mistakes are important elements that occur in almost all kinds of learning. In an educational setting, instructors' opinions about mistakes are extremely significant since they may shape learners' views about the errors. Nevertheless, approaches to errors' corrections in a foreign language are completely different. Texts about SLA, which reinforce corrections can be found in parts of theory like Swain's (1985, as cited in Sampson, 2012) *Output Hypothesis*, which defeats and supports corrections and discusses that when learners get direct metalinguistic response about their production, it is usual to approve or disapprove rules of form, which supports learning. Although, Maicusi et al. (2000) assert that errors are usually measured as problems in learning a language. Therefore, Krashen's (1982, as cited in Zhu, 2010) claims that studying a second language might be discouraged by the teachers who rely strongly on corrections and grammatical correctness as they can increase the learners' levels of concern. Also, Littlewood (1984) proposes that too much correction is damaging since it might emphasize practice one form or model more than enough, therefore the learner makes it in an unsuitable context. While it might be true, many professionals support errors' correction and recommend that it is a valuable practice in the foreign language writing process. Truscott (1996) explained errors' corrections as a set of procedures applied to revise syntactic errors to improve learners' capabilities to write precisely and correctly.

Ferris (2004) emphasizes that instructors must stabilize students' favorites with their energy and time restrictions. She confirmed in addition to more research which is urgent, teachers' involvements are also critical. This issue is somehow vague and needs further explanations. On the other hand, teachers cannot stop training and wait for investigators to answer how it must be done. Instead they should trust on signs of study that are not overtly clear, their own awareness and skills, and their students' wishes to guide them. At the same time, we should be flexible and open to the acquisition of training cooperation and modelling the new methods relating to errors' corrections. Sultana (2009) put forward two main modules of form-focused instruction as *grammar teaching* and *errors' corrections*. In this study, the researcher focuses on DMs rather than grammar teaching. Mahmoud (2012) posits that Grammar instruction

facilitates the process of natural hypothesis formation as it supports and transforms the learners' self-discovered rules.

Most of the foreign language teachers treat errors' correction as an educational responsibility which is supported by their own beliefs and their students' desires and expectations. If grammar instruction (here DMs instruction) speeds up the hypothesis formation and testing process as it is mentioned before, then errors' correction shares with it the hypothesis of modification role. Therefore, in the foreign language teaching and learning, errors' correction has a place. The purpose is to clarify who should correct the errors. Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (2011) listed three types of correction as: teacher correction, peer correction and self-correction.

In a study which concentrates on peer and teacher correction (Sultana, 2009), errors are regarded as the 'results of natural development' not as a result of 'no learning'. Accordingly in this trend, the instructor acts as an organizer. S/he does not correct errors constantly. Instead the learners act to check their process. Teachers can give feedback in different ways in the class. A distinct strategy which is taken for granted is teacher correction. In a customary classroom, instructors like learners assume that the teacher has to correct the student's errors. As the teacher is believed to be the one from whom information runs to the students, it is only 'natural' that s/he will choose whether pupils have learnt or not. The concept of self-correction is strictly knotted with learners' independence as confirmed by Sultana (2009). Self-correction is a procedure which involves pupils to correct their errors themselves. Peer correction is employed in classes to raise learners' independence, teamwork, communication and participation (Sultana, 2009). Language teachers use mostly this technique in classrooms, with or without knowing the learning theories. According to McDowell (1995), the main strengths of peer feedback are that (1) there is a development of evaluative and critical abilities, (2) there are opportunities for skills' development, (3) knowledge is more integrated and (4) students collaborate, they will be thus motivated and satisfied. It is assumed that knowing the criteria of a product and observing the work of peers, lead to a higher understanding of the quality of one's own work (Falchikov, 1995; Freeman, 1995). Peer feedback has been also suggested to suffer from certain problems including: student editors are more likely to address surface errors and not the problems of meaning, the inexperienced students may find it hard to judge the validity of their peers' comments (Leki, as cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006), and students

