

The Effects of Focused and Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback on Grammatical Accuracy of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—This study aimed at investigating whether direct focused corrective feedback and direct unfocused corrective feedback caused any differential effects on the accurate use of English articles by EFL learners across two different proficiency levels (low and high). The participants were divided into low and high proficiency levels by administering a TOEFL test. Then, sixty learners in each proficiency level formed two experimental groups and one control group, 20 learners in each group. One experimental group received focused written corrective feedback and the other experimental group received unfocused written corrective feedback. The statistical analysis indicated that focused group did better than both unfocused and control groups in terms of accurate use of English articles in both proficiency levels. Therefore, these results suggested that unfocused corrective feedback is of limited pedagogical value, whereas focused corrective feedback promoted learners' grammatical accuracy in L2 writing more effectively.

Index Terms—written corrective feedback, focused feedback, unfocused feedback, English articles, proficiency level, grammatical accuracy

I. 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., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002; Sheen, 2007) 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.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As pointed out by Nunan (2001), producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in a language. Harmer (2001) believes that, when a student produces a piece of language and sees how it turns out, that information is fed back into the acquisition process which means that output becomes input. Such input or feedback can be provided by the writer himself, by the people he is communicating with, and, of course, by the teacher. Hyland (2003) has asserted that one of the major concerns of L2 writers is error-free work since their work may be evaluated in academic setting where accuracy is an important matter, so learners require and value feedback to their works. Also, Freedman (1987) believes that if students fail in well performance in writing, further feedback is necessary to help them take correct actions about their writing in order to improve it and reach an acceptable level of performance.

A. Research Evidence for and against Written CF

Since Truscott (1996) claimed that providing corrective feedback on L2 writing is both ineffective and harmful and should therefore be abandoned, debate about whether and how to give L2 learners feedback on their written grammatical errors has been of considerable interest to researchers and classroom practitioners. Ferris (1999) has disputed this claim, arguing that it was not possible to dismiss correction in general as it depended on the quality of the correction – in other words, if the correction was clear and consistent it would work. Truscott replied by claiming that Ferris failed to cite any evidence in support of her contention. In his most recent survey of the written corrective

feedback research, Truscott (2007) again critiqued the available research and concluded that "the best estimate is that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately" (p. 270).

Several researchers have argued that written CF does not have a positive effect on the development of learners' L2 writing accuracy (e.g., Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 2007; Sheppard, 1992). For example, Sheppard (1992) analyzed the effects of two types of CF (indirect error coding CF vs. holistic comments in the margins) on the development of L2 students' accurate use of verb tense, punctuation, and subordination. He reported that the group that received holistic comments outperformed the group that received CF and further noted that the CF group regressed over time. This led him to conclude that grammar error correction had a negative effect. Similarly, Kepner (1991) compared error corrections and message-related comments on American university learners' written Spanish. The results of his study showed that grammar error correction did not lead to significant improvement in accuracy. Kepner (1991) also concluded that corrective feedback which focuses on grammar has little value.

In contrast, there is now a growing body of literature on the efficacy of written CF for helping L2 writers improve the accuracy of their writing. On the one hand, there is evidence that written CF can help writers improve their written accuracy when asked to revise their texts (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1999, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). On the other hand, there is mounting more recent evidence of the long-term effectiveness of written CF on accuracy improvement, revealed in the writing of new texts (Bitchener, 2008, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a; Bitchener, Young & Cameron 2005, Chandler, 2003; Ellis, Sheen, Takashima, Murakami, 2008; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009).

