

# Do We Care? Investigating How a Caring Relationship Might Influence Comments and Responses in EFL Writing Classes

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**Abstract**—These This paper examines the ways a caring relationship between teacher and students might influence teacher's written comments on students' writing and the processes by which students use teachers' comments as they revise their drafts. Attempts were made to figure out the factors which contribute to the establishment of a caring relationship between teacher and students. These factors included the students' perception of the teacher's language ability, teacher's helpfulness, and teacher's dialogue with his students as well as teacher's attention to students' needs and wants. Understanding and responding were the factors which led both the teacher and the students to develop a caring relationship. Moreover, the students' drafts and final written productions were examined by the teacher and an experienced writing teacher and they both agreed that students had improved in terms of macro-level structures in writing.

**Index Terms**—caring, caring relationship, feedback

## I. INTRODUCTION

In writing classes, similar to any form of human interaction, written comments on student writing are a form of mutual communication between teacher and students (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, &Tinti, 1997). But how teachers can effectively communicate with their students through written comments?

Taking into consideration the importance of writing in foreign language education, the majority of studies on writing and feedback have demonstrated that teacher written comments play an important role in motivating students to revise and improve their drafts, thereby contributing to the development of their writing abilities (Bitchner, 2008; Ferris, 1997; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Goldstein, 2004; Hyland, 1998; Leki, 1990; Nicol and Macfarlane- Dick, 2006). There are even more researches on teachers' and students' attitudes towards written feedback (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991; Montgomery & Baker, 2007) which all show that L2 learners expect and want their teachers to give feedback on their writing. As noted by Hyland & Hyland (2005) the feedback is not "simply disembodied reference" of students' writing but "an interactive part of the whole context of learning, helping to create a productive interpersonal relationship between the teacher and individual students". As a result, the interpersonal aspects of feedback could build the kind of relationship between teacher and students that can facilitate the students' writing development. (Hyland & Hyland, 2005)

## II. STUDIES ON FEEDBACK

### A. Attitudes toward Feedback

In Zamel's pinion (1985), feedback is often "vague, cryptic, and inconsistent". He believes that teachers should avoid emphasizing on form and they have to focus on meaning. Giannakopoulou (2007), on the other hand, states that;

"Responding in the writing process is seen as reacting to the content, quality of ideas, style and language of a paper rather than merely grading, marking, or correcting it. Novice writers need specific feedback from the teacher concerning not only their language but also the reader's perspective in order to produce writing which is coherent and comprehensible..." (p.41)

Montgomery and Baker (2007) also contend that both teachers and students perceive teacher-written feedback as an important part of the writing process. In sum, despite the fact that correction of students' writing errors is still under debate, research in this area argues that teachers should provide comments on students' drafts because these comments are likely to motivate students to revise their texts and improve the quality of writing (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Leki, 1991).

#### *B. Teacher Correction and Student Reaction*

Some studies have shown that ESL students want and appreciate error correction and that such correction motivates students to write (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, cited in Rahimi, 2010; Leki, 1991; Montgomery & Baker, 2007) and helps students improve the accuracy and quality of their writing (Chandler, 2003; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997).

Chandler (2003) and Ferris (1997) examined the samples of various drafts of several different assignments for a full semester and therefore could examine the change which occurred across writing assignments, points of the semester, student ability levels, and the impact of teacher comments on student revision. Along the same line, Lightbown and Spada (1999; cited in Giannakopoulou, 2007) believe, an overemphasis on error and correction hinders the development of fluency in writing.

#### *C. Students' Attitudes toward Feedback*

L2 writing teachers are usually aware of students' perception of written comments and they try to do so; however, they might not be fully aware of how much feedback they have to give on local issues such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation as well as global issues such as content and organization (Montgomery & Baker, 2007).

Zacharias (2007) examined students' attitudes toward teacher feedback by using both qualitative and quantitative data. The results demonstrated that generally teachers and students have a "marked preference" for teacher feedback. Moreover, students preferred form-based feedback and they considered it to be more effective; they believed that content-based feedback tended to be general. According to Lee (2007), in ESL studies, the ways students perceive teacher feedback refers to different factors such as student's educational backgrounds, classroom assignments, classroom goals and interpersonal relationships. As a result, students' interpretations of teacher feedback were not always related to their teacher's intentions.

