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Comparing the Outcomes of Two Types of Corrective Feedback on EFL Classes’ Final Exam

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the effects of feedback and its various types on the retention of forms are among the hottest debates in TEFL, it is surprising that EFL learners in most of the Iranian language schools do not receive any corrective feedback on their final exam performances other than a simple grade. Feedback on final exams is mostly neglected in English language schools where the students are just made aware of their score with no further feedback on their errors. This study aims at examining the effect of a partly teacher-, partly peer-feedback on final exam papers on the performance of students in the following semesters. The students in the Experimental group were given their exam papers with the errors just underlined by the teacher, for which the students themselves would find the correct answers in groups of 3 or 4 followed by a conference with the teacher, while the control group was just provided with the corrected papers by the teacher, followed by a possible conference with the teacher to solve any questions the students might have encountered. The results indicated that the experimental groups’ speech and written productions contained less errors in the first sessions of the next semester.

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1. Introduction

The input the learners receive after their utterances can be of two kinds, positive and negative evidence. Negative evidence also known as negative and corrective feedback, has been defined as “an indication to the learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect” (Lightbown and Spada, 1999, p.172). Corrective feedback (CF) can be of different kind, depending on being oral or written, the context and kind of the error made. Generally in oral

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feedback, implicit CF just gives the learner a hint that his/her utterance contained an error, usually restating the utterance with rising/falling intonation (e.g. recast), whereas in explicit CF, the learner is made aware of the exact error he/she has made, usually with the correct form being provided. There is another overlapping dichotomy of input-providing vs. output-prompting CF with implicit vs. explicit CF. As the names suggest, in input-providing, the correct form is provided (either implicitly or explicitly) while in the output-prompting kind, the students are encouraged to find the error and self-correct (Ellis, 2009).

In the case of written CF, the feedback can be either direct or indirect, where the students are given the correct forms or are made aware of the existence of an error and asked to self-correct, respectively. There also exists another kind of feedback mentioned in the literature on this continuum of directness and indirectness, which is located somewhere in between and middle of the continuum, i.e.: metalinguistic feedback. It is defined as the kind of feedback that “contains either comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student’s utterance” where there is no provision of the correct form (Lyster and Ranta, 1997, p.47). Among the types of metalinguistic feedback (comment, information, and question), all try to elicit the correct form from the student, but usually just the information gives some grammatical metalanguage about the error made, the other two do not necessarily provide metalanguage information of the kind of error.

2. Review of literature

The attitude towards the role of feedback has changed a lot along with the changes in the approaches and methodologies in language teaching. Under the influence of Behaviorism and Structuralism, error correction was considered as a necessity in treating learners’ errors. Later in 1970s and 1980s, error correction was put aside as it was believed that it interfered in natural process of language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). It was by the increasingly attribution of the Interaction Approach to language learning and teaching that error correction and feedback found their place in the classrooms. But the debates and disagreements on the usefulness of CF continues to last, resulted by the diverse evidence the researches provided. The studies and papers have been mostly divided into two groups of those providing evidence on the uselessness of CF and those advocating its provision. Among the researchers believing that the CF does not provide any positive effect on second/foreign language learning, (Kepner, 1991; Krashen, 1982; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996, 2004, 2007), Truscott is known as having the most extreme views of using CF in classrooms. In his first paper against the provision of corrective feedback, he not only considered feedback as having very little effect on learning process, but he also insisted on the negative affective influence it might have on the students. By reviewing the papers and research on the in/effectiveness of the CF, he tried to demonstrate that most of the studies attempted to be optimistic about the results (Truscott, 1996). Kepner (1991) also compared the feedback on grammatical structure with feedback on the content of the writings of students, reaching to the conclusion that those who received feedback on content performed better in later writings. Similar result was observed by Shepperd (1992). Despite these studies, and their claims on ineffectiveness and also harmfulness of CF, other scholars have continued to demonstrate how CF can be effective and useful as a tool in helping the learners (e.g. Bitchener and knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 1999, 2006; Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009). The disagreement continues to include those studies comparing the effectiveness of different types of CF (e.g. Bitchener and Knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). In their study, Ferris and Roberts (2001) indicated that indirect feedback is more effective since it engages the students in guided learning, promotes reflection and attention to the form, it also seems to foster long-term retention. Chandler (2003) examined the possible existing differences between direct vs. indirect feedback on students’ writings, concluding that both types were very effective indeed, with having better functions than describing the type of error to the students. Bitchener and Knoch (2009) investigated the effect of different types of feedback (direct CF + written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; Direct CF + written meta-linguistic explanation; only direct CF) on the functional use of the English article system “a” and “the”. With no differences witnessed in the low-intermediate groups receiving different kinds of feedback, they concluded that the provision of CF suffices.

