The Effects of Direct vs. Indirect Corrective Feedback on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

This paper reports a quasi-experimental study investigating the effect of different types of teacher written corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy. To do so, 80 Iranian learners of English were assigned into three groups direct corrective feedback (DF), indirect corrective feedback (IF), and no feedback (NF). During eight treatment sessions, the students in the DF and IF treatment groups received comprehensive direct or indirect corrective feedback while the control group did not receive any feedback. After 10 sessions of treatment, the post-test of writing was administered to check the learners' writing development. Results revealed that DF group significantly outperformed the other two groups.
Keywords: corrective feedback, direct feedback, feedback, indirect feedback, writing skill

INTRODUCTION

In terms of skills, the most difficult thing to do in language learning is probably producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing. It is what most native speakers never master. The review of years of conceptual and empirical work on writing clarifies its importance in the domain of second language writing instruction.

The skills involved in writing are highly complex ranging from higher level skills of planning and organizing to lower skills of spelling, pronunciation, word choice, and so on. As it is in many educational settings, teaching writing is examination-oriented, with accuracy as the most important criterion of evaluating students. Thus, correctness in writing is highly valued in these settings and a main concern of many L2 writing teachers is to help students produce accurate writings. One of highly debatable attempts done by teachers is providing corrective feedback (CF). Feedback, an inherent part and an important element in instructional design, has a strong foundation in major learning theories. The practice of instructional design has been influenced by major learning theories such as behavioral learning theory, cognitive information processing theory,

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and Gagné's theory of instruction (1985), and all these theories regard feedback as a crucial part in learning and instruction, including language learning and language instruction.

The vital role of feedback in students 'learning is evident in language learning and language instruction, including writing in English as a second or foreign language context. Students gain benefits from sufficient writing practice and revisions on their drafts to produce a final piece of writing. In these processes, students often rely on feedback either from a teacher, peer, or self. Feedback that students receive from a source, or a combination of sources, provides them with information about what is good and what needs to be improved so that they can fit in and use the feedback in their revisions and in the final products of their writing.

Regardless of recent research findings that found evidence in support of written corrective feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, et al., 2008), some questions still remain to be investigated the one of which is the focus of the researcher in this study. The investigator endeavors to investigate whether corrective feedbacks, more specifically direct or indirect, can enhance students 'writing. It is to mention that, according to what have been studied in this domain, direct corrective feedback might have more effect on students 'writing accuracy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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 makes 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. Students can then relate these clues to the context where an error exists, determine the area of the error, and correct the error based on their informed knowledge. Indeed, facilitating students with indirect feedback to discover the correct form can be very instructive to students (Lalande, 1982). It increases students' engagement and attention to forms and allow them to problem-solve which many researchers agree to be beneficial for long term learning improvement (Ferris, 2003a; Lalande, 1982).

Research on second language acquisition shows that indirect feedback is viewed as more preferable to direct feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen et

al., 2009) because it engages students in the correction activity and helps them reflect to upon it (Ferris& Roberts, 2001) which may help students foster their long-term acquisition of the target language (O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006) and make them engaged in "guided learning and problem- solving" in correcting their errors. In addition, many experts agree that indirect feedback has the most potential for helping students in developing their second language proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge and has more benefits than direct feedback on students' long-term development (Ferris, 2003a), especially for more advanced students (O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006).

Lalande's (1982) study, which involved 60 German foreign language learners, compared two different treatments of error correction: direct correction in a traditional manner by providing correct forms to be incorporated by students into their written text, and indirect correction in the form of "guided learning strategies" by providing students with systematic marking using an error correction code. Students were asked to interpret these codes, correct their mistakes, and rewrite the entire essay upon corrective feedback. Results of his study showed that students receiving indirect corrective feedback made significantly greater gains as compared to students who received direct corrective feedback from the teacher. Chandler's (2003) study involving 31 ESL university undergraduate students shows that indirect feedback with underlining on students' errors is a preferred alternative to direct correction in a multiple-draft setting as indirect feedback engages the students in the correction process and engages them more cognitively during the process. It is important to note that, in her study where students were required to make corrections, both direct feedback and indirect feedback with underlining of errors resulted in significant increase in accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing over the semester. An additional finding of Chandler's study is that if students did not revise their writing based on teacher feedback about their errors, getting their errors marked was comparable to receiving no feedback as their correctness did not increase. Similarly, the study conducted by Ferris (2006), involving 92 ESL students in the United States receiving several types of direct feedback and indirect feedback, shows that there was a strong relationship between teacher's indirect feedback and successful student revisions on the subsequent drafts of their essays.

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.