#### *D. Written Feedback in EFL Settings*

Robati (2007) examined the effect of teachers' written feedback on Iranian learners' writings with the focus on form versus content. Riazi (1997, cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006) conducted a similar study on Iranian students and the results suggested that the students consider feedback as an important part of writing classes; though, they believed that the form-based feedback as more effective in improving their English. In a similar study, Rahimi (2010) explored EFL students' beliefs about teacher's feedback and their preferences for receiving feedback on different grammatical units by applying questionnaire, verbal protocol, and students' writing scores. Several other studies in Iran have been conducted in the form of MA or PhD dissertation conducted in Iran (Alfi, 2004; Bakhshi, 2005; BozorgAliabadi, 2005; Edalat, 2005; Kordi, 2007).

Additionally, as in other settings Ellis et al. (2008) conducted a study on corrective feedback and found it to be effective. Another similar study (Binglan & Jia, 2010) showed that explicit corrective feedback is more helpful for students' long-term improvement of writing accuracy, concluding that teachers should use explicit comments on the writings. Schulz (2001) investigated the relationship between the two types of teacher feedback i.e. error correction versus meaning correction and their effects on the level of grammatical accuracy and the level of thinking. He found that feedback on meaning helped the students improve their grammatical accuracy and thinking levels, while feedback on local errors and grammatical rules did not help them grow in their grammatical and cognitive skills levels.

### III. CARING RELATIONSHIP AND ITS INFLUENCE ON TEACHING WRITING

As Yoshida (2010) states, since corrective feedback occurs in classroom context, teachers' and students' perceptions of feedback episodes may be influenced by their perceptions of classroom interactions (emphasis ours)" (p. 297).

#### *A. Noddings' Description of Caring*

Noddings (1999) describes caring as a combination of honesty and patience, trust and respect, humility and courage, experience of others, encouragement and devotion. She described her approach to ethics of care as relational ethics since her approach "prioritizes concern for relationships". However, Noddings believes that caring, rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness is a more basic and preferable approach to ethics (1984).

Noddings suggests three requirements for caring. She argues that the career has to exhibit engrossment and motivational displacement, and the person who is cared for must respond in some way to the caring. By engrossment, Noddings means thinking about someone in order to gain a better understanding of him or her. It is possible that someone has a deep understanding of another person but acts against that person's interests. Therefore, there would be a need for motivational displacement. Motivational displacement is defined by Noddings as the willingness to be

concerned about the goals and needs of the cared-for. Finally, as the third requirement of a caring relationship, she argues that caring should be a foundation for ethical decision-making.

#### *B. Tarlow's Concepts of Caring Relationship*

Tarlow (1996) conducted a study about caring relationships at schools. She found out that eight basic concepts made up caring relationships: time, 'be there', talking, sensitivity, acting in the best interest of the other, caring as feeling, caring as doing, and reciprocity. Tarlow believes that spending time with students is important in the formation and maintenance of caring relationships.

### IV. STUDIES ON CARING

Bosworth (1995, cited in Protheroe, 2005) conducted a study that asked middle-level students how they defined care and described caring teachers. Alder (2002) investigated how caring relationship between middle school students and their teachers was created and maintained. Noblit (1993, cited in Magyar et al., 2007) had an ethnographic research and investigated the teacher's construction of caring through the ethical use of power. McLaughlin (1991) examined teachers who struggled with establishing appropriate control and care in their classrooms. There was only a single study by Lee and Schallert (2008) which examined the role of trust between teacher and students through feedback and revision cycles in writing.