might have difficulty identifying problematic areas in their peers' performance and offer them misleading advice" (Horowitz, as cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Teachers' feedback is the most common form of written correction. The efficiency of this method has been questioned by many scholars as already confirmed by Altena and Pica (2010). However it is a complicated issue and needs to be fully investigated. Some researchers worked on approaches (Clement, 2010) that teachers operate to react to their learners' written works including direct correction, the use of codes, etc. Others worked on the type of feedback such as form against content (Kazuya, 2012). The latter is found to be more effective. Although it is the most common type of feedback, Saito (1994) states that there are many ways of providing feedback in both L1 and L2 situations: teachers' corrections, errors' identification, commentaries, teacher-student conferences, peers' corrections, and self-corrections. Teachers' correction is frequently practiced by EFL teachers. Zacharias (2007) remarks that teachers are considered more competent in terms of language and knowledge and are therefore considered more experienced in writing and providing feedback. However, Lee and Schallert (2008) propose that even though learners think their teachers' feedback serves mainly to inform them of their errors, they do not realize the significance it has in their writing. Learners seem to value teachers' correction greatly, therefore, it is still considered crucial in the classroom settings. Moreover, as correcting written compositions can be time-consuming, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to read and correct all the learners' written works.

Ajideh, Leitner, and Yazdi-Amirkhiz (2016) found that collaborative writing improves students' writing in terms of task achievements and cohesion and coherence. Likewise, Sanonguthai (2011) found that involving learners in collaborative brainstorming and debating of the topic prior to writing significantly improve candidates' writing skills. As another line of research, some studies explored the effect of corrective feedback on candidates' writing performance in IELTS (Ganji, 2009; Ketabi & Torabi, 2013). As a prime example, Ganji (2009) discovered that IELTS candidates who were treated by peer-correction and self-correction outperformed those who were treated by traditional teacher correction. Moreover, they found that peer-correction was the most effective technique of providing learners with corrective feedback.

2.3. Writing Tasks

Teaching the writing process or self-identify mostly implied by teachers as the process teachers. In the zone of feedback on learners' writing; however, the majority of teachers carry out the surface aspects of language use, even though some of them continue on rejection of contents. The writers are not sure about this matter that old product approach which highlights errors' corrections can be drifted apart from the particular process approaches. Chandler (2003) found that if learners are asked to correct their writing errors, their accuracy will be improved more than when they are not required to do it. Indirect teacher feedback to written tasks of university students was examined by Ferris and Roberts (2001). The amount of errors which could be corrected through self-edited texts was the object of this research. Self-edited texts were used across three types of feedback conditions: (a) errors pointed with codes (b) errors underlined with no codes and (c) no feedback at all. Students' ideas about teachers' feedback is mostly positive and this can cause misunderstanding about learners' perception of teachers' feedback and it is one of the most common opinions about teachers' feedback which rest on features like attention to errors in the field of linguistics, giving help to writing skills and general explanations about content and quality of writing (Enginarlar, 1993). Doing more organized practices and corrections in writing such as more individualized and clear written responses are some examples that should be taken into account simultaneously (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996). While L2 writing teachers might have an idea about the most effective response that they must use at classrooms, investigations showed that teachers' feedback and learners' opinions may not be the same (Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Storch & Tapper, 2000). Moreover, the quality and quantity of response that transfer from teachers to learners might not be fixed. It may change according to the tasks' difficulty and learners' competence (Ferris et al., 1997).

2.4. The Present Study

One interesting and important area of research in second language writing is to see how DMs are used by L2 writers of English. Nonetheless, in foreign language writing studies, not enough is known about the patterns of DMs applied by the learners in different forms of writing and it is vague whether there are any connections between the use of these markers and the quality of the texts produced by EFL learners. To shed light on these issues, this study carried out to scrutinize the ways Iranian intermediate EFL learners tend to use DMs in their writing.

