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Subject:

The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on Iranian EFL Learners' Acquisition of Selected Prepositions

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In the name of God

Dedicated to:

Mom and Dad

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List of abbreviations

CF	corrective feedback
CCF	coded corrective feedback
UCF	uncoded corrective feedback
MF	metalinguistic feedback

Abstract

This study examined the effect of three different types of written corrective feedback (coded, uncoded, and metalinguistic feedback) on the acquisition of selected prepositions among elementary Iranian EFL learners. The participants of the study were 90 learners who were selected from 136 elementary learners based on their performance on a KET test. Three experimental groups were formed, and there were 30 subjects in each group. Each group received one type of written corrective feedback on their writing tasks: the coded correction group's errors were corrected based on an abbreviated code system, the uncoded correction group's errors were highlighted in their writing tasks, and the metalinguistic group's correction contained metalinguistic comments that explained the correct form. After ten treatment sessions, the learners were given a posttest. Three weeks after the posttest, they took the delayed posttest. The three groups' performance on the posttest and delayed posttest were compared by one way ANOVA. The results showed that the learners in metalinguistic group outperformed the other groups both on the posttest and the delayed posttest. It was found that written metalinguistic corrective feedback helped learners to improve in accuracy.

CHAPTER I

Background and Purpose

The mistakes or errors that language learners make in the process of learning a second or foreign language have always been a cause of much concern for both teachers and researchers alike. It is believed that learning a language like acquiring any other human learning involves making errors. Errors are inevitable part of the process of learning a language and sometimes they are signs of learning. It is through making errors and receiving the correct form that language learners gradually build up their interlanguage system and develop their understanding of how language works (Keshavarz, 1994).

Learners make use of their errors and use them to receive feedback from the environment. They use the feedback to test and modify their hypothesis about the target language (Keshavarz, 1999). Since errors need to be given feedback, it is essential for language teachers to carefully consider their learners' errors and respond to them in the most appropriate way. By observing learners' errors, teachers can test the effectiveness of teaching techniques, and they can understand which parts need more attention and accordingly need to be corrected and given feedback.

Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers have benefitted from corrective feedback (CF) which is one of the subcategories of the general concept of feedback in different ways. Some researchers have employed CF to help their learners to improve their general writing ability (Chandler, 2003; Fazio, 2001) and other researchers have made use of CF to enhance their learners' accuracy in their pieces of writing across a number of different grammatical structures (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Han, 2002). Since the results of these CF studies have always been controversial, some SLA researchers have the idea that intensive CF that repeatedly focuses on a single linguistic feature has more beneficial effect on learners' language development (Han, 2002; Iwashita, 2003). Nowadays in providing their learners with CF, researchers have focused their attention on specific linguistic structures and have dealt with a limited number of linguistic features (Sheen, 2007).

Prepositions in English are a small number of words used before nouns and pronouns to connect them to the preceding material. They show the relationship between nouns and pronouns complements and some other words in the sentence. They may be part of a verb as in ''keep on,'' or may function as an adverb as in ''he went down'' (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 2006). Some prepositions may be used as conjunctions as in ''I will see

you after dinner.’’ They usually appear before their noun objects and may be composed of one, two, or three parts. They may express time or place. Prepositions are part of the English language that learners frequently make errors in using them, and only consulting a grammar book or a dictionary is not enough for their learning. Lindstromberg (2010) states that grammar books are mainly about grammar and not meaning, and dictionaries as for most of them order their entries alphabetically; that means information about prepositions is scattered across hundred or even thousands of pages. He presents some reasons for inadequacy of grammar books in teaching prepositions:

> Pairs of prepositions may seem to mean the same thing in some contexts. Dictionaries seldom explain that such appearances are almost always deceptive: Two prepositions rarely if ever have precisely the same communicative effect. A related weakness of dictionaries is they seldom explain the limits of a preposition’s usage. Many prepositions have more than one usage