Several studies employing the use of direct feedback on student errors have been conducted to determine its effect on student writing accuracy with variable results. Robb et al. (1986) conducted a study involving 134 Japanese EFL students using direct feedback and three types of indirect feedback strategies. Results of their study showed no significant differences across different types of feedback but the results suggested that direct feedback was less time- consuming on directing students' attention to surface errors. The study conducted by Semke (1984) involving 141 university students of German as a foreign language in the United States using different feedback strategies (writing comments and questions rather than corrections, marking all errors and supplying the correct forms, combining positive comments and corrections, and indicating errors by means of a code and requiring students to find corrections and then rewrite the assignment) and found that student progress was increased by writing practice alone rather than by error correction. She also found that there was no significant difference among the treatment groups.

On the other hand, Chandler (2003) reported the results of her study involving 31 ESL students on the effects of direct and indirect feedback strategies on students' revisions. She found that direct feedback was best for producing accurate revisions and was preferred by the students as it was the fastest and easiest way for them to make revisions. The most recent study on the effects of direct corrective feedback involving 52 ESL students in New Zealand was conducted by Bitchener and Knoch (2010) where they compared three different types of direct feedback (direct corrective feedback, written, and oral metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only) with a control group. They found that each treatment group outperformed the control group and there was no significant difference in effectiveness among the variations of direct feedback in the treatment groups.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the problem mentioned above, this study tries to answer the following questions:

Q1. Does corrective feedback (direct or indirect) have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?

Q2. Does direct feedback have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?

Q3. Does indirect feedback have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?

Q4. Do students at direct corrective feedback group write more accurate than students at indirect feedback group?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H01: Corrective feedback (direct or indirect) has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy.

H02: Direct feedback has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy.

H03: Indirect feedback has no effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy.

H04: Students at direct corrective feedback group write more accurate than students in direct feedback group.

METHOD

Design of the Study

To conduct the present study, quasi-experimental design was used; in which, according to Mackey & Gass (2005) both the control and experimental groups received the same pre-test and post-test, however, the control group did not receive the same treatment between the tests.

Participants

The participants of the study were 80 EFL students (both male and female) who were selected out of 120 with the age range of 18 to 30 from a total population of 250 students studying English Translation at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch. They were all native speakers of Persian. Participants of this study were students who were enrolled in Advanced Writing classes. These participants received a standard version of NELSON Test which was previously piloted among 30 EFL learners with similar characteristics to that of the main participants of the study to check its reliability and then the test was implemented for the purpose of homogenizing the sample of the study and to make sure that the study enjoys homogeneous and identical participants with respect to the participants' English language proficiency. The students who scored one standard deviation (1SD) above and below the mean formed the main participants of the study.

The researcher hopefully could select 80 participants from among a total number of 120 learners studying in the intermediate-level. The selection of participants and groups was non-randomly done by the researcher. The participants of the study were divided into three homogeneous groups to form two experimental groups (direct and indirect corrective feedback) and one control group. The total number of students in experimental group was 50 (25 in each groups), while there were 30 participants in the control group. Then, writing pre-test was administered to all participants to assure the homogeneity of the subjects in three different groups prior the beginning of the study. Following the fifth session of the semester, the learners in five classes received different

types of treatment (direct and indirect corrective feedback) and no treatment. The students who did not meet the criterion also participated in the study but their scores were not included in the related analyses.

Instruments

Nelson test

The Nelson test was employed as a language proficiency test to homogenize the prospective students for the study. The Nelson employed in the study was a standard one released by Cambridge University Exam Center which was administered for the purpose of homogeneity. The test included 50 items: vocabulary and grammar.

Pre and Post-test Instruments

The second instrument to be used in the pre-treatment level was a pretest of writing (selected from among the standard topics of TOEFL) which was given to the participants selected after the proficiency test. The writings of the learners were corrected by two raters based on the rubrics presented by ETS (2000). This revealed how well the learners were familiar with the concept of writing before the treatment began. The content validity of the prompts given to the learners in the writing section was checked with two experts who are teaching writing at Tonekabon Islamic Azad University and inter-rater reliability of the learners' writings was also calculated.

The posttest of writing was another task selected from among the standard writing topics of TOEFL. The writing task was checked for its content validity by two experts before it was given to the students.

Procedure

The first phase of this study was the pilot phase during which 30 intermediate students with similar features to the target sample took the sample Nelson used for homogenizing the participants. In the second phase of the study the participants were selected. First, the piloted Nelson was administered to 120 intermediate students to homogenize them regarding their general English proficiency. Out of 120 students, 80 students whose scores fell one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the main participants of the study.

The selected participants were non-randomly assigned to three groups, two experimental and one control groups with 50 students in experimental groups and 30 ones in control group respectively. It's worth mentioning that due to the nature of the convenient non-random selection of the samples the discarded students were allowed to attend the classes, but their scores on the pretest and posttests were not included in the study.