For instance, Ferris and Roberts (2001) investigated 72 university ESL students' abilities to self-edit their texts across three feedback conditions: (1) errors marked with codes; (2) errors underlined but not otherwise marked or labeled; (3) no feedback at all. They found that both groups who received feedback significantly outperformed the no-feedback group on the self-editing task but that there were no significant differences between the "codes" and "no-codes" groups. However, as mentioned before, more recently studies have examined the value of written CF by measuring progress in new pieces of writing. Bitchener et al. (2005), for example, investigated the extent to which different types of CF (direct CF with and without oral conferencing) influence the accuracy in new pieces of writing. They concluded that both types of direct CF had a significant impact on accuracy in new pieces of writing but that this was only evident for the definite article and past tense. The same type of feedback did not have a significant positive effect on accurate use of prepositions. Also, Chandler (2003) found that both direct correction and simple underlining of errors are significantly superior to describing the type of error, even with underlining, for reducing long-term error.

B. Research Evidence on Efficacy of Different Types of Written CF

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. Most often, these studies have categorized written CF as either direct (explicit correction of linguistic form above or near the linguistic error) or indirect (indicating that in some way an error has been made but not providing a correction). Among those that have compared direct and indirect types, Lalande (1982) investigated the effects of direct error correction and indirect coding correction on 60 German FL intermediate learners, consisting two experimental groups and no control group, during 10 weeks and reported an advantage for indirect feedback. Also, Robb et al. (1986) and Semke (1984, as cite in Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b) reported no difference between the two approaches; and Chandler (2003) reported positive findings for both direct and indirect feedback.

Several recent studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010b) have examined the relative effectiveness of different types of direct CF on improved accuracy. For example, Bitchener (2008) investigated the effectiveness of direct feedback combinations: (1) direct error correction with written meta-linguistic explanation and oral meta-linguistic explanation; (2) direct error correction with written meta-linguistic explanation; (3) direct error correction; and (4) no corrective feedback. Feedback was provided on only two functional uses of the English articles (the indefinite article "a" for first mention and the definite article "the" for subsequent or anaphoric mentions). Groups one and three outperformed the control group while group two only just failed to do so.

A further distinction that needs to be examined is between 'unfocused' and 'focused' CF. Sheen (2007) examined the effects of focused CF on the development of 91 adult ESL learners' accuracy in the use of two types of articles ('the' and 'a'). The study included a direct only group (the researcher indicated errors and provided correct forms), a direct-metalinguistic group (the researcher indicated errors, provided correct forms, and supplied metalinguistic explanations), and a control group. The effectiveness of the CF was measured on pretests, posttests, and delayed posttests. Sheen found that both direct CF groups outperformed the control group. She explained this finding by pointing out that the feedback supplied to the students with the correct form was limited to two linguistic forms (i.e., articles 'the' and 'a'), which made the processing load manageable for them.

To date only a few numbers of studies have focused on comparing the effects of focused and unfocused CF. For the first time, Ellis et al. (2008) compared the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the accurate use of English definite and indefinite articles and reported that both focused and unfocused CF groups gained from pre-test to post-tests on both an error correction test and on a test involving a new piece of narrative writing and also outperformed a control group, which received no correction, on the second posttest. Therefore, the CF was equally effective for the focused and unfocused groups. However, as mentioned by Sheen et al. (2009), one of the methodological problems with this study,

acknowledged by the authors, was that the focused and unfocused CF were not sufficiently distinguished (i.e., article corrections figured strongly in both) and another limitation of this study was that their measure of learning involved just one structure – articles (i.e., they did not examine whether focused CF had any effect, on the accuracy of structures not targeted by the CF).

To overcome some of the limitations of previous study, Sheen et al. (2009) ,using six intact adult ESL intermediate classes totaling 80 students, investigated the effects of the focused and unfocused approaches on both single grammatical target (articles) and on a broader range of grammatical structures (i.e., articles, copula ‘be’, regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition). They had four groups in this study consisting: focused written CF group, unfocused written CF group, writing Practice Group and Control Group. Interestingly, they reported that focused CF group achieved the highest accuracy scores for both articles and the other four grammatical structures. Therefore, they concluded that unfocused CF is of limited pedagogical value while focused CF can contribute to grammatical accuracy in L2 writing.