At the same time, peer correction is seen as a way of giving more control to students since it allows them to make active decisions about whether or not to use their peers' comments as opposed to a passive reliance on teachers' feedback (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Mittan, 1989). Freedman and Sperling (1985) and later on Mittan (1989) considered that peer response can be more authentic and honest than teachers' response. It encourages the atmosphere of cooperation and makes the other students stay involved in the lesson. Some research projects such as (Hagege, 1996) have suggested that correction is even more efficient when it is done with the help of peers. Some others like Chaudron (1984) have found the influence of teacher and peer feedback on writing improvement to be about the same, while other researchers such as Zhang (1985) found teacher feedback as more effective than peer feedback in the improvement of grammatical errors. One of the major issues of language teaching that concerns any teacher is how to correct writing errors by using DMs properly. Peers' corrections and the role of instructors have been investigated in this study to determine whether these factors have any impact on intermediate EFL learners' writing skills or not.

In fact, the type and frequency rate of DMs to maintain the texts cohesive have been examined and the researchers attempted to display the ways DMs used by Iranian intermediate EFL learners with respect to their teacher and peers' corrective feedback. The researchers then evaluated and compared the teacher vs. peers made corrections of EFL learners' writing tasks. In essence, three main areas including total omissions and scarcities of connectors, additions of unnecessary connectors, and wrong choices of connectors were taken into deep account in this study. On the basis of the difficulties seen, some guidelines were also recommended. This study therefore attempted to address three research questions as hereunder:

RQ1. Do the DMs have any significant impacts on EFL learners' writing performance?

RQ2. Does the use of peers' corrections have any significant effects on EFL learners' writing performance?

RQ3. Does the use of teacher's corrections have any significant effects on EFL learners' writing performance?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study included 60 male intermediate participants. The age range of these students was between 15 ~ 20. They were studying English language in Iran-Asia Language Institute in

Tehran. They were selected based on their results on the Michigan Test. These learners were truly homogenous with respect to their English proficiency levels. The subjects were divided into two groups; the control and the experimental groups.

3.2. Instruments

To meet the objectives of the study, the researchers applied three instruments as follows:

3.2.1. Michigan English Test

Participants were selected based on their results on the Michigan English Test and they indicated to be homogeneous. After obtaining the results of the proficiency test, only those participants who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen as the sample of the study. The Michigan English Test emphasized communicative use of English rather than a formalistic knowledge of English, and it captured the students who were able to function and perform communicative transactions in all four skill areas of the language (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). The test included 100 multiple choice items and took one hour and fifteen minutes. It had different sections as below;

1. Grammar - 40 questions.

2. Vocabulary - 40 questions.

3. Reading Comprehension - 20 questions.

3.2.2 Pre-Test and Post-Test Writing

The participants were asked to write compositions/writing samples about general assigned topics for the pre-test and post-test at both the control and experimental groups to evaluate their abilities as far as DMs were concerned. Allocated time was 30-45 minutes and the evaluation was analytical based on Jacobs et al. (1981) scale.

3.2.3. Teacher vs. Peers' Correction

All writing tasks were scored twice, once by the teacher (one of the researchers of the study) and once by the peers using a set of analytical procedures. According to Jacobs et al. (1981), every composition read three times and each time only one factor was taken into account. The three factors were Content, Organization, and Mechanics. All the subjects were given 3 sub-scores for each writing, and the total grade was calculated naturally between 0 and 100.