Then the treatment period began and was continued for 10 sessions. The whole semester included fifteen weeks and the learners attended the class one day a week, each session lasted for 90 minutes in all groups. Considering the fact that the syllabus of

the university had to be covered during the semester, ten sessions of 20 minutes were allocated to the experiment in the experimental groups. Therefore, the classes of control and experimental groups received the same hours of instruction and practice. Also the researcher herself taught both groups.

Both control and experimental groups used the same course book, materials, passages and topics. Three different treatments were included in this study; two experimental treatments: (a) direct corrective feedback (DF), (b) indirect corrective feedback (IF), and (c) no feedback (NF). In the first session of treatment the investigator explained about the articles, prepositions, and past tense verbs for all groups. Then students were given 8 TOEFL writing topics, one topic for each session. After that, they were required to write a paragraph at home and bring their papers the following session.

Students in the Direct and Indirect treatment groups received comprehensive direct or indirect corrective feedback respectively on the paragraph they created. Whereas direct corrective feedback took the form of identifying both the error and the correct form, indirect corrective feedback only consisted of an indication of the error and its category. All the papers were collected and corrected. For direct corrective feedback group, the researcher directly corrected the errors. For the indirect corrective feedback, she just marked the errors.

In the control group, the learners received almost no specific training on the corrective feedback techniques; however, they enjoyed the same materials, course books; and other traditional writing strategies were employed to help them develop their writing ability. It was tried to keep the situation in all classes the same and the only focused difference was the presence of feedback in the experimental groups. After 10 sessions of treatment, the post-test of writing was administered to check the learners' writing development. In this phase, both control and experimental groups were asked to take a writing test. Then the data was gathered and analyzed through SPSS version 21 and the results and findings were reported.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the three groups on the pretest of writing. The second experimental group (M = 16.26, SD = 1.75) showed the highest mean on the pretest of writing. This was followed by the first experimental (M = 16.04, SD = 1.81) and control (M = 15.83, SD = 1.98) groups.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Pretest of Writing by Groups

	N	M	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Exp1	25	16.04	1.814	.363	15.29	16.79
Exp2	25	16.26	1.751	.350	15.54	16.98
Control	30	15.83	1.984	.362	15.09	16.57
Total	80	16.03	1.846	.206	15.62	16.44

Based on the results displayed in Table 2 (F (2, 77) = .35, P > .05, ω^2 = .016 representing a weak effect size) it can be concluded that there were not any significant differences between the means of the three groups on pretest of writing. Thus it can be concluded that they enjoyed the same level of writing ability prior to the main study.

Table 2. One way ANOVA on pre-test by groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.485	2	1.243	.359	.700
Within Groups	266.687	77	3.463		
Total	269.172	79			

A one-way A NOVA was run to compare the three groups' means on the writing accuracy in order to probe the effects of different types of feedback on the improvement of their writing accuracy. As displayed in Table 3; the direct feedback (M = 28.24, SD = 2.85) had the highest mean on the post-test of writing accuracy. This was followed by the indirect feedback (M = 24.64, SD = 2.62) and control (M = 19.38, SD = 2.60) groups.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Writing Accuracy by Groups

	N		Std Deviation	Std. Error	95%Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
DF	5	8.24	2.858	572	27.06	29.42	25	35
IF	5	4.64	2.628	526	23.56	25.72	19	29
Control	0	9.38	2.609	476	8.41	20.36	14	24
Total	0	3.79	4.577	512	22.78	24.81	14	35

The results of one-way ANOVA (F (2, 77) = 75.44, p < .05, ω^2 = .65 representing a large effect size) (Table 4) indicated that there were significant differences between the three groups' means on the post-test of writing accuracy. Thus, the major first null-hypothesis as corrective feedback did not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy was rejected.

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA; Post-test of Writing Accuracy by Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1095.685	2	547.843	75.441	.000
Within Groups	559.162	77	7.262		
Total	1654.847	79			

The results of the post-hoc Scheffe's tests (Table5) indicated that;

A: The direct feedback group (M = 28.24) significantly outperformed the control group (M = 19.38) on the post-test of writing accuracy (MD = 8.85, p < .05). Thus the second null-hypothesis was rejected.

B: The indirect feedback group (M = 24.64) significantly outperformed the control group (M = 19.38) on the post-test of writing accuracy (MD = 5.25, p < .05). Thus the third null-hypothesis was rejected.

C: The direct feedback group (M = 28.24) significantly outperformed the indirect feedback group (M = 24.64) on the post-test of writing accuracy (MD = 3.60, p < .05). Thus the fourth null-hypothesis was rejected.

