



The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on the Accuracy of English Article Usage in L2 Writing

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Abstract

The present study is a quantitative and experimental survey that measured the accuracy of using two functions of English article system, namely definite article “the” and indefinite articles “a” and “an” during eight weeks using pre-test and post-test. Sixty students including 20 in each group participated in the study to determine which kind of teacher written corrective feedback affects writing accuracy more. The control group did not receive WCF on specific grammar errors; the first experimental group received direct WCF; the second experimental received indirect WCF. The results of the study demonstrated that direct WCF affected students’ performance more.

Keywords: written corrective feedback, accuracy, definite article, indefinite article, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The role feedback in correcting L2 students’ erroneous utterances has been the subject of an extensive debate in the second language acquisition literature. The present study primarily focused on the role of direct and indirect (WCF) in case of writing accuracy of Iranian intermediate learners with the purpose of determining which kind of these kinds of error treatment is more helpful in terms of improving wring accuracy of students in general and using definite and indefinite articles , in particular.

With indirect feedback, the teacher brings students’ attention to an error using various strategies including highlighting or underlining errors, showing the number of errors, confirmation checks and request for clarification (Bitchener, 2008).An alternative for the above-mentioned indirect WCF method is metalinguistic feedback that identifies the nature of an error. This method of WCF combines elements of both direct and indirect CF with the purpose of saving students’ time and frustration while still pushing them to take initiative to reflect and to rely on their own knowledge, which might lead to student-generated repair (Huiying Sun, 2013). One common method of providing

metalinguistic feedback is through the use of editing codes or editing symbols. Another type of metalinguistic WCF is to provide student writers with a set of criteria in the form of a help sheet (e.g., the so-called error awareness sheet in Lalande, 1980).

In Bitchener and Knoch's (2010) study, one group received WCF in the form of written metalinguistic explanation along with an example of the targeted grammar feature. They described this as a form of direct WCF. However, since direct error corrections were not provided, the author of this dissertation would classify it as indirect WCF because students could not simply copy the correction, rather they still had to infer from the examples and expectations. Rezazadeh, Tavakoli, and Eslami Rasekh (2015) investigated the effects of two types of written feedback - direct corrective feedback (DCF) and metalinguistic explanation (ME) - on Iranian EFL learners' implicit and explicit knowledge of English definite and indefinite articles. Results indicated that both treatments were effective in the immediate posttests. However, the ME proved to have longer lasting effects than the DCF as the improvement of both knowledge types.

The present study hence, aims to examine and compares ESL learners' and teachers' opinions and preferences for different types and amounts of WCF, and also explores the reason why they prefer particular types and amount of WCF.

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to find out which type of WCF, namely direct WCF and indirect WCF is more effective in terms of Iranian learners at intermediate level. This section attempts to present the comprehensive methodology of the present research and presented participants, research design, instruments that were used in the study, data collection procedures, and data analyses with regard to the research questions.

Participants

Eighty-five intermediate students with the age range of 19-32 who were learning English as a foreign language in Iran served as the participants of the current study. Firstly, a Nelson English Language Proficiency Test, version 200 A, (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was given to the learners to find out whether they are at the same level of proficiency or not. The obtained mean and standard deviation were ($M = 29.09$ and $SD = 8.99$). Based on the test results, the researcher selected the true intermediate level participants to enhance the precision of the results and to control as many as extraneous factors as possible.

Instruments

Proficiency test

Nelson Battery-Section 200 A (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used to estimate the proficiency level of the subjects. The test was quite reliable for this purpose. It included 50 multiple choice items on cloze tests, structure, and vocabulary.

Pretest

The second instrument used in the study was the written English test which served as the pretest in order to determine whether three groups are homogeneous with regard to their writing skill. In fact, a writing topic assigned to the participants in the three groups. The topic of the pretest, as well as the corresponding instructions, time allocation, number of words, and additional explanations were adopted from Kaplan IELTS 2009-2010 Edition. The students were given 20 minutes to write about 150 words about the pretest topic.

Posttest

When the treatment sessions were over for the experimental groups, another topic was given to the students to write about. Again, the topic of the posttest, as well as the corresponding instructions, time allocation, number of words, and additional explanations were adopted from Kaplan IELTS 2009-2010 Edition. The students were given 20 minutes to write about 150 words about the posttest topic.