Cited in Ellis et al. (2008) are some points Truscott (1996) mentioned about the limitations and problems some studies suffer from, leading to the invalidity of their results. The first one mentioned is the lack of control group in some of the studies (Ferris 1995, 1997, 2006; Lalande, 1982). The second one is that they “did not examine the effect of CF on new pieces of writings” (p.354). These studies (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris...
and Roberts, 2001) continued to examine the effect on the later drafts of the same writing. The third problem with the studies (e.g. Kepner, 1991) is no inclusion of pre-test to make the groups of learners homogeneous. The current study has tried to exclude these kinds of problems in its process.

The present study aimed at filling the gap existing in Iranian language schools, that of no provision of CF for the final exam papers. Final exams are very important indeed for their nature of being taken at the end of a semester. The scores are always of significance for the learners and teachers since they are the indication of what the students have learned throughout the semester. Moreover, since students’ written utterances in final exam papers are of the controlled type, as they answer the given questions, final exams can be good sources for both teachers and learners. Due to lack of time and no easy access to the teacher, no feedback is provided for the errors made on the final exam papers, thus learners probably make the same mistakes in the next semester. Feedback can be used as a tool to raise the consciousness of the students about their errors, so providing feedback after final exam should be included in the program and process of teaching. This study, thus, compared the effects of two kinds of feedback (direct vs. indirect) on the final exam papers on the performance of the students in the follow-up semester.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Twenty adult students between the ages of 19-24 in Zabansara Language School of Tabriz were invited to take part in the study. Although they were all beginner students, a pretest ensured their homogeneity. The students were randomly divided into two groups of control and experimental groups equally. The portion of the male and female students was equal in both groups, five in each one, all sharing Turkish as their mother tongue, and Persian as their second language. Both classes were taught by the same teacher-researcher.

3.2. The target structure

As the structures covered in the beginner level were simple present and simple past forms, they were taught and practiced during the semester, thus the final exam contained questions mostly of these grammatical points. Moreover, the questions asked at the post-test aimed at eliciting these forms.

3.3. Procedure

After the final exam was taken, the students did not leave the exam as what usually happens in language schools. The students in the experimental group were randomly divided into two groups of three and one group of four. The errors were underlined by the teacher to indicate where they existed but no further explanation was given. The papers were then handed out back to the students; they were asked to find the correct forms individually and if facing an error whose correct form they couldn’t find, they were to solve them in their groups. All the process was monitored by the teacher. When the students finished the editing process, each group had a 3 minutes conference with the teacher to solve the problems they hadn’t been able to find the answers for. However, due to the fact that the questions in the paper had been practiced during the semester, the students were mostly able to give each other the needed feedback.

The students in the control group received their papers corrected by the teacher with the correct forms provided. They were asked to consider their papers carefully and they had the opportunity to have a conference with the teacher to ask the questions they might have encountered.