To date, the findings of research on feedback types have revealed some interesting patterns, but the inconsistency of the findings makes it clear that more research is needed. Much of the available research has been done with lower proficient or intermediate learners, so the extent to which the effectiveness of different types of feedback is dependent upon the proficiency level of an L2 writer is under question. As Ellis (2008) has stated, “the effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback is likely to depend on the current state of the learners’ grammatical knowledge” (p.355). Therefore, besides the obvious needs for clearer empirical evidence about implementation of whether focused or unfocused written CF, the present study aimed to investigate the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on accurate use of targeted grammatical forms (English articles) by foreign language learners across two different proficiency levels (low and high).

III. METHOD

A. *Research Questions and Hypotheses*

RQ1: Are there any significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by low-proficient EFL learners?

H01: There are no significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by low-proficient EFL learners.

H1: There are significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by low-proficient EFL learners.

RQ2: Are there any significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by high-proficient EFL learners?

H02: There are no significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by high-proficient EFL learners.

H2: There are significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by high-proficient EFL learners.

B. *Participants*

The participants for the study were 120 Iranian EFL learners including 50 males and 70 females with age range of 18-35. A TOEFL test was administered in order to divide them into two proficiency levels, low proficient (LP) and high proficient (HP). Then 60 learners in each proficiency level formed three groups, 20 learners in each group, two experimental groups and one control group. The experimental groups consisted of (1) a focused written CF group, and (2) an unfocused written CF group.

C. *Instruments*

The first instrument utilized in the present study was an actual TOEFL proficiency test administered in 2004 by ETS in order to assign participants into two levels of proficiency (low and high). The other instruments were ten short fables, five for each proficiency level, based on Aesop.’s fables which were used as written narrative tasks. Additionally, to examine the effects of the two types of treatments on learners’ use of the indefinite article (for first mention) and the definite article (for anaphoric reference), two different picture compositions taken from Byrne (1967) were used as narrative writing tests in both proficiency levels. One of the tests was administered in pre-test session and the other one in post-test session. These picture compositions consisted of six pictures shown sequentially and the learners were asked to look at them and write a story.

D. *Procedures*

After dividing the participants into two proficiency levels (low and high) by administering a TOEFL test, each proficiency level was classified into three groups, two experimental groups and one control group. Then, a week prior to starting the treatment sessions, a narrative writing test (picture composition) as a pretest was given to all participants in order to be sure of their homogeneity and to measure their writing proficiency in use of the indefinite article (for first

mention) and the definite article (for anaphoric reference) at the beginning of the study. The participants were asked to look at the pictures and write a story in details about 150-200 words within a given time (15-20 minute).

Afterwards, over the next three weeks, all three groups in both proficiency levels completed five written narrative tasks in every other session, each of which followed by a CF treatment session in the following class. The narrative tasks involved reading and then rewriting fables. The tasks given to each proficiency level were different in terms of difficulty and complexity. In both proficiency levels, the first experimental group received focused CF; the second experimental group received unfocused CF, while the control group received no feedback. The grammatical target for the focused group was the use of English definite and indefinite articles whereas the target for the unfocused CF group included the following five grammatical features: (1) English articles, (2) copula 'be', (3) regular and irregular past tense, (4) third person's, and (5) prepositions (e.g., at, in, on).

Finally, one session after receiving CF for the last writing task, the learners were given another narrative writing test (picture composition) as a post-test. Writing test scores were calculated by means of obligatory occasion analysis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) in order to measure the differential effects of our treatments on the acquisition of the accurate use of the indefinite article (for first mention) and the definite article (for anaphoric reference).

IV. RESULTS

A. Testing the First Hypothesis

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the pre-test and post-test of the low proficient learners in each of the three groups. All three groups increased the accuracy of their use of articles from the pre-test to post-test. However, the gained mean score by focused group on the post-test is much higher than the other two groups.