Procedure

The present study included a sample of 60 Iranian intermediate EFL learners who were homogeneous in terms of language proficiency levels, in general, and writing ability, in particular. In order to arrive at this sample, the researcher, employing cluster sampling, selected 85 intermediate-level learners studying at Navid English language institute, Shiraz, Iran. To ensure language proficiency homogeneity, these learners sat a proficiency test, i.e., Nelson proficiency Test version (200A). From among 85 students, 60 of them met the homogeneity criteria and were selected to serve as the participant based on the result of Nelson language proficiency test. Then, students were randomly divided into three groups. From among 60 intermediate learners, 20 of the learners formed control group, 20 of them formed the experimental group (1) who had direct written corrective feedback, and 20 learners were randomly assigned to experimental group (2) who had indirect written corrective feedback. Further, to make sure the participants, in the three groups, did not possess statistically significant different abilities in terms of writing proficiency, a pretest was given, requiring the participants to write in-class one-paragraph expository compositions of about 150 words on a specific topic within a time limit of 20 minutes. 60 compositions were then scored by two raters in order to increase the reliability of scoring and to avoid any bias on the part of raters. To be more precise, two raters who were female (age 30 to 32) and M.A. holders in TEFL were chosen to correct the writings. They had 6 years' experience of teaching. Furthermore, they were provided with scoring procedure instructions to ensure consistent scoring procedure.

In the experimental phase of study, students in three groups were given eight topics to write about during eight weeks of instruction. Students in control group worked based on traditional way of learning and practicing writing skill. Participants in experimental

group (1) received direct WCF on their grammatical errors while learners in other experimental group (2) received indirect WCF.

In total, 10 topics were given to the students in three groups. Two of which served as the pretest and the posttest topics which the participants were required to write about. In order for the results to be comparable, the testing condition and the test rubrics were made as uniform as feasible for three groups.

When the treatment was over, a posttest was administered to all participants to determine which type of feedback, namely direct WCF or indirect WCF is more effective regarding writing ability of the students, in general and the accurate using of definite and indefinite articles, in particular. The topic of posttest was also selected from Kaplan IELTS 2009-2010 Edition and students were given 20 minutes to write about the selected topic. Again, the compositions were scored on the scale of 20 to 80 by two raters.

After collecting data, the researcher by comparing the mean scores in both pretest and posttest for three groups tried to discover whether significant difference exist among the three group, if yes, to shed light on the most effective sort of feedback in terms of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

RESULTS

The study primary investigated the answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Which type of teacher corrective feedback on writing accuracy is more effective?

RQ2: Dose accuracy of using definite and indefinite articles change during eight weeks of error treatment?

With regard to the aforementioned research questions the following hypotheses were developed:

Initially, Nelson English Language Test (version 200 A) was applied to estimate language proficiency of the students. As Table 1 demonstrates, the mean and standard deviation for Nelson test were ($M=29.02$, $SD=8.79$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Nelson test (Intermediate level)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Scores	85	14.00	45.00	29.02	8.79

In order to figure out whether the data of Nelson Test is normally distributed, we conducted Kolmlgrov-Smirnoff non-parametric test. The sig showed .07 which illustrates that the scores are normally distributed because p value was higher than 0.05, $p > 0.05$.

Table2. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

	N	85
Normal Parameters	Mean	29.0235
	Std. Deviation	8.78984
Extreme Differences	Absolute	.140
	Positive	.140
	Negative	-.071
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.295
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.07

Among 85 intermediate students, 60 learners qualified to participate in the study. Later, the researcher administered a pretest to investigate whether students were at the same level of writing ability. The results of the participants' performance in the three groups on the pretest are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the performance of the three groups on the pretest

Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Control Group	20	45.45	9.74
Experimental 1	20	41.25	7.85
Experimental 2	20	43.25	11.99
Total	60	43.31	9.95

Moreover, to understand whether the data of pretest scores are normally distributed, we run Kolmogorov-Smirnov non-parametric test (as nonparametric test examines normality of distribution of scores, Pallant, 2005). The Sig. for control group, experimental group 1, and experimental group 2 in pretest showed .85, .56, and .095, respectively. Again, since the p value was greater than 0.05, the scores turned out to be normally distributed. Thus, parametric ANOVA was used to analyze the data. Table 4.4 manifests the results of this normality test.

Table 4. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Pretest		Control Group	Experimental Group1	Experimental Group2
	N	20	20	20
Normal Parameters	Mean	45.45	41.25	43.25
	SD	9.74	7.85	11.99
Extreme Differences	Absolute	.137	.168	.277
	Positive	.088	.088	.277
	Negative	-.137	-.168	-.174
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.611	.788	1.23
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.850	.564	.095

Since we had three groups one-way ANOVA was conducted to discover any significant differences among the three groups. According to Pallant (2005), Levene's test tests whether the variance in scores is the same for each of the three groups and gives information about the homogeneity of variance in the three groups. Since the significance value (Sig.) for Levene's test here is .083 which is *greater* than .05, the

assumption of homogeneity has *not been* violated. Table 5 shows the result of Levene's test.

