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The Role of Direct and Indirect Written Corrective Feedback in Improving Iranian EFL Students' Writing Skill

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Abstract

The call for longitudinal evidence on the efficacy of written corrective feedback (WCF) for ESL and EFL writers has been made repeatedly since Truscott (1996) claimed that it is ineffective, harmful, and therefore; should be abandoned. Though controversy continues as to whether error feedback helps L2 student writers to improve the accuracy and overall quality of their writing (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996; Truscott, 1999), most studies on error correction in L2 writing classes have provided evidence that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time. This study was an attempt to investigate the role of direct and indirect written corrective feedback in improving EFL students' writing skill. The participants were sixty pre-intermediate students in "Iranians" institute in Ardabil. Twenty students were in direct-feedback group, twenty students were in indirect-feedback group and twenty students were in no-feedback group. The variance of the number of errors of three classes in session one (pretest, appendix 1) was approximately equal, so their ability in this structure was the same. We gave the students TOEFL tests about definite and indefinite articles in five sessions. There were twenty-two tests and forty blanks in each session. The tests were selected from three books titled: TOEFL Grammar Flash, Rahnama TOEFL, and Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test. Treatments were made on experimental groups through giving feedback and correcting their errors. This was fulfilled during five sessions (one session per week.). Two direct-feedback and indirect-feedback groups received the treatment in terms of giving feedback about their errors while the no-feedback group did not receive any kind of feedback. In correcting the papers of direct-feedback group, we gave them direct feedback on their errors. But in correcting the papers of indirect-feedback group we just underlined the errors. And in correcting no-feedback group we corrected their errors but we did not give them their papers. One-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data for three groups. Group differences were considered significant when $p < .05$. The analysis of data is presented in this paper. Because the time interval of tests was the same and the type of testing (fill in the blanks test) also was the same and variances were equal so we analyzed just two phases of pretest (session1) and posttest (session5).

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1. Introduction

The question of whether teachers should provide feedback on grammar in the writing assignments of ESL/EFL learners, and if so how, has been a matter of considerable debate in the field of SLA. Some researchers (e.g., Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 2007) claim that grammar corrections do not have a positive effect on the development of L2 writing accuracy. According to the most extreme views, such as Truscott (2007), corrective feedback (CF) is seen as not only ineffective but also potentially harmful. In contrast, other researchers (e.g. Ferris, 1999, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003) claim that CF is of value in promoting grammatical accuracy. What makes this issue even more controversial is the variety of strategies for carrying out written CF. It is not just a question of whether CF is effective but also which type is effective.

A range of studies has investigated the extent to which different types of written CF may have an effect on helping L2 writers improve the accuracy of their writing. One of the much discussed contrasts is that between direct and indirect error correction. The main factor distinguishing these two types of CF is the learner's involvement in the correction process. Whereas direct CF consists of an indication of the error and the corresponding correct linguistic form, indirect CF only indicates that an error has been made. Instead of the teacher providing the target form, it is left to the learner to correct his own errors. Indirect correction methods can take different forms that vary in their explicitness (e.g. underlining of errors, coding of errors) (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ferris, 1995)

Advocates of direct CF (e.g. Chandler, 2003) have claimed that the indirect approach might fail because indirect CF provides learners with insufficient information to resolve complex errors (e.g. syntactic errors). Chandler (2003) furthermore argued that, whereas direct CF enables learners to instantly internalize the correct form as provided by their teacher, learners whose errors are corrected indirectly do not know if their own hypothesized corrections are indeed accurate. This delay in access to the target form might level out the potential advantage of the additional cognitive effort associated with indirect CF. Additionally, Bitchener and Knoch (2010b) suggested that only direct CF offers learners the kind of explicit information that is needed for testing hypotheses about the target language.

In contrast, there is research evidence to indicate that indirect feedback (i.e., indicating errors without correcting them) brings more benefits to students' long-term writing development than direct feedback (Ferris, 2003; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982). Ferris (2002) suggests that indirect feedback is generally more appropriate and effective than direct feedback. The danger of direct feedback is that teachers may misinterpret students' meaning and put words into their mouths. Direct feedback is appropriate (Ferris, 2002), however, (1) for beginner students; (2) when errors are 'untreatable', i.e., errors not amenable to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice and (3) when teachers want to draw students' attention to other error patterns which require student correction.