3.3. Design and Context of the Study

The design of the study was true-experimental design (pre-test, posttest, treatment and control group design). The independent variables of the study were explicit instruction of discourse markers (including conjunctions, adverbs, and propositional phrases) and the raters (that is, teachers vs. peers) and the dependent variables were learners' writing scores.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The homogenous participants were supposed to write three writing tasks on assigned topics. Thirty~ forty-five minutes were devoted to each writing task. As it was mentioned earlier, all writing tasks were scored twice, once by the teacher (one of the researchers of the present study) and once by the peers. During the study, the key discourse markers (DMs) were taught to the experimental group in 16 sessions including consequences (results), reasons (inferentials), additions (elaboratives), and contrastives (adversatives) while no DMs were taught to the control group. The teacher presented and practiced teacher-centered method in a sense he corrected the students' errors. At the same time, the teacher discussed the strategies for peers' corrections to the students. Then during the course, the errors were encouraged to be corrected by the peers. Things that peers should have remembered in their corrections were highlighted as 1. Peers should stay positive: they should try to make suggestions and corrections in a positive way, 2. Peers should be specific: they should give the author specific ideas on how to improve his or her writing, 3. Peers should criticize in-effective parts positively, 4. Peers should complete all four steps: compliments, suggestions, criticisms, and corrections. Then the results were analyzed objectively by using SPSS as a statistical computerized software program.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers aimed at investigating whether the explicit instruction of DMs, types of raters (that is, teachers vs. peers) and their correlation had any significant effects on participants' writing scores. To this end, following steps were conducted:

1) Descriptive statistics of 2 groups of students.
2) Independent sample t-test to compare the gain score of the mean of DMs' use across two groups; the experimental and the control.
3) Effect size to show whether the difference between 2 groups was statistically significant or not.

4. Results

4.1. The Results of the First Research Question

To answer the first research question, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. It was used to compare the gain score of the mean of DMs' use across two groups; the experimental and the control. The improvement (gain) from the pretest and to the posttest computed for each participant by subtracting each person's posttest score (the number of times DMs were used in this time of testing in his writing tasks) from his pretest score (the number of times DMs were used in this time of testing in his writing tasks). The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of two groups of students (N = 60)*

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Gain	Exp.	2.40	4.35	0.79
Score	Cont.	0.47	1.70	0.31

Table 2**.** *Independent sample t-test of gain scores of DMs' Use*

		Levene's		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Lower	Upper
Gain	Equal variances assumed	9.83	0.00	2.27	58.00	0.03	0.23	3.64
Score	Equal variances not assumed			2.27	37.62	0.03	0.21	3.66

The independent sample *t*-test showed a significant difference between the gain scores of the mean of DMs' use across two groups, *t* (37.62) = 2.27, *p* = .03), equal variance not assumed. It can be claimed that the experimental group (*M* = 2.40, *SD* = 4.35) outperformed the control

group ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 1.70$ (See Tables 1 and 2) in their use of DMs, with Cohen's d effect size of .58 which was considered a medium effect. So, it can be argued that despite some advances in control group regarding the use of DMs, this was not statistically significant. In contrast, experimental group had a significant advance akin to the use of DMs from the pretest to the posttest. Consequently, it can be concluded that instruction had a significant medium effect on the use of DMs and the first null hypothesis was rejected. Figure 1, illustrated the outcomes.
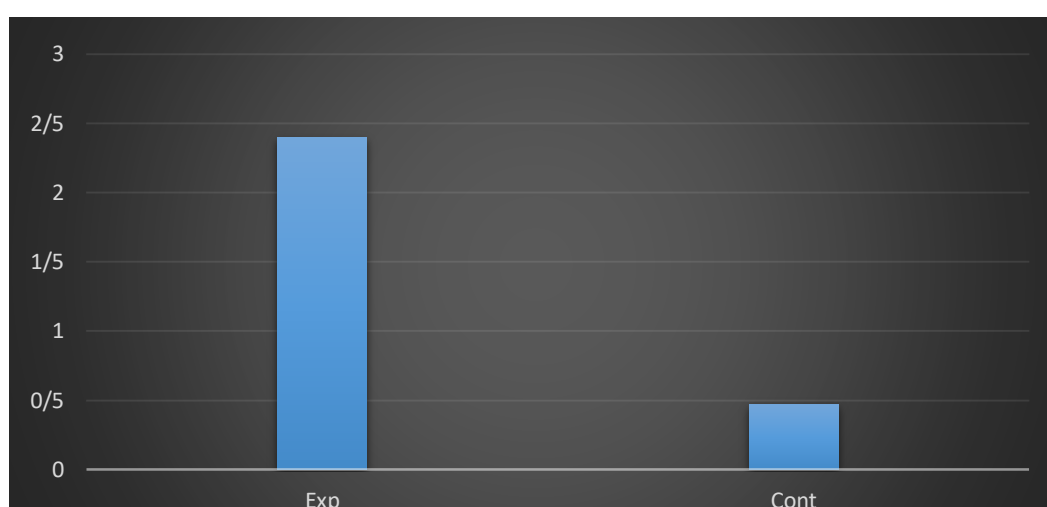