Table 5. Levene's test of equality of error variances

Levene Statistics	df1	df2	Sig.
2.60	2	57	.083

Levene's test for homogeneity of variances tested whether the variance in scores was the same for each of the three groups. As Table 5 shows, the significance value (Sig.) for Levene's test was greater .05. In the current study the Sig. value is .083; therefore, the homogeneity of variances assumption was not violated. On the other hand, as Table 6 illustrates, there is no statistically significant difference among the three groups mean scores on the pre-test. Thus, the three intermediate groups were not statistically different from each other on the pre-test.

Table 6. Multiple comparisons of the three groups on the pretest

(I) participants	(J) participants	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	Experimental1	4.20000	3.16518	.420	-3.7557	12.1557
	Experimental2	2.20000	3.16518	.786	-5.7557	10.1557
Experimental1	Control	-4.20000	3.16518	.420	-12.1557	3.7557
	Experimental2	-2.00000	3.16518	.820	-9.9557	5.9557
Experimental2	Control	-2.20000	3.16518	.786	-10.1557	5.7557
	Experimental1	2.00000	3.16518	.820	-5.9557	9.9557

Thus, both inferential and descriptive statistical procedures demonstrated that students had the same level of language proficiency, in general, and writing skill, in particular in the pretest.

The main concern of the research questions of the present study was to probe whether using direct WCF vs. indirect WCF had any significant impacts on the Iranian intermediate EFL students' performance in writing skill, in general, and accurate using of English articles, in particular.

The researcher administered the posttest, one week after the treatment, to compare the students' performances in the three groups in both pretest and posttest and to shed light on the fact that which kind of feedback is more influential in terms of intermediate students' writing skill. To this end, the researcher, firstly, determined inter-rater reliability indices for the scoring of the compositions by computing the correlations between two raters' awarded grades. The reliability index computed as to be 0.86. Then, the descriptive statistics for the three groups was run. Table7 shows the results of the three intermediate groups' performance on pre and posttests.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of the three groups' performance on the pre and posttests

Group	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control group	Pretest	45.45	9.74
	Posttest	52.65	6.49
Experimental G1	Pretest	41.25	7.85
	Posttest	69.00	6.92
Experimental G2	Pretest	43.25	11.99
	Posttest	60.30	3.61

At first, to test the homogeneity of the participants in three groups the Levene's test was run. The results of this application showed that the three groups were homogeneous because Sig (.20) was higher than .05 level of significance.

Table 8. Levene's test of equality of error variances

Levene Statistics	df1	df2	Sig.
1.64	2	57	.202

With regard to the research questions whether there is any significant difference between Control group, Experimental Group 1 and Experimental Group 2 in terms of writing ability of the students, a close study of Table 9 reveals that the *F*-ratio (38.90) is greater than the critical *F* (3.15). Also, Sig (*P*-value =.000 is lower than α (0.05). Therefore, it can be concluded that three intermediate groups are significantly different in terms of their writing skill and appropriate using of articles in English.

Table 9. ANOVA for three intermediate groups' performance on the posttest

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean squares	F	Sig.
Between group	2676.90	2	1338.45	38.90	.000
Within group	1960.75	57	34.399		
Total	4637.65	59			

Although the *F*-value of 38.90 demonstrates significant differences among the three groups on the posttest, the multiple comparisons on the post hoc test (Table 10) was run to show the exact place of differences among the three groups' mean scores.

Table 10. Multiple comparisons on the performance of the three groups on the posttest

(I) participants	(J) participants	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	Experimental1	-16.35000*	1.85470	.000	-21.0118	-11.6882
	experimental2	-7.65000*	1.85470	.001	-12.3118	-2.9882
experimental1	Control	16.35000*	1.85470	.000	11.6882	21.0118
	experimental2	8.70000*	1.85470	.000	4.0382	13.3618
experimental2	Control	7.65000*	1.85470	.001	2.9882	12.3118
	experimental1	-8.70000*	1.85470	.000	-13.3618	-4.0382

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

Contrary to the results of the pretest, the mean performances of the three groups showed significant differences on the posttest. On the other hand, students in experimental group 1 who received direct written corrective feedback performed better than the other two groups, followed by students in experimental group 2 who received indirect feedback on their grammatical errors especially appropriate use of article “the” and articles “a” and “an”. Finally, students in control group who worked and practiced based on traditional method of learning writing obtained the lowest mean scores compared to their counterparts in two experimental groups.