So, should teachers provide corrective feedback on form or should they not? The debate still rages between proponents of both options because research so far has not been able to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that providing corrective feedback is a decisive factor in the attainment of language fluency and accuracy. So, in this paper, we will study the effect of direct and indirect written corrective feedback on L2 female students' writing skill.

Research Question: Do direct and indirect written corrective feedbacks on linguistic errors affect performance accuracy in new pieces of writing?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants: The participants were sixty pre-intermediate students in Iranian institution in Ardabil. All of the students in this study were females. There were three classes and twenty students in each class. We did test of homogeneity of variance in pre-test session to see if the ability of them is equal in article system of English language. They were divided into three groups. Twenty students were in direct-feedback group, twenty students were in indirect-feedback group and twenty students were in no-feedback group.

Table 1

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
1.963	2	57	.150

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups. $p=0.150$, it is bigger than 0.05 so three classes were homogeneous, and we can use ANOVA for analyzing our data.

2.2 Materials:

We gave the students *TOEFL* tests about definite and indefinite articles in five sessions. There were 22 tests and 40 blanks in each session. The tests were selected from three books titled: *TOEFL Grammar Flash- Rahnama TOEFL- Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test*

2.3 Target Structure:

Article system of English language was chosen as the target structure for some reasons. The English article system is claimed to be one of the most difficult structural elements for second-language (L2) learners of English due to its high complexity and its frequency of use. L2 learners have consistent difficulty in its acquisition and sometimes never reach native-like levels of proficiency. (Master (2002)

Master (2002: pp. 331–332) claims that this difficulty stems from three principle facts about the article system: (i) articles (a, an, the and the null article-) are among the most frequently occurring function words in English and this makes rule application difficult in extended discourse; (ii) function words are normally unstressed and, thus, difficult to be discerned by learners of the language, and (iii) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which results in a considerable burden for the learner.

2.4 Procedure:

The participants were sixty pre-intermediate students in "Iranian" institution in Ardabil. There were three classes and twenty students in each class. Because institution rules did not let me merge the students so, I selected one of them as control group and two of them as experimental groups. Twenty students were in direct-feedback group, twenty students were in indirect-feedback group and twenty students were in no-feedback group. The variance of the number of errors of three classes in session one (pretest) was approximately the same, so their ability in this structure was the same.

Two direct-feedback and indirect-feedback groups received the treatment in terms of giving feedback about their errors while the no-feedback group did not receive any kind of feedback. During the term, different tests were given to the students to do about the definite and indefinite articles. In correcting the papers of direct-feedback group, we gave them direct feedback on their errors. But in correcting the papers of indirect-feedback group, we just underlined the errors. And in correcting no-feedback group we corrected their errors but we did not give them their papers. It was done in summer term in five sessions, one test for each session. It took five weeks and one session was held per week.

3. Analysis of Results

Because the time interval of tests was the same and the type of testing (fill in the blank) also was the same and variances were equal so I compared just two phases of pre-test (session1) and post-test (session5). One-way

analysis of variance (one way ANOVA) was employed to find out if the difference between the three groups was significant.

Table 2

Results of ANOVA for three groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3181.433	2	1590.717	129.179	.000
Within Groups	701.900	57	12.314		
Total	3883.333	59			

The result of one way ANOVA, provided in table 2 revealed that the difference between groups was significant. Technically speaking ($F = 129.179, p = .00$) proved to be significant at the 0.05 level in terms of dependent variable.

A post-hoc comparison was run to exactly pin down where the difference lies.

Table 3

Results of LSD for Multiple Comparisons of Means of Groups

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Direct feedback	Indirect feedback	-.9500	1.10969	.396	-3.1721	1.2721
	No-feedback	14.9500*	1.10969	.000	12.7279	17.1721
Indirect feedback	Direct feedback	.9500	1.10969	.396	-1.2721	3.1721
	No-feedback	15.9000*	1.10969	.000	13.6779	18.1221
No-feedback	Direct feedback	-14.9500*	1.10969	.000	-17.1721	-12.7279
	Indirect feedback	-15.9000*	1.10969	.000	-18.1221	-13.6779

The results showed that there was a meaningful difference between the experimental groups who received corrective feedback and the control group who did not receive any feedback. The results revealed that the direct feedback group significantly outperformed the control group (no feedback). The results also indicated such a significant difference between the indirect feedback group and control group (no feedback). However, the difference between the two experimental groups (direct feedback and indirect feedback) as shown in table 2 was not statistically significant.