#### *A. Noddings's Concept of Caring*

Noddings (1984) used the term caring for describing an interaction between a person giving care ("the one-caring") and a person receiving that care ("the cared-for"). She believes that care is basic in human life and everyone wants to be cared for (Noddings, 2002). For Noddings, caring is not an innate part of people. She believes that caring is not something a person is but it is something that a person engages in. It is "a connection or encounter between two human beings" (Noddings, 2001, p. 15). Without having the cared-for's reciprocal response to the one-caring, "the one who is the object of caretaking feels like an object" (p. 65). She discussed four key components of caring relationship: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2002). For Noddings (1992), the concept of dialogue is respecting the students' opinions, rationales, and motives (Alder, 2005). Furthermore, caring teachers need to provide an atmosphere for students "to share efforts at providing care" (Owens & Ennis, 2005). They have to help students practice care so that students learn how to "be supportive and encouraging to one another" (Alder, 2005). For being encouraging, the teachers need to know the students very well to "realize what they are trying to become" (Owens & Ennis, 2005). By confirming students, the teachers provide students with positive direction and help them "incorporate instances of poor judgment into an ethical view of themselves that they can live with honorably" (Alder, 2002, p.5).

#### *B. Tarlow's Concept of Caring*

Through eighty-four interviews, Tarlow (1996) identified eight issues which make up caring relationships: time, 'be there', talking, sensitivity, acting in the best interest of the other, caring as feeling, caring as doing, and reciprocity.

The first issue is time which refers to the actual time of the interacting between teachers and students. "be there" is the second issue in caring relationships. It means that the caring teacher should be both physically and emotionally present, available and approachable to help the students in any way they can. The third characteristic of a caring relationship in Tarlow's (1996) research is "talking for building caring relationship between teacher and students. The next important issue is sensitivity, i.e. teachers should be sensitive to their student's moods and needs. The fifth issue, acting in the best interest of other, is described as to ensure that the teachers' assistance help students promote their success. "Caring as feeling" is the next issue which refers to the teachers' feeling and sentiments. According to Tarlow (1996), caring sentiments reflect empathy and hopefulness for the future of their students" (cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005). The seventh one, caring as doing is described as helpful activities of caring for students. The last issue is reciprocity which refers to mutual relationship between teacher and students in giving and taking.

### V. DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The class met twice a week for a five-week semester and each session lasted 90 minutes the writing topics were: "In general, it seems that people do not have such a close relationship with their neighbors as they did in the past. Do you agree? If so, why is it like that? And what can be done to improve this kind of contact?", "In your opinion, what's an ideal holiday like? Describe it in terms of time, place, people, activities and whatever else important to you.", "Write about the best birthday you have ever had", and "How important do you think is it to be honest with one's partner in married life?"

Data	The purpose of data
Field notes and observation	To see what exactly happened in the class
Background interview	To elicit students' background information
Final interview	To perceive the teacher's notions while commenting on the students' writings, students' attitudes towards teacher's comments
Writing samples	To how the caring relationship between the teacher and students affected the teacher's feedback and students' revisions.

Figure1. Data collection and procedures

### A. Grounded Theory

The present study followed the stances of grounded theory in the application of its research methods and procedures. According to Liamputtong et al (2005), in grounded theory, concepts, categories, and themes are recognized, then the relationship between categories are identified to develop to what Glaser and Strauss (1968) refer to as formal theory.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), open coding refers to the process of identification of the themes emerging from the data. It also aims at looking for relationships between events and develops new ways of describing these relationships (Liamputtong et al, 2005, p.268). Therefore, the first step was to transcribe the interviews to look for possible relationships and patterns. As noted by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) the researcher "should painstakingly take apart their field notes, matching, contrasting, aggregating, comparing and ordering notes made". Accordingly, during this phase, the transcriptions of the interviews were compared to find the embedded similarities and the differences and so the themes were inductively generated from the data. Axial coding refers to the process of re-examination of the categories for the purpose of determining possible connections between a category and sub categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Consequently this phase required a second close reading of the transcriptions to find the connections between sets of data axially. In this regard, the key concepts were reported first and then the content of the interviews were analyzed by comparing the words and sentences. Those carrying similar themes were placed in the same groups. Finally, the categories and sub-categories were settled. Finally, all categories are to be unified around a 'core' category to uncover the central theme that the whole research is moving around (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In the last phase, the emerged themes and codes from the transcriptions and written documents were attended and by ordering the data thematically the connections between events showed up.