Figure 1. The gain scores of the mean of DMs' use across two groups in two times of testing

4.2. The Results of the Second and Third Research Questions

To examine the next research questions, the mean of the ratings of students and teachers in three writing tasks were computed and were compared by an independent sample *t*-test:

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics of Two Types of ratings (N = 80)*

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Ratings	Learner	85.63	10.00	1.58
	Teacher	80.71	7.97	1.26

Table 4. *Independent Sample t-test of Two Types of ratings*

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Lower	Upper
Ratings	Equal variances assumed	4.488	.037	2.431	78	.017	.89025	8.94309
	Equal variances not assumed			2.43	74.28	.01	.88707	8.94626

As it can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, there was a statistically significant difference between teachers' and students' ratings, t (74.28) = 2.43, p = .01, equal variance not assumed, with Cohen's *d* of .55 which was considered a medium effect size, with learners giving higher ratings (*M* = 85.63, *SD* = 10) than what teachers gave (*M* = 80.71, *SD* = 7.97). Consequently, it can be argued that rating types (peers' rating or teacher's rating) did have a significant effect on learners' writing performance. Figure 2, depicted the results.
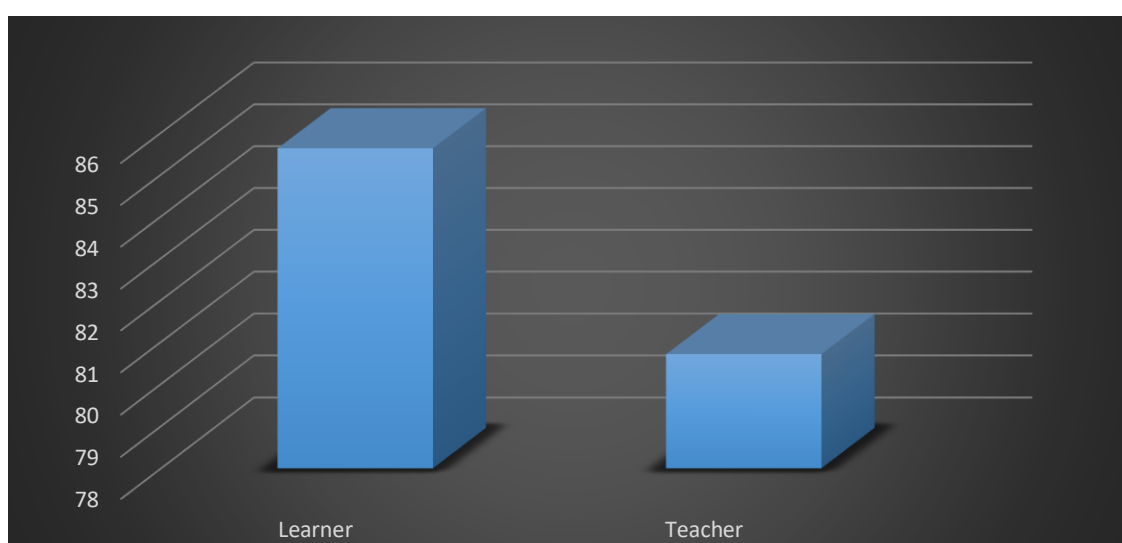

Figure 2. The mean of students' and teachers' ratings in three different writing tasks

