

The Effect of Direct/Indirect Corrective Feedback on the Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher tries to examine the effectiveness of direct and indirect error correction in improving L2 writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. The participants for this study are 75 Iranian EFL learners, including 35 males and 40 females with an age range of 13 to 18 at upper-intermediate level. The test in the current study is deployed over two testing sessions (pretests and post-tests), each being an error correction test. An examination of the two experimental groups' scores on the posttest revealed that there were no significant differences between direct and indirect written corrective feedback in the writing of Iranian EFL learners. The results of this study can be significant for EFL teachers and learners as it represented an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of the previous studies by investigating the effects of corrective feedback on EFL learners' writing performance as a whole, not just focusing on one aspect of it. The results of the study have some pedagogical implications for language teachers and syllabus designers.

Keywords: Feedback, Corrective Feedback, Indirect Corrective Feedback, Direct Corrective Feedback

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1. Introduction

Corrective feedback is one of the hot topics in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Brown, 2007). It is also “of perennial concern to L2 teachers” (Kepner, 1991, p. 305). Feedback in language teaching takes the form of positive reinforcement or correction (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). Lightbown and Spada (1999) broadly define corrective feedback (CF), also known as negative feedback, as “any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect” (p.171). Corrective feedback (CF), which lies at the heart of this study, refers to various ways a reader can respond to a second language writer by indicating that some usage in the writing does not conform to the norms of the target language.

In very general terms, corrective feedback on grammar errors can enhance learners' accuracy and expedite learners' grammar acquisition (DeKeyser, 1997; Ellis, 1996; Long, 1991b, 1997; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

One rationale for the provision of teacher CF is based on the arguments that the environment for L1 learning differs from adult L2 learning on at least two points: first, the cognitive ability, and second, the learning context. Children do not respond well to CF as their ability to understand rules and explanations is more limited (Carroll, 2001; DeKeyser, 2007; Krashen & Seliger, 1975). Cognitive psychologist, Ausubel (1964), noted that unlike children, adult L2 learners can profit from grammatical explanations.

Another argument for corrective feedback is based on the belief that CF is essential to prevent fossilization of bad habits. *Fossilization* or *stabilization* was defined by Brown (2007) as “the relatively permanent incorporation of incorrect linguistic forms into a person's second language competence” (p. 382). This belief is rooted in the behaviorist learning theory (Skinner, 1957). The strong stance for error correction is reflected in Brooks' (1960) comment: “Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcomes, but its presence is to be expected” (p.56).

Corder (1981) has underscored the provision of teacher corrective feedback as the essential duty of any teacher. This responsibility is especially prominent in foreign language contexts, where the teacher is often the only source of the expert feedback students expect to receive. In this study, the researcher tries to examine the effectiveness of direct and indirect error correction in improving L2 writing accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. This study is also going to seek to investigate students' attitude regarding error correction in this context.

1.1 Research Questions

1. Is there any significant difference between the effects of direct corrective feedback versus indirect corrective feedback on the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant difference in the Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward direct versus indirect corrective feedback?

1.2 Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference between the effects of direct corrective feedback versus indirect corrective feedback on the writing ability of EFL learners.
2. There is not any significant difference in the Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward direct versus indirect corrective feedback.

2. Review of Related Literature

The study of corrective feedback has been much studied and debated since Truscott (1996) raised an issue on grammar correction. However, despite the significant amount of research activity, there remains no conclusive result on whether corrective feedback is actually effective for language learning. This present study is designed and executed in response to this lack of conclusive result, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of corrective feedback (direct, indirect, and no feedback).

2.1. Process-writing

Since 1980s, the trend in the field of SL writing pedagogy has been away from viewing writing as only a finished product towards thinking about writing as a process (Cambourne, 1986; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Yoshida, 1983). A key concept for the process writing approach is that writing is “writing to learn” (Britton, 1970; Emig, 1971, 1977). Ferris (2008) points out that the most obvious reason for teacher WCF is to justify the grade that teachers give for the students’ written assignments. But in the process-oriented approach to writing instruction, teachers hope their feedback can help students improve their subsequent drafts and future writing (Ferris, 2008; Hyland, 2003; Vyatkina, 2011).