TABLE 1:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE NARRATIVE WRITING TESTS (LP)

Groups	N	Pre-test M	SD	Post-test M	SD
Focused	20	44.22	9.7	85.56	7.01
Unfocused	20	43.19	12.24	59.85	9.12
Control	20	44.83	10.58	55.94	10.06

In order to find out whether there are any statistically significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the accurate use of English articles in the post-test by low proficient learners, a one way ANOVA was performed. The results of the ANOVA test are shown in Table 1. This revealed that the difference between groups is statistically significant ($p=0.000$, $\alpha=0.05$, $p<\alpha$) and it means that the groups performed differently after receiving different types of feedback. Consequently, the first null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is confirmed. In light of these findings, Tukey's post-hoc pairwise comparisons were also computed to isolate where the significant differences lay among the groups (with an alpha level of .05). These analyses revealed that in the post-test, the focused CF group performed better than both the unfocused CF group and the control group.

TABLE 2:
COMPARING POST-TEST MEAN SCORES (LP)
ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10353.397	2	5176.699	66.443	.000
Within Groups	4440.974	57	77.912		
Total	14794.372	59			

B. Testing the Second Hypothesis

In Table 3, the mean scores and standard deviations for the pre-test and post-test in high proficiency level are shown. The mean scores of the learners on the post-test are different from each other across the three groups unlike the pre-test mean score which are very close to each other. These obtained results mean that after receiving the treatment of the study, the three groups showed dissimilar performances; therefore, our treatment had some effects on the learners' accuracy performance but not the same effect.

TABLE 3:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE NARRATIVE WRITING TESTS (HP)

Groups	N	Pre-test M	SD	Post-test M	SD
Focused	20	56.02	9.46	81.49	10.97
Unfocused	20	54.5	7.63	64.12	7.12
Control	20	52.81	8.97	58.96	8.28

Therefore, another one-way ANOVA analysis was applied to see whether the differences across the three high-proficient groups are statistically significant or not. The results shown in Table 4 indicate that the level of computed significance or p value is less than the level of significance set in this analysis ($p=0.032$, $\alpha=0.05$, $p<\alpha$). Therefore,

providing the two different types of feedback had significantly different effects on written accuracy performance of high-proficient learners in the use of definite and indefinite English articles. In other words, the second null hypothesis is also rejected and consequently the second alternative hypothesis is accepted. Also, Tukey's post hoc pair-wise comparison (with an alpha level of .05) was performed to see the difference between which groups is statistically significant. These indicated that on the post-test, participants in focused CF group significantly outperformed those in the unfocused CF and control groups.

TABLE 4:
COMPARING POST-TEST MEAN SCORES (HP)
ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5573.466	2	2786.733	34.840	.032
Within Groups	4559.172	57	79.985		
Total	10132.638	59			

A short look at the results of the post-tests makes it clear that in both proficiency levels the two experimental groups receiving two different types of feedback did better than the control group. Therefore, it can be said that one of the similar points about these two proficiency levels is that providing feedback had positive effect on both low-proficient and high-proficient learners. Another similarity between the levels is that the group receiving focused written CF did better than the group being provided by unfocused written CF in both levels.

Although there are some similarities such as the ones mentioned above, there is a difference in the effect of focused written CF across the two proficiency levels that catch the attention in Figure 1. The low-proficient focused CF group gained more than high-proficient one on the post-test. Therefore, it can be concluded that providing focused written CF had more positive effect on low-proficient learners rather than high-proficient ones. To summarize, focused written CF had different effect on learners across two levels of proficiency.