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
DF	IF	3.600*	62	000	1.70	5.50
	Control	8.857*	730	000	7.04	10.68
IF	DF	-3.600*	762	000	-5.50	-1.70
	Control	5.257*	730	000	3.44	7.08
Control	DF	-8.857*	730	000	-10.68	-7.04
	IF	-5.257*	730	000	-7.08	-3.44

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

It should be mentioned that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's F = .23, p > .05) (Table 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the results of this study revealed, in contrast to Truscott and Hsu (2008) who believe that successful error reduction is not related to learning, there was empirical evidence in this study that teacher written corrective feedback was effective in reducing students' errors on grammatical items focused in the study, not only in subsequent revised writing but also in the production of a new writings. The findings of the current study clearly indicate that students in the feedback treatment groups were proven to have learned effectively from teacher corrective feedback to identify different types of errors and to appropriately react to teacher feedback by incorporating teacher feedback in subsequent revised writings and by applying grammatical rules they learned from teacher feedback, including explicit corrective comments on grammatical, in writing. Thus, students in the feedback treatment groups reduced their grammatical errors. The results of this study may provide empirical evidence that the reduction of errors in students' writings was in fact a result of learning from teacher feedback that they received the treatment and they applied in their activities.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of this study can be used to inform ESL/EFL teachers and researchers interested in applying or investigating teacher various types of written corrective feedback strategies, including written corrective feedback, as used in this study. The finding that participants in the treatment groups in this study gained in grammatical accuracy in subsequent revised drafts, as well as in writings, may encourage teachers and researchers in the EFL field to provide corrective feedback with confidence that

students' writings can benefit from corrective feedback. At the end of this study indicates that teacher feedback may have a long-term impact on student writing.

This study refers to two types of written corrective feedback, namely direct and indirect feedbacks and their effect on EFL writing. The findings of the study will have some implications for material developers and syllabus designers; they can improve learners' writing ability. So teaching beyond use of feedbacks can be a part of some language courses. Language books should enable learners to not only understand those materials and use them as appropriately as possible, but also they can teach them how to use those feedbacks. Also it is very useful for teachers; they can use these feedbacks for teaching, and they can enable their students to become better writers and also readers.

One of the reasons for conducting every study in the field of teaching is to come across findings that could feed into classroom practice, and provide guidance for students and teachers as well as material designers and syllabus planners. Having the findings at hand, one can suggest sound implications as follow:

1) The first implication is for students. The findings of this study are helpful to students in demonstrating the importance of employing feedbacks. Knowledge of one's errors directly or indirectly may be beneficial in that the learner will be aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses in terms of learning experiences. Therefore, future learning may be enriched if the learners maintain their strengths and improve their weaknesses.

2) Teachers should keep in mind that students would like to be evaluated on the basis of their progress and their improvement in English. They get satisfaction from their achievement in English if they see they can use the language effectively in real-life communications.

3) Teachers should help students discover their own learning errors via using different kinds of feedbacks and provide constructive feedback about the advantages and disadvantages of various strategies. Also, teachers should encourage learners' development, while at the same time creating opportunities for students to try different ways of learning.

4) The outcomes of the study can contribute to materials and syllabus design to indicating which kind of feedbacks are most likely to be used by students.

5) Moreover, researchers may make use of the results of the present study to conduct some pieces of research as to the effect of variables such as gender, age, and cultural influences on the students' when the use different kid of feedbacks.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is a fact that no research is complete in its own right. The more answers are obtained the more questions will naturally be raised. The domain of feedbacks is too vast to be explored in one single study. It is therefore reasonable to end this study by suggesting some topics related for future studies.

 1. With all the findings of the study described above, further research is recommended in the context of application of different strategies of teacher corrective feedback in improving ESL/EFL students' writing in terms of grammatical accuracy and writing quality in general.

2. Last but not least, the present study used explicit corrective comments approach in providing feedback and was focused on the use of English articles, prepositions, and past tense verbs. Additional research may be needed in regards to the extent of explicitness and coverage of the comments on the grammatical rules or linguistic features of students' writing. Also, additional research may be needed in regards to other grammatical items or other aspects of writing such as content, organization, vocabulary, or mechanic. This new study would help clarify whether the effectiveness of explicit corrective comments can be translated into different areas of grammar or other aspects of writings.

3. Further investigation based on larger corpora from different institutes will contribute to the creation of more reliable research.

4. This research focuses on the writing skill; the others can study the other language skills and language components, such as listening, reading, and speaking.

5. In this research, researcher did not attend to the gender of learners separately; the investigations based on males and females separately will be more reliable.

6. The focus of the current research was on the EFL learners, so the other researchers can turn their attention to the ESL learners for new information.

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