2.2 The Roles of Error Correction

Error correction, whether oral or written, is the process of providing clear, comprehensive, and consistent corrective feedback on a student’s grammatical errors for the purpose of improving the student’s ability to write accurately (Ferris, 2002). Despite the process of providing corrective feedback being frustrating, difficult, and time-consuming, teachers still prefer to provide error correction because it allows for individualized teacher-to-student communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of an L2 writing class (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997).

2.3 Indirect Feedback

Indirect feedback is a strategy of providing feedback commonly used by teachers to help students correct their errors by indicating an error without providing the correct form (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Indirect feedback takes place when teachers only provide indications which in some way make students aware that an error exists but they do not provide the students with the correction. In doing so, teachers can provide general clues regarding the location and nature or type of an error by providing an underline, a circle, a code, a mark, or a highlight on the error, and ask the students to correct the error themselves (Lee, 2008; O’Sullivan & Chambers, 2006). Through indirect feedback, students are cognitively challenged to reflect upon the clues given by the teacher, who acts as a ‘reflective agent’ (Pollard, 1990) providing meaningful and appropriate guidance to students’ cognitive structuring skills arising from students’ prior experience.

2.4 Direct Feedback

Another feedback strategy commonly used by teachers is direct feedback. Direct feedback is a strategy of providing feedback to students to help them correct their errors by providing the correct linguistic form (Ferris, 2006) or linguistic structure of the target language. Direct feedback is usually given by teachers, upon noticing a grammatical mistake, by providing the correct answer or the expected response above or near the linguistic or grammatical error (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris, 2003a). Direct feedback may be done in various ways such as by striking out an incorrect or unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme; inserting a missing or expected word, phrase, or morpheme; and by providing the correct linguistic form above or near the erroneous form (Ellis, 2008; Ferris, 2006), usually above it or in the margin. Direct feedback has the advantage that it provides explicit information about the correct form (Ellis, 2008). Lee (2003) adds that direct feedback may be appropriate for beginner students, or in a situation when errors are ‘untreatable’ that are not susceptible to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice, and when teachers want to direct student attention to error patterns that require student correction.

2.5. Learners’ Attitude toward Corrective Feedback

The effectiveness of any teacher intervention is dependent on learners’ motivation and presupposes active learner participation. As Corder (1967) noted, “it is the learner who controls the external stimuli, or the input, or more properly, his intake” (p. 165). Later, Corder (1981) again pointed out that there is obviously not a one-to-

one relation between input and output. Converting corrective CF into long-term acquisition must be achieved internally by the learners themselves, in accordance with their particular learning goals (Carroll, 2001).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants for this study are 75 Iranian EFL learners, including 35 males and 40 females with an age range of 13 to 18. A Preliminary English Test (PET) is administered in order to be sure of their homogeneity and of having two groups at upper-intermediate level. The test consists of four parts: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The subjects' scores are out of 100. Then, 75 learners form two experimental groups and one control group (25 learners in each group). The two experimental groups consist of a direct CF group, and an indirect CF group. The sampling will be purposive sampling because only the participants at the upper-intermediate level will be selected. The reason for choosing upper-intermediate participants is that the main skill which is going to be tested in this study is writing, so the participants should be at a proper level in order to be able to write.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Testing Instruments

The test in the current study is deployed over two testing sessions (pretests and post-tests), each being an error correction test. It consists of 15 statements and each contains one error which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. The test items will be selected from the Top Notch Upper-Intermediate book. The total time for each of the tests is 15 minutes. What students need to do in each test is circling the errors and then giving correct forms. Each step will be awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test is 30 marks. In order to estimate the reliability of the tests, KR-21 formula will be used. In order to assess the content validity of the scale, the items are also analyzed by three experts.