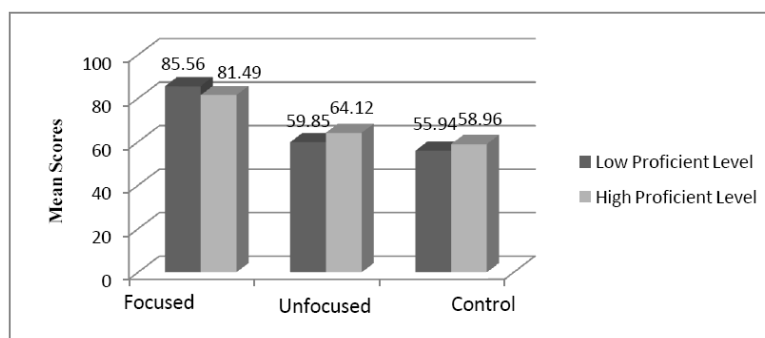


Figure 1: LP and HP Learners' Post-test Mean Scores

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The first research question concerned the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on the learning of English articles by low proficient EFL learners. The results indicated that the focused CF group outperformed not only the control group but also the unfocused group in the post-test. Concerning the general effectiveness of written CF, the results of the study corroborate those of recent studies on article use with lower proficiency writers (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a; Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009). However, concerning the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF, this study's findings differ from those of Ellis et al. (2008). Ellis et al. failed to find significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused CF, with both proving to be equally more effective than no correction. On the other hand, the results of the current study were very similar to those of Sheen et al. (2009) in displaying the clear distinction between the effects of focused and unfocused CF approaches. They proved that the group receiving focused CF achieved the highest accuracy scores than the unfocused CF, writing practice, and control groups.

The second research question investigated whether focused or unfocused written CF on English articles enabled high-proficient writers, who had already achieved a reasonable level of accuracy, to further improve this level of achievement. The results showed that although both focused and unfocused CF groups did better than the control group, focused CF group outperformed both. Therefore, it can be concluded that first of all, providing written corrective feedback is an effective way for responding to high-proficient learners' written performance in general, and secondly that focused written CF has more positive effect on these learners' acquisition of the targeted structures than the unfocused written CF.

Concerning the general effects of written CF apart from its specific type, the results of this study are in line with the study of Bitchener and Knoch (2010b) who found that advanced L2 writers were able to make further gains in accuracy as a result of targeted written CF. In this respect, the findings of their study informed us that "there is potential for

written CF to also be effective in targeting certain types of errors made by advanced L2 writers, even when their existing levels of accuracy are quite high, and that these can be targeted successfully with one feedback treatment" (p. 215).

Concerning the differential effects of these two types of feedbacks across two different proficiency levels, the findings of the study showed that in both proficiency levels the two experimental groups receiving feedback did better than the control group. However, the focused CF group outperformed the unfocused group CF in both levels. Moreover, a very interesting point found in this study was that the low-proficient focused CF group showed a bit higher accuracy level than high-proficient one on the post-test while the high-proficient group was expected to gain more due to its higher level of English knowledge. Therefore, it can be concluded that providing focused written CF can lead to more improvement in accurate use of targeted structures by low-proficient learners.

According to Sheen et al. (2009), one reason that unfocused CF was not effective is that when the correction addresses a range of grammatical errors, learners are unable to process the feedback effectively, and even if they attend to the corrections, they are unable to work out why they have been corrected. Han (2002), has also argued that "a consistent focus on one aspect of L2 use" is one of the key conditions for recasts (as one type of CF) to have an effect on acquisition. Finally, Sheen et al. (2009) has pointed out the probable reasons of differential effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF as follows:

Focused CF may enhance learning by helping learners to (1) notice their errors in their written work, (2) engage in hypothesis testing in a systematic way and (3) monitor the accuracy of their writing by tapping into their existing explicit grammatical knowledge. In contrast, unfocused CF runs the risk of (1) providing CF in a confusing, inconsistent and unsystematic way and (2) overburdening learners. (p. 567)

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

From the pedagogical point of view, the results of this study are important for second and foreign language teachers to establish which type of written CF, whether focused or unfocused, helps to improve accuracy of learners' written works. As this study revealed, teachers should feel confident that providing error correction alone on specific functional uses of limited number of rule-based features (focused CF) is more effective and helps learners to improve better in accurate use of these features than correcting all of the existing errors from different grammatical features in learners' one piece of writing. Additionally, the findings of the present study make it clear that the effectiveness of teachers' reactions to learners' writing can be dependent on their proficiency levels. As discussed before, this study showed that focused CF is more effective in concern with the learners in lower levels of proficiency than the unfocused one.

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