5. Discussion

The results of the analyses implied that the more knowledge the students gain about the discourse markers, the more cohesive texts they can produce. Definitely, the learners in the experimental group created cohesive texts in more efficient ways than the learners who were not taught the discourse markers. Therefore, the researchers of the present study have evidence to support the claim that the instruction of DMs would be helpful in improving learners' writing ability. Considering the results of the statistical analyses, the explicit instruction of DMs could enhance the learners' writing ability significantly. In fact, based on the results, the researchers could be statistically sure about the existence of the significant difference between the two group's ratings –teacher and peers in three writing tasks. Accordingly, the outcomes of this study confirm the effect of cooperative learning activities on improving the components of writing skills including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. All of these five components were improved through cooperative learning activities. It can be suggested that writing performance can be improved through small-group cooperative interaction among peers in a supportive and stress-reduced environment. In fact, working with small groups provides various quality and quantity of inputs, outputs, and corrections along with the increase of face-to-face interactions. This is almost missing in traditional teacher-centered classes. This is in line with the findings of Ahangari and Samadian (2014). It may also enhance the communicative skills such as active listening, speaking, and turn taking. Cooperative group work can also foster cognitive skills such as problem solving, discovery learning, and creativity. Working together provides a context for students to learn and practice social skills, to learn how to make social relationships, how to value and respect others, how to cope with different ideas and how to tolerate conflicts. These are all important features which should be taken into account in any kind of educational program if it aims to make the learners ready for a prosperous future life (Ahangari & Samadian, 2014).

Likewise, the results of this study are parallel with those already found by Ghorbani (2008). He tried to determine the impact of cooperative instruction on the writing skill of Iranian EFL learners. He concluded that cooperative instruction comparing to traditional method was more effective and often led to better learning. Similarly the results of this study are in line with Razavi (2005). She found cooperative learning improved reading performance of Iranian University ESP students considerably. She has shown that students who have learned in more student-centered classes had better understanding than those fostered in teacher-dominated

classes. The outcomes of this study were also in line with Liang (2002) who implemented cooperative learning in his study. He showed that cooperative learning is a feasible and practical teaching method that put the communicative approach into action. As he confirmed, such a student-centered teaching method enhanced the students' oral communicative competence to a large degree.

The results of this study are also in line with Hays (1992). He found that while only three students mastered well, an overwhelming number of students were able to use the discourse markers *and, but*, and *so*. He confirmed that semantic words and thus ideational discourse markers are to be expected earlier because they are overtly taught. Norment (1994) similarly found that there was a difference between text types in the use of cohesive devices and discovered a correlation in the frequency of discourse markers and the quality of writing. Intraprawat and Steffensen (1995) also showed that differences between essays that received good ratings and essays that received poor ratings were observed due to the number of words, T-units, and density of DMs. Likewise Jalilifar (2008) found a statistically significant relationship between the quality of the compositions and the number of well functioned DMs used in the compositions. He concluded that DMs, besides other textual characteristics, help identify good and poor writings, and more importantly, the quality is tapped by the use of well-functioned DMs. Thus, the larger the number of DMs in appropriate use, the higher the quality of the composition. He also confirmed that some DM types had a stronger influence on the quality of the compositions. Specifically, there were statistically significant differences between the compositions in the use of DMs types. Assadi and Shahrokhi mehr (2012) further implied that the more knowledge about discourse markers, the more cohesive texts the students can produce. They showed that experimental group's learners created cohesion text in more efficient way than learners who do not know the role of discourse markers. They came to the conclusion that the instruction of DMs would be helpful in writing ability's improvement. Sadeghi and Heidaryan (2012) indicated that discourse markers provide an important first clue to the conversational move of the speakers. They concluded that using discourse markers help the utterances seem more natural to the user and will help him understand the discourse intent of the upcoming move.

The findings of this research are supported by other studies which are related to this topic. Traugott (1995) investigated the relationships between DMs and self-perceived success of

learners in writing in a foreign language. Feng (2010) concludes that discourse markers function as one of the cohesive devices between words and sentences. He also believes that during English teaching, especially during English writing teaching, discourse markers should be taken into deep account.