Coding type	Initial phases of analysis
Open coding	At the time of observation, transcription, and writing samples
Axial coding	While framing the analysis
Selective coding	Emerged in the process of analysis

Figure2. Coding procedure

### B. Trustworthiness

It has been widely held that "because of the association with the quantitative conceptualization of the research process, the term validity has generally been replaced by the term trustworthiness within qualitative research" (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the notion of "trustworthiness" for that of validity. They have further introduced five key factors that contribute to trustworthiness and have provided techniques for achieving it similar to what Maxwell (2005) presented for validity later.

Criterion Area	Technique	The present study follow-ups
Credibility	Long-term involvement	Several in depth interviews
	Triangulation	Diverse sources and methods of data collection
Transferability	Thick description	Thick description of events in the writing class
Dependability	The dependability audit, including audit trail	Accuracy and authenticity of data
Confirmability	The confirmability audit, including audit trail	Voice records, writing samples, observational notes, condensed notes, categories of themes

Figure3. Techniques for trustworthiness

## VI. INTERPRETATION OF THE COLLECTED DATA

### A. Initial Interviews

The first interview was conducted with the students to elicit their background information regarding their writing experiences in Persian and English, their attitude toward writing, their goals for the class and finally their definition of a caring teacher. Accordingly several questions were asked and the answers were categorized into two main areas. An overall brief inspection of the interview transcripts revealed that the students attended the course with different objectives in mind, out of which one common theme was the need for getting proficient of English writing for academic purposes. Still other apparent causes for attending a writing course in English were to pass IELTS or TOEFL, to handle potential occupational requirements, to communicate effectively and to surf the Internet as a literate person. Some students showed more ambition; Sara hoped to be a "skilled translator one day" while a few others like Mahshid did

not mention any specific goals; she attended the class to learn how to organize a piece of writing. Interview transcripts revealed that students were sharing some fundamental beliefs in their definition of a caring teacher. Their comments were collected and categorized according Figure 4.

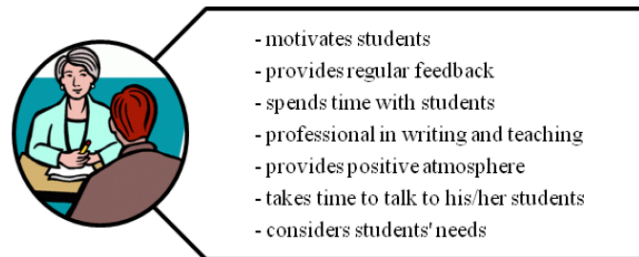


Figure4. Students' definition of a caring teacher, July, 2010

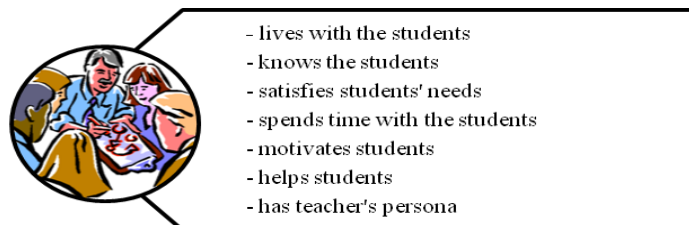


Figure5. Teacher's definition of a caring teacher, July8, 2010

### B. Final Interviews

Final interviews were conducted once the students received the teacher's feedback on their writing assignments. The extracted data in this part of the study revealed that all the students appreciated the comments they received from their teacher. Unlike the findings of several studies (e.g. Binglan&Jia, 2010; Cohen, 1987; Rahimi, 2010; Schulz, 2001), the students in this class found the meaning-based comments quite helpful. They believed that the usual comments they had received in other classes were mostly local ones limited to grammatical points; yet, in this class, they had a chance to learn about the style and the organization of a piece of writing and it was considered valuable by them. The teacher taught them how to prepare outlines and how to organize their writings and almost all the students stated that that was the first time that they learned about the very act of writing and not the micro-level points. Consequently, All the participants mentioned that the kind of caring relationship proved helpful in managing their ideas and distributing them text effectively and almost all of them considered their teacher a caring one. They believed that upon the establishment of a caring relationship their attitudes towards writing were reformed and deepened.

