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**On the Effect of Focused Written Corrective Feedback on  
Acquisition of Articles**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in  
TEFL

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## **Abstract**

Corrective feedback has recently gained prominence in studies of ESL, EFL and other second language education contexts. It is partially due to Truscott's (1996) review of written corrective feedback (CF) studies and his controversial conclusion that written CF is ineffective and even harmful in promoting L2 acquisition. This led many researchers to investigate the issue of written corrective feedback in language learning and teaching. The study reported in this thesis set out to provide evidence that CF is effective in an EFL context. Using a pretest—immediate posttest—delayed posttest design, it compared the effects of focused direct only and direct metalinguistic written corrective feedback on the accuracy with which Iranian intermediate language learners used English indefinite and definite articles in written narratives. 57 students at the intermediate level of language proficiency at Aryanpour Language School were randomly assigned to three groups namely, direct linguistic only (G1), direct metalinguistic (G2), and control (G3). Then, all the participants were given recognition and production pretests developed by the researcher on articles and the uses formerly mentioned to ensure that the participants did not have a prior knowledge of them. In the next step, each group was treated based on its own specific methodology. After the treatment, different but parallel immediate recognition and production posttests were given to the participants in order to measure the effectiveness of the treatment. The last step was the repetition of the same recognition and production pretests as the delayed recognition and production posttests after a 3-week time interval to examine the effectiveness of the correction approaches in long term. Six separate one-way ANOVAs were employed to compare the mean scores of the three groups on the recognition and production pretests, the immediate recognition and production posttests, and the delayed recognition and production post-tests. Finally, these analyses were followed by post-hoc Scheffe tests to pinpoint the differences between the groups. The results of this study showed that the direct linguistic feedback group outperformed the control group just in the immediate and delayed production posttests. In addition, there was no significant difference between the types of feedback (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic) in neither the immediate recognition and production posttests nor the delayed recognition and production posttests. The results of this study have implications for language teachers, materials developers, and teacher trainers.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

**ANOVA:** Analysis of variances

**CF:** Corrective feedback

**CLT:** Communicative Language Teaching

**EFL:** English as a Foreign Language

**ESL:** English as a Second Language

**L2:** Second Language

**NES:** Native English Speaker

**SLA:** Second Language Acquisition

**UG:** Universal Grammar

# **Chapter I**

## ***Introduction***

## **1.1. Introduction**

Corrective feedback has long been a topic of heated debate in the field of second/foreign language teaching and many researchers have conducted studies to enlighten the dark sides of this aspect of teaching in different pedagogical areas such as spoken and written corrective feedback (CF), error treatment, acquisition, recast, etc. (Ayoun, 2004; Bitchener, 2008; Bitcher, Cameron, & Young, 2005; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ellis, Erlam, & Loewen, 2006; Ellis, Takashima, Sheen, & Murakami, 2008; Han, 2002; Hyland, 2000; Panova & Lyster, 2002; Sheen 2004; Sheen, 2007). However, there is a growing interest in the role of CF in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

One of the significant areas in CF is its written form. Different opinions exist regarding the efficacy of written CF (Ellis et. al, 2008). Truscott (1996, 1999), reflecting the views of teachers who adhere to process theories of writing, advanced the strong claim that correcting learners' errors in a written composition may enable them to eliminate errors in a subsequent draft, but has no effect on grammatical accuracy in a new piece of writing. In other words, it does not lead to acquisition. Ferris (1999) 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. In response to this claim, Truscott (2007) critiqued the available research and claimed that Ferris (1999) had failed to cite any evidence in support of her contention. He maintained that there was empirical evidence (for example, Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984) that the practice of providing students with corrective feedback was ineffective and harmful and it was not worth continuing. Moreover, he concludes that the best estimate for correction is that it has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately. Bitchener & Knoch (2008a) reviewed a number of studies that have investigated the effects of written CF. They divided them into studies with and without a control group. All five studies without a control group (Chandler, 2000; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2006; Lalande, 1982, cited in Bitcher & Knoch, 2008a) reported improvement in grammatical accuracy following corrective feedback. However, Truscott (1996) argued that such studies cannot be used as a proof for usefulness of CF, due to the fact that they lack a control group. A control group is essential to demonstrate that CF is effective. So the crucial evidence is to be found in the studies with a control group (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Polio, Flech & Leder, 1998; Sheen, 2007). Though, many of these suffer from other problems, for example, many of them did not have a pretest so it was not certain whether the groups were equivalent prior to treatment (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a).