3.2.2 Attitude Questionnaire

To answer the second research question, students' attitudes toward WCF are examined. For that purpose, an attitude questionnaire (see Appendix 1) developed by Carroll (2001) will be administered. It consists of ten questions which shows learners' attitude toward corrective feedback provided by teacher. Learners are asked to fill in the option which best showed their attitude about corrective feedback provided by teacher in two groups of direct and indirect. The questionnaire included a five-point Likert type scale with five options in five ranking, namely 'strongly disagree' (-2), 'disagree' (-1), 'undecided' (0), 'agree' (+1) and 'strongly agree' (+2). Following Loewen et al. (2009) and Vyatkina (2011), the responses are analyzed, and emerging patterns are identified and categorized. The attitude questionnaire responses will be organized in the tables displaying the numbers of responses and percentages of the possible responses per group to each question. To check the face validity of the questionnaire, a detailed discussion is undertaken with three experts in the field, and their suggestions are incorporated into the questionnaire. In order to assess the content validity of the scale, its items with regard to the definition of the variable are also analyzed by three experts. This scale is translated into Persian for the sake of clarity. It is received by several English teachers and translators in order to assure the accuracy of the translations. To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaire, an internal reliability (Cronbachs α) test will be conducted.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The entire study will be spread over a period of 8-week block practice. At the beginning of the study, all the students in three groups take the pretest to examine their existing ability to use the targeted forms. In each of the treatment sessions from week 2 to 4, students are first given 5 to 10 minutes to read the teachers' corrective feedback and self-correct if required. This will be done in class to ensure that every student read teacher's feedback carefully. The second part of the treatment session is a narrative writing task in which students need to write a short article of around 150 to 200 words on assigned topics as homework. The post-tests start in week 8 after reviewing the corrective feedback for the last writing task.

Throughout the whole period, no explicit instructions in class on the targeted error categories are provided in class by the teacher. Besides, to ensure the validity and reliability of the testing instruments, all the test papers and writing worksheets will be piloted among thirty students who are not from the groups of control and experimental but from the same level of proficiency at the same institute. Suitable adjustment will be made to make the instruction more explicit and reader-friendly.

4. Results

After administering the writing pretest and posttest, in order to test the null hypotheses, an ANOVA tests was conducted to find the significant difference between three groups, the results of which are presented below.

4.1 Reliability of the Writing Pretest and Post-Test

In order to estimate the reliability of the writing pretest and posttest, KR-21 formula was used. The results are presented in table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Reliability of Writing Pretest

Statistics	Mean	N of Items	Variance	KR-21
	18.12	30	29.89	0.79

Table 4.2

Reliability of Writing Post-Test

Statistics	Mean	N of Items	Variance	KR-21
	20.67	30	24.46	0.86

Based on Table 4.1 and Table 4.2, the reliability of the teacher-made test for the pretest is 0.79 and for the post-test is 0.86, which is acceptable. Therefore, the test used in this research, enjoyed acceptable indices for reliability.

4.2 The Writing Pretest

The writing pretest consisted of 15 statements, and contained one error which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. The test items were selected from the Top Notch Upper-Intermediate book. What students needed to do in this test was circling the errors and then giving correct forms. Each step was awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test was 30 marks.

After administering the writing pretest, the mean scores of the direct WCF and indirect WCF and of course the control groups were calculated, the result of which are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Pretest

	N	M	SD	SEM
Direct Group	25	17.16	5.08	1.01
Indirect Group	25	16.96	6.05	1.21
Control Group	25	17.48	4.43	0.88

Table 4.3 presents the means and standard deviations for the pre-test scores of the learners in each of the three groups. According to Table 4.3, the mean score of the direct group was 17.16 with the standard deviation of 5.08, and the mean score of indirect group was calculated as 16.96 with the standard deviation of 6.05, and for the control group, the mean score is 17.48 with the standard deviation of 4.43.