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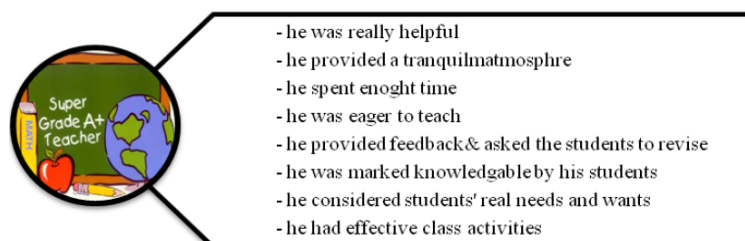


Figure 6.Characteristics of the caring teacher

### C. Teacher's Strategies for Handling Feedback

The teacher in his final interview highlighted on a number of techniques he implemented as a caring teacher;

a. He considered all the errors; however, he commented selectively, i.e. he commented on some particular ones according to course objectives and students' needs.

b. He took his students' personality into account while commenting on their writings. This aligns with one of the Tarlow's characteristics of a caring teacher. She states that a caring teacher tries to get to know his students by observing and paying attention to them in order to be sensitive to their moods and feelings (Owens & Ennis, 2005).

c. He believed that he should not always give them the answers; rather he preferred to scaffold their learning by making them notice the problems and by motivating them to reflect on the problems.

d. Individual student-teacher talk was a salient feature of the commenting procedure and lasted between 5-10 minutes and was aimed at making the students aware of their writing problems.

e. A combination of written and oral feedback was provided to ensure the responsiveness of students towards feedback.

f. Oral interaction between the teacher and students was regarded as an integral constituent of the revision process and the plenty of oral communication was influential in the establishment of a caring relationship.

#### *D. Grammar-based Feedback or Style-based feedback*

While the majority of students seemed to prefer Grammar-based feedback over the style-based one (e.g. BabaeiRobati, 2007; Chandler, 2003; Leki, 1991) the students of the present study warmly embraced style-based comments from their teachers. They believed that the grammar points were helpful for them but the style-based feedback such as organization was more helpful and beneficial. Almost all of the students acknowledged that learning how to organize an outline was quite advantageous. They affirmed that before taking part in the course, organization of a text and generating ideas had been the most demanding sections of the writing process.

### VII. THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER'S CARING PRACTICE ON STUDENTS' WRITING QUALITY

Although the aim of the present study was not that of measuring students' improvement in their writings and the teacher had not focused on scores as a lever for spurring students' motivation, an overall betterment was discerned and reported by the teacher and an experienced colleague teacher (Teacher's interview with an experienced writing teacher, August 15, 2010). According to the colleague teacher who had closely reviewed the drafts as well as final written productions, students' writings showed an overall improving trend.

Yet, there was one student whose writings did not show any significant improvement throughout the semester. Sara had studied English at university and the researcher could conclude from her interview excerpts that she believed her English overtopped others and according to the teacher she behaved as if she knew more than the other students (Teacher Interview, August 30, 2010). Although her first drafts were good and actually needed very few comments, she did not get much from the instruction. In spite of the enthusiasm and willingness she showed in her final interview, she was absent for four sessions and as a result she did not hand two of the assignments in. However, she stressed that she had learned a lot about the organization of a piece of writing and not grammar.

The opposite case was Shima who admitted she hated writing at the beginning of the semester and considered her writing awful. Interestingly, the quality of her writing improved through the semester. In the first assignment which was about neighbor, she received a considerable amount of written comments from her teacher while in the final draft which was about honesty she received very few comments and the teacher appreciated her writing.

### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study confirmed what Noddings (1984) named motivational displacement, i.e. the teacher's willingness to give primacy to goals and needs of the students and what Tarlow (1996) called sensitivity referring to teachers' attention to students' needs and moods. It also corresponded to the study of Bosworth (1995), as cited in Protheroe (2005) which stated that the students considered their teacher as caring when he/she was attentive to individual students' needs.

Still another factor which seemed to contribute to the development of a caring relationship was the relaxed and supportive atmosphere which was believed to be created by the teacher. The students believed that the teacher's helpfulness was a determining factor in the formation of a tranquil and positive atmosphere which enhanced attention and learning.