In the first session of the next semester, which was held after a one week break, an oral quiz was conducted based on the target structure emphasized during the last semester and final exam. The students were also asked to write writings about the given topics (their routine activities compared to a family member and their last holiday) were expected to elicit the intended structures (i.e. simple present, and simple past respectively). Since the students were in the beginner level of proficiency, the writings were not expected to be complicated or more than simple individual clusters of sentences in the target structures.
3.4. Scoring and analysis

In order to compare the effect of direct versus indirect CF on the accuracy of the oral and written productions of the students, the scores from the oral quiz and writings of the students were obtained by the same teacher-researcher. In the oral quiz, the students were asked some regulated questions which would elicit a specific grammatical point, so identifying the obligatory uses of the targeted structures was not necessary. The scores were given on the basis of accuracy of the use of the forms, fluency was not considered due to the level of the students, with the maximum score of 20. In correcting the writings of the students, the teacher only focused on the accuracy of the targeted structures, and ignored other errors witnessed. So the scores in the written part of the quiz are based on the accuracy of the intended structures rather than the overall accuracy of the sentences and their use of vocabulary. The total score for the oral and written quiz was 40. The final exam papers were also corrected with a standard rubric out of 40. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the scores of the final exam and the post-test separately for both control and experimental groups which showed a significant improvement in the scores of the experimental group.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the final exam and post-test of both experimental and control groups. As indicated, the mean scores of the control group in the final exam is one score more than the experimental group. The mean score of the experimental is (34.95), whereas the mean score of the control group is (35.5) out of 40. These scores show the students in the control group had performed better in the final exam than those in the experimental group. However, the mean scores of the post-test indicate the contrary. While the mean score of the experimental group in the post-test is (37.1), the control group’s mean is (36.2). It not only shows that the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group (37.1 for the experimental and 36.2 for the control group), it also demonstrates that the feedback the students in the experimental group received made a significant change in their performances in the following semester (34.95 in the final exam, 37.1 in the post-test). The mean score of the control group had increased as well from (35.55 to 36.2), but the improvement was not as significant as that of experimental group.

Fig. 1 provides a visual representation of the data in the table 1 in order to indicate the effectiveness of the different types of feedback more clearly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Final exam</th>
<th>Post test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>34.95</td>
<td>9.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>35.55</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it is seen in the Fig.1, the performance of the students in the experimental group has been improved significantly. The kind of feedback this group received was indirect CF, along with the peer-feedback if needed. The students in the control group had received direct CF in which they were asked to consider the correct form of their errors.
Although feedback in general, raises consciousness of the learners about the language, more specifically the structures they are learning, it seems that students might get involved in the process of learning if they try to correct their own errors or mistakes. The findings in this study indicate that these students benefited more from indirect feedback. Similar results have been found in Ferris and Roberts (2001). They concluded that indirect CF can lead to consciousness-raising among the students, and foster long-term acquisition. Since the indirect feedback was followed by peer-feedback for compensating the possible lack of knowledge; we can also conclude that the feedback the peers provide can be more effective than the feedback provided by the teacher. Despite the belief that the students prefer their teacher to correct their errors (Ellis, 2009, p.7) and they are unlikely to be able to correct every error, the students in this study welcomed the self-correction process and the result of the post-test supported their recognition. The learners seem to reflect on the forms and structures much more when they are obliged to correct the errors they have made. Contrary to what Bitchener and Knoch (2009) stated, this study provides evidence for the fact that different types of feedback lead to diverse results. Based on the findings of their study, they had pointed out that the provision of feedback is necessary and effective indeed, but the type of it does not influence learners’ uptakes.

Generally, viewing language learning as a process, justifies the provision of feedback. The teachers should consider lots of variables when correcting the students, choosing the best type of feedback based on his previous knowledge of the students and the context of the class.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to prove how much provision of feedback on final exam papers can be of benefit for the students in the following semesters. However, it has a number of limitations to be mentioned. The first limitation is the low number of the participants in the study. The second one is the fact that, although the study was conducted with two groups of experimental and control, it seems the study would have more validity if there was another group involved receiving no feedback at all. Another limitation to be considered in further studies is that the study would be more valid and confident in its results with more number of post-tests, possibly delayed, to calculate the long-term effects of the feedback. Regardless of the limitations, the findings indicated that indirect CF functions better than direct feedback. The results of this study shed some light on the on-going debate on the feedback and its divergent types. It is yet to be believed that error correction and provision of CF depends largely on various variables, e.g. the learners’ age range, the amount of motivation, their personality type, etc.

References