4.3 The Writing Posttest

The writing posttest like pretest consisted of 15 statements, and contained one error which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. Each step was awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test was 30 marks. After administering the writing posttest, the mean scores of the direct WCF and indirect WCF and the control group were calculated, the result of which are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Descriptive Statistics of the writing posttest

	N	M	SD	SEM
Direct Group	25	20.76	4.24	0.84
Indirect Group	25	21.60	4.41	0.88
Control Group	25	18.08	4.36	0.87

According to Table 4.4, the mean score of the direct group was 20.76 with the standard deviation of 4.24, and the mean score of indirect group was calculated as 21.60 with the standard deviation of 4.41, and for the control group, the mean score is 18.08 with the standard deviation of 4.36.

There were no outliers in the study, so the normality of the data was checked. In order to check the normality of the data, two measures were used. One was the measure of skewness which needs to be smaller than one to guarantee the normality of the data. The second one was the standard error of skewness. In order to assure normality, the standard error of skewness should be smaller than two. The results are shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5
Normality of writing posttest

	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Direct Group	0.163	0.464
Indirect Group	0.163	0.464
Control Group	0.055	0.374

According to Table 4.5, the measure of skewness for direct group was 0.163, for indirect group was 0.225 and for the control group was 0.055, which are all smaller than 1 (skewness= 0.163, 0.225, 0.055<1). And the standard error of skewness for direct group, indirect group and control group was 0.464, which are all smaller than 2 (Std. error of skewness= 0.464<2).

Since the scores were distributed normally, which met the assumption of normality, an ANOVA test was used to check whether there was any significant difference among the means of the three groups. As Table 4.6 shows, the result of the ANOVA is $F(2, 72) = 4.478, p = 0.15$. Therefore, providing the two different types of feedback had significantly different effects on the written performance of learners on the accurate use of English in the post-test.

Table 4.6

Analysis of the Variance for the Post-test Means of the Three Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	168.987	2	84.493	4.478	.015
Within Groups	1358.400	72	18.867		
Total	1527.387	74			

Having applied the One-way ANOVA, the researcher acknowledged that means are significantly different from each other. In order to determine the exact location of mean differences, a Dunnett analysis should be applied.

Table 4.7 illustrates the significant differences between the groups. This table reveals that the experimental groups, which received direct and indirect corrective feedback, significantly outperformed the control group at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 4.7

Multiple Comparisons (Dunnett)

Group	Group	(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Direct Group	Control	3.52000*	1.22855	.010
Indirect Group	Control	2.68000	1.11747	.059

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

4.4 Results of Attitude Questionnaire

To answer the second research question, students' attitudes toward WCF were examined. For that purpose, an attitude questionnaire (see Appendix 1), developed by Carroll (2001), were administered. It consisted of ten questions, which shows learners' attitude toward written corrective feedback provided by teacher.

4.4.1 Reliability of the Attitude Questionnaire

To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaire, an internal reliability (Cronbachs α) test was conducted, and the results showed that the instrument had a good internal consistency of the items in this instrument as shown in the following table (Table 4.8)

Table 4.8
Reliability Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire

Cronbach's α	N of Items
0.796	10
0.163	0.464
0.055	0.374

4.4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Direct Group

As stated before, a questionnaire which consisted of ten questions was given to the learners of direct group. Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for direct group are shown in table 4.9, and its histogram distribution is shown in Figure 4.5.

Table 4.9
Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Direct Group

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	108	43.2	43.2	43.2
Agree	84	33.6	33.6	78.8
Disagree	36	14.4	14.4	91.2
Strongly Disagree	22	8.8	8.8	100
TOTAL	250	100	100	

4.4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Indirect Group

The questionnaire was also given to the learners of indirect group. Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for indirect group are shown in table 4.10.