4. Discussion

Considering the results and interpretations of the tests, the research question (Does the type of corrective feedback (indirect corrective feedback and direct corrective feedback) on linguistic errors determine accuracy performance in new pieces of writing?) can be answered now. The type of corrective feedback affects accuracy (in using articles) in EFL writing.

As the hypothesis of the study, it was predicated that the students who would receive corrective feedback would act differently from those who would not receive corrective feedback. The findings indicated this hypothesis is accepted and the null hypothesis is rejected.

The results of this study are in line with those of some studies (Ferris & Helt 2000; Frantzen, 1995; Lee, 1997; Robb, T., Ross, S. & Shortreed, I. 1986) which reported that the indirect corrective feedback on error helps the learners improve accuracy in their writing. The results however are different from those of other studies which reported that the corrective feedback on error cannot help the learners improve accuracy in their writing (Fazio, 2001; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

When students did not receive any feedback they had no opportunity to practice the structure. But when they received feedback on their errors in each session they had enough opportunity to practice the structure, so they improved their skill in article system of English.

All of the repairs in indirect feedback group were student-generated. However, indirect feedback always encourages the learner to take part in the process of repair, which puts him or her in the appropriate framework to at least acknowledge the suggested solution and, therefore, to notice it. In the direct group, however, the teacher was the one who always provided the correct form. Students had no obligation to draw on their own resources in order to try to come up with the correct grammatical form. In other words, the teacher solves the problem for the learners and the learners are under no compulsion to produce "pushed output" (Swain, 1985).

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study has examined the relative effectiveness of two different types of written corrective feedback on the development of L2 target form knowledge. Despite the fairly limited amount of feedback generated, the results demonstrated higher gains in the development of grammar knowledge for groups who received written corrective feedback in comparison to the control group. This study indicates some support for using indirect and direct feedback to expand learners' grammatical accuracy. Thus, it would be reasonable to allocate some time to the training of teachers in this regard. Some students do not pay attention to the given feedback. We should teach them how to use the given feedback to improve their performance.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Fill in the Blanks Tests of Session One (pre-test)

Decide where you must use the definite article "the", and where you must use the indefinite articles "a" or "an" in the sentences below. If you don't need the article, choose "x".

1. I think we must call doctor.
2. Emily needs new desk in her room.
3. Ben has old bike.
4. Do you know Browns? They live next to us.
5. President Johnson was Vice President to Kennedy.
6. There is new English book on the desk.
7. I arrived in USA last Monday. We left Rome flew over Alps and made a quick stop in London.
8. There we went shopping in Harrods, visited Tower and enjoyed a sunny afternoon in Hyde Park.
9. White House is home of President of US.
10. I like blue T-shirt over there better than red one.
11. Their car does 150 miles hour.
12. Where's USB drive I lent you last week?
13. Do you still live in Bristol?
14. Is your mother working in old office building?
15. Carol's father works as electrician.
16. The tomatoes are 99 pence kilo.
17. What do you usually have for breakfast?
18. Ben has terrible headache.
19. After this tour you have whole afternoon free to explore the city.
20. We often see our cousins over Easter.

Appendix 2: Fill in the Blanks Tests of Session Five (post-test)

Decide where you must use the definite article "the", and where you must use the indefinite articles "a" or "an" in the sentences below. If you don't need the article, choose "x".

1. What do you usually have for breakfast?
2. Ben has terrible headache.
3. After this tour you have whole afternoon free to explore the city.
4. The speed of this car was 160 miles hour.
5. They finished unit.
6. She's reading old comic.
7. My grandmother likes flowers very much.
8. Listen! Dennis is playing trumpet.
9. We often see our cousins over Easter.

10. There is university in this town.
11. Greece is in south.
12. Odeon Cinema is in Green Street.
13. radar images of Venus add details about planet dominated by volcanoes and lava
14. In 1863 and 1864, U.S. Congress passed the National Bank Acts which set up a system of privately owned banks chartered by federal government.
15. energy in tornado is enormous by any set of standards.
16. The people on plane were all Italian.
17. White House is home of President of US.
18. President is head of state in U.S.
19. Plaza Hotel is on the corner of 59th Street and 5th Avenue.
20. world's fastest animal is cheetah, but if birds are included, the fastest of all animals is spine-tailed swift.
21. In human body, blood flows from heart through arteries, and it returns through the veins.
22. I arrived in USA last Monday. We left Rome, flew over Alps and made a quick stop in London.