Moreover, there are lots of investigations that are in line with the second research question. Most EFL teachers concerned about the unsatisfactory outcome of English courses in Iran (Ahanghari & Samadian, 2014). It is disappointing and discouraging for them to witness incomplete student performance despite their high efforts to increase the input for better students' intake. This problem is remarkable in writing classes, too. Students prefer to have a teacher to solve their writing problems through explanation and translation into the target language. They expect to receive a direct and explicit correction from the teacher. The result is boring and despairing however. One of the solutions to motivate these inattentive learners to master the target language is shifting the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learners. Nowadays that we consider learners as significant information providers with specific background knowledge, and care for the effects of socio-cultural factors and interactions in the process of learning, the need for collaboration and cooperation in language classes is undeniable. The impact of more knowledgeable person on one's language mastery should not be ignored in language pedagogy though. This is proved by the significant theoretical viewpoints such as Vygotskyan ZPD. In this regard, creation of conditions under which the learners can be exposed to language and take part in real communication is of great importance. On the other hand, writing skills as a complex and self -selected activity can be learned and practiced through the student-student interactional process. That is, writing improvement needs more learner-centered courses due to its being a personalized activity. Respectively, putting the learners in collaborative situations to challenge their own learning is a better way to attain desirable outcomes (Ahangari & Samadian, 2014).

6. Conclusions

One of the objectives of this study concerned with the existence of the relationship between DMs instruction and learners' writing achievements. To that end, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. It was used to compare the gain score of the mean of DMs' use across two groups; the experimental and the control groups. The improvement (gain) from the pretest and to the posttest was computed for each participant by subtracting each person's posttest score

(the number of times DMs were used in this time of testing in his writing tasks) from his pretest score (the number of times DMs were used in this time of testing in his writing tasks). The results showed a significant difference between control and experimental groups. Consequently, it was concluded that instruction had a significant medium effect on the use of DMs and the first null hypothesis was rejected. Additionally, it was also intended to determine whether there is any significant difference between teacher and peers' ratings of EFL learners' writing scores or not. The research provides an insight into the implementation of an analytic scoring rubrics based on Jacobs et al. (1981) schemes for assessing learners' writing performance. The obtained conclusions of this study confirm the claim of this research that explicit instruction affects the writing ability of intermediate EFL learners and improves it. It is concluded that the explicit instruction of discourse markers can be one of the basic steps in developing writing ability and learners usually benefit from it and use it in an efficient way. A good writing needs to be not only grammatical, but also cohesive and coherent (Feng, 2010). Discourse markers have key roles in any text cohesion and should be thus considered in teaching writing. Nobody can say discourse markers are decisive for English writing, yet no one can deny the great role they play in the cohesion and coherence of writing (Kamali & Noori, 2015). Discourse markers tell us not only about the linguistic properties including semantic and pragmatic meanings, sources, functions, etc. of a set of frequently used expressions and the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used, but also about the cognitive, expressive, social, and textual competence of those who use them. One of the main objectives of teaching is to help learners become independent in their learning process and become more confident with writing tasks. Therefore, learners who can become more educated can compose more cohesive texts. This thesis is hoped to sharpen the ideas of those who are concerned with language pedagogy. Drawing the results obtained from the present study, it might be concluded that: 1) Cooperative Learning activities improve writing skills in EFL classes, and 2) All of the components of a piece of writing, that is, content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics might be improved through cooperative learning activities.

Due to the limitations of the study, some of the other aspects of the issue at hand were not fully covered by the researcher. This study investigated the effects of explicit instruction of DMs in writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners and determined whether there is any significant difference between teacher and peers' ratings of EFL learners' writings. Moreover,

in this study, the researchers limited the activity by including only sixty participants. A larger sample of students from multiple institutions and/or different levels of English Language Proficiency are therefore recommended for future research.

Moreover, the findings of this study are restricted to an Iranian context. Hence further research seems necessary to see to what extent the results would be changed if the study is replicated in other contexts. Some other variables that are likely to affect the quality of mediation are gender, experience, background knowledge, topic familiarity, and levels of difficulty. These are the further variables that should be taken into account by other researchers while conducting/replicating the empirical research as they would change the results significantly.

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