Table 4.10
Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Indirect Group

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	117	46.8	46.8	46.8
Agree	90	36	36	82.8
Disagree	31	12.4	12.4	95.2
Strongly Disagree	12	4.8	4.8	100
TOTAL	250	100	100	

According to the Table 4.11, about 43.2 percent of students in direct group, and 46.8 percent in indirect group checked the "strongly agree" choice. For the "agree" choice, it's about 33.6 percent in direct group, and 36 percent in indirect group. It shows that 8.8 percent of students in direct group have positive attitude toward direct corrective feedback and also, 82.8 percent of students in indirect group have positive attitude toward indirect corrective feedback. And of course 14.4 percent of students in direct group disagreed with this method while about 8.8 percent strongly disagreed. These statistics for indirect group is 12.4 percent "disagree" and 4.8 percent "strongly disagree".

Table 4.11
Results of Attitude Questionnaire

	S. agree	Agree	Disagree	S. disagree
Direct group	43.2%	33.6%	14.4%	8.8%
Indirect group	46.8%	36%	12.4%	4.8%

5. Discussion

The aftereffects of this investigation uncover that receiving written corrective feedback helped students to enhance their grammatical accuracy. An examination of the two experimental groups' scores on the posttest indicated that there was not such an effect. The indirect group's mean on the posttest was slightly higher than the direct group's mean, but in the pretest this superiority was vice versa. Overall, the difference between the indirect and direct groups on the posttest did not reach statistical significance. This implies that both types of CF were equally effective in improving learners' grammatical accuracy. Our findings are in agreement with Ferris (2004), who claimed that indirect CF led learners to be reflective and analytical because they took more responsibility. On the other hand, this study found that the type of feedback provided did have a significant effect on accuracy. To answer the second research question, the results on the construct of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated learners' preference in two experimental groups, for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the indirect group scored higher than the other group in their attitudes toward receiving indirect error correction, though it seems close to the other group. This could be true as 83% of the participants of indirect group and 79% of participants of direct group preferred having errors correction and think that error correction is absolutely help them to learn English.

6. Conclusion

An examination of the two experimental groups' scores on the posttest revealed that there were no significant effects between direct and indirect written corrective feedback on the writing of Iranian EFL learners. The mean of indirect group on the posttest was slightly higher than the mean of direct group, this superiority was vice versa

in the pretest but totally these superiorities were insignificant. Thus, the difference between the direct and indirect groups on the posttest did not reach statistical significance. This implies that both types of CF were equally effective in improving learners' grammatical accuracy. The results also showed that the direct and indirect groups improved their grammatical accuracy in posttest in comparison to pretest, whereas the control group did not show any significant improvement. Making our findings more robust, in another experimental study on error correction and writing accuracy. The learners in the indirect group did slightly better than the learners in the direct group. Participants in the indirect group made fewer mistakes in their posttest, compared to the direct group.

The results of this study may raise teachers' confidence in providing feedback for Iranian EFL learners. The results obtained show that written corrective feedback is indeed effective in L2 acquisition. Besides that, the findings of this study show that there is no significant difference between the direct feedback and indirect feedback.

The results on the construct of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated learners' preference in two experimental groups, for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the indirect group scored higher than the other group in their attitudes toward the errors to be corrected, though it seems close to the other group. Learners' responses to the attitude questionnaire revealed that they highly appreciate teachers' feedback in both groups of direct and indirect. About their preference of and attitude to feedback type, the majority of them (83%) prefer indirect corrective feedback as the most useful technique.

This study can be significant to EFL teachers and curriculum developers as it informs them about the type of WCF, which may be more efficient for intermediate EFL learners. Also, the results of this study can be significant for EFL teachers and learners as it represented an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of previous studies by investigating the effects of WCF on EFL learners' writing performance as a whole, not just focusing on one aspect of it. Repeating this study in other conditions would provide a better understanding of this issue. Teachers can investigate a variety of WCF strategies, which might be appropriate in their own contexts.

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