Moreover, since the teacher spent plenty of time on planning and implementing the feedback activities, his feedback served as another precursor to the development of caring relationship in class. This was consistent with Tarlow's (1996) finding which put emphasis on "time" as a determining factor in a caring relationship between teacher and students.

The students also found their teacher a caring one because he spoke to them a lot and explained the ambiguous points to them patiently. This was in line with Straub's (2000) study which showed that having dialogue with the students connects the teacher to the students. Furthermore, Nodding' (1984) and Tarlow (1996) both conceptualize dialogue as one of the key elements in creating caring relationship. The teacher's language proficiency was another effective factor in developing a caring relationship. Since all students considered their teacher as a knowledgeable and highly proficient one, they felt responsible towards the teacher and revised their papers with confidence. Moreover, the teacher's use of Persian (students' first language) in class helped the students figure out the problematic areas better, which in its own turn, led to better revisions and therefore contributed to the growth of a caring relationship. Lee and Schallert (2008) had come to the same conclusion and believed that language ability played an important role in an EFL classroom and could affect the caring relationship between teacher and student.

Furthermore, this study showed the importance and necessity of feedback in writing. This finding was not consistent with those L2 studies which did not regard teacher's feedback as an important factor (e.g. Cohen, 1987; Radecki and Swales, 1988; cited in Montgomery and Baker, 2007; Truscott, 1996; Zamel, 1985). However, it aligned with the findings of studies which put emphasis on the importance of feedback and comment in writing (e.g. Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Giannakopoulou, 2007; Leki, 1991; Montgomery and Baker, 2007). Unlike many studies (e.g. Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Zacharias, 2007), the students of the present study found global writing issues such as organization, style and content more helpful than local issues such as grammar and mechanics of writing. This was consistent with those L2 studies which declared that feedback on form is not helpful (Kepner, 1991;

Truscott, 1996; Zamel, 1985). Furthermore, the students appreciated the encouraging words they received in the comments. This was supported by the findings of studies by Straub (2000) and Ferris (1995) claiming that encouraging words on the students' writing created a motivating atmosphere for the students and connected them to the teacher.

#### IX. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study provided explanations as to how the caring relationship between the teacher and students in EFL settings might influence the ways the students make sense of the comments and revise their drafts. The researcher gained some understanding concerning the effects of caring relationship on the students drafting process based on which following implications could be put forth;

a) Writing teachers based on the findings of the present study can encourage the development of caring relationship. This is what, as to researcher's personal experience, is lacking in most EFL writing classes in Iran. At the first glance the task might seem quite demanding especially for teachers in large classes yet; they will certainly be able to apply at least some of the above mentioned features such as creating relaxed atmosphere, group dialogues...etc.

b) Upon provision of feed forward and feedback, the teachers can facilitate the revision process and make learners go through drafting which is essential to improving the writing quality.

c) Still another way to enhance students' writing, which is less time consuming, is to avoid correcting all errors and to focus on more significant ones i.e. the global ones.

d) Group work is no hindrance to caring relationship and has the potential to save time and energy on the part of teachers. Regarding students however, group work will reduce anxiety and enhance motivation.

e) One of the salient features of caring relationship is attention to individual students this will positively affect students self-confidence and their motivation. This further led them feel responsible for implementing teacher's comments to their writing and served as another factor in development of a caring relationship.

There are certainly other implications for novice as well as experienced teachers which have stayed untouched by the researcher and which show up during actual practice in natural classroom settings and by teachers and students as agents of change.

#### X. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this context, because the teacher was expected to respond to students' writing, peer comments were not used as an instructional option in the classroom. Therefore, further research might be conducted to investigate how peer comments can play a role in the development of a caring relationship. The development of caring relationship can certainly be explored in other language skill areas like reading and speaking. Moreover, the effects of caring relationship can be explored in productive skills versus receptive skills to see if such relationship can lead to better production or vice versa. The participants of the present study were all females. A similar study could be conducted on male students to see if gender has got a role in the development of caring relationship. Further research can also be carried out to see if the caring relationship has got similar effects on other levels of proficiency in different skills.

There are numerous other studies which if conducted can introduce new concepts and valuable insight into the literature. It will be the responsibility of teachers and researchers of the field to pave the way for a better understanding of EFL learning and teaching process.

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