Consequently, of the studies that have been conducted until fairly recently, most, in terms of their design, execution, and analysis, were flawed to some extent so this has meant that firm conclusions about the efficacy of written corrective feedback are not yet available (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009).

Regarding the need for more studies in this issue, the current study tries to overcome the pitfalls of previous studies and add more evidences to the usefulness of CF in writing in an EFL context.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

A great number of studies have been carried out on whether error correction would enhance students' writing accuracy in ESL contexts, but the research on written CF to date has not comprehensively explored the efficacy of this technique in EFL contexts (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008a, 2008b; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ellis et. al., 2008; Sheen, 2004). Consequently, it encourages scholars and researchers to carry out more studies to establish a stronger foundation for acceptance or rejection of Truscott's (1996, 1997) case against written corrective feedback.

Regarding the importance of corrective feedback, very few studies have been done in our country on this aspect of language learning/teaching



(Bahrami, 2002; Norouzian, 2009). Meanwhile, corrective feedback can be an important instrument for facilitating acquisition and improving grammar accuracy. Furthermore, there are different strategies for correcting students' written work, so it makes it very difficult to examine all techniques and strategies in correcting papers in a single study. As a result, more studies are needed to be conducted to explore all dark aspects of written corrective feedback.

Furthermore, many of studies conducted to explore the efficacy of written corrective feedback lacked a control group (see Table 2.3), which is absolutely crucial for establishing a stronger foundation in acceptance or rejection of its usefulness. So there is a great need for more studies including a control group for eliminating ambiguities and uncertainties attributed to previous studies.

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

The efficacy of corrective feedback has long been debated in the field of language learning and teaching. In addition, writing, though sometimes neglected in our classes, has been proved to play a significant role in L2 acquisition and learning. The findings of this study, focusing on the efficacy of written CF in the acquisition of English articles on Iranian intermediate students, can encourage teachers to take writing skill and its following feedback and correction procedure more seriously not only as a

practice on a skill, but also a reliable tool for grammatical accuracy and acquisition. Besides, this study seeks to carefully examine two approaches to written error correction, so that teachers can have a better view of choosing appropriate strategies for correcting their students' written work.

In a wider range, this study can add to the existing literature of written CF, considering the fact that a few studies have been conducted on this issue of giving feedback in Iran. Consequently, as previously mentioned, research community is still in a great need for more studies in this respect, considering the fact that many of the studies conducted around the world have not had a control group and almost all of them were in ESL contexts, while the current study is in an EFL context, so it can make a useful contribution to studies in the field of foreign language teaching.

#### **1.4. Purpose of the Study**

This study is intended to examine the role of corrective feedback in L2 acquisition of English articles by addressing written CF. The purpose of this research is relevant to writing pedagogy given that such pedagogy aims to improve students' written grammatical accuracy. Having sufficient knowledge about corrective feedback and the role it plays in L2 acquisition, teachers can provide their students with an appropriate way of giving them feedback in correcting their writings so that they can facilitate acquisition of a second language for their students. The purpose of this

study is not recommending a model for correcting writings, but investigating a significant aspect of the model, i.e. linguistic accuracy.

## **1.5. Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions regarding the perceived problems in written CF research:

1. Does the type of focused written corrective feedback (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' immediate recognition of English articles?
2. Does the type of focused written corrective feedback (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' immediate production of English articles?
3. Does the type of focused written corrective feedback (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) have any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' delayed recognition of English articles?
4. Does the type of focused written corrective feedback (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) have

any effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' delayed production of English articles?

## **1.6. Research Hypotheses**

1. The focused written corrective feedback type (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' immediate recognition of English articles.
2. The focused written corrective feedback type (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' immediate production of English articles.
3. The focused written corrective feedback type (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' delayed recognition of English articles.
4. The focused written corrective feedback type (i.e. direct only and direct metalinguistic corrective feedback) has no effect on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' delayed production of English articles.