Although we know that our groups differ, we don't know the exact location of different. Thus, in order to discover where these differences occur, Post-hoc comparison was run. On the other hand, since here exist more than two levels to our independent variables, Post-hoc seems to be the best choice because this test systematically compares each of our pairs of groups, and indicate whether there is a significant difference in the means of each (Pallant, 2005). To be more precise, Post-hoc comparison demonstrated that the mean score for experimental group 1 (Direct written corrective feedback) ($M=69.00$, $SD=6.92$) was significantly different from experimental group 2 (indirect written corrective feedback) ($M=60.30$, $SD=3.61$), and control group ($M=52.65$, $SD=6.49$). In fact, There was a significant difference between experimental group one and control group ($P=.001<.05$) and experimental group 2 and control group ($.001<.05$). There was also significant difference between two experimental groups ($P=.000<.05$). As it is evident, students who received direct written feedback obtained higher score on the posttest compared to those students who received indirect written corrective feedback. Thus, it can safely be claimed that direct written corrective feedback was more influential than indirect written corrective feedback regarding writing skill and appropriate use of article “the” and articles “a” and “an” in terms of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

To sum up, among the three groups, direct WCF scored the highest followed by indirect WCF and control group, respectively. It suggests that the use of direct corrective feedback during teaching writing has an important effect on the intermediate student's performance and it is more effective than indirect corrective feedback for intermediate students. In fact, students who received direct WCF while trying to learn writing obtained the highest mean score ($M=69.00$), followed by those students who received indirect WCF ($M=60.30$), and finally control group who did not receive any sorts of feedback on their writing ($M=52.45$). Thus, the two aforementioned null hypotheses were rejected and type of feedback had effects on writing ability of Iranian intermediate students' writing skill, in general, and their accurate use of definite and indefinite articles, in particular. Teachers should be aware of this fact that it is more effective to provide intermediate learners with direct corrective feedback in order to help them to understand better and eliminate their errors.

DISCUSSION

With regard to the primary purpose of this study, and as tables and diagrams indicate, the null hypotheses were safely rejected at the 0.05 level of significance. In other words,

the analysis of obtained data strongly suggested that using direct written corrective feedback during teaching writing and correcting grammatical errors of the students promoted writing skill. The findings of this study are in accordance with Ellis' (2009) statement that "Direct CF has the advantage that it provides learners with explicit guidance about how to correct their errors" (p.99). The present study also showed that intermediate students profited from direct CF more because they may not know correct form or they may not be able to self-correct themselves.

The finding of the current research generally lent support to the results of previous studies (Archibald, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999) that error correction has positive impacts and helps students to improve their writing accuracy.

The current study also agrees with sheen's (2007) finding that direct CF is better than indirect corrective feedback for learners at elementary or intermediate level because they are not proficient enough to detect the correct form and they may skip the errors at lower level.

The finding of the present study disagrees with Lalande's (1982) study which found no significant difference between direct and indirect corrective feedback. Contrary to the claim of Ferris and Roberts (2001) that indirect feedback is more helpful, in the present students benefited more from direct feedback. In another study, Robb et al. (1986) also asserted no substantial difference exist between direct and indirect feedback. The result of current study also was in contrast with Norrozizadeh (2009) study which indicated indirect feedback stimulated students to become more autonomous, thereby it leads to long term learning.

CONCLUSION

The research probed the role of two prevalent sorts of written corrective feedback on the enhancing writing accuracy of Intermediate learners, the results demonstrated that there is significance difference in the enhancing of writing ability for the group who received directive written corrective feedback in comparison with the other two groups. This study indicates some supports for using directive written corrective feedback to expand learners' writing accuracy. Thus, it is noteworthy to bear in mind that teacher should be trained in this regard and they should be taught how to use this kind of feedback to improve students' writing performance.

The findings of the current research will provide teachers with an analytical perspective about the different types of written corrective feedback that have influence on students' writing. This study could provide some guidelines for teachers to choose the best type of corrective feedback.

From a theoretical point of view, a research of this type could help teachers worldwide to grasp a more comprehensive idea of their field. It is of special help to beginner teachers who want to choose the best type of feedback for their students.

The results of this study can more helpful to English language teaching domain where there is debate in domain of teaching and teaching method.

The limitations of the present study were as follows. First, the findings of the study, however, are limited by the small sample size and short treatment time. Second, there is not in ESL context. Third, it is necessary and important to observe the effects of written corrective feedback more longitudinally. Fourth, some students do not pay attention to the given feedback. Fifth, we should teach teacher how to use the given feedback to improve their students' performance.

The limitations of the present study suggest a number of directions for future research. First, current research focuses mainly on written corrective feedback. Oral conference feedback can be incorporated with written feedback to achieve better effects, as examined by Bitchener (2008). Second, future research can investigate different feedback strategies targeting more specific types of errors which are common in L2 writings, such as subject-verb agreement errors, sentence fragments and run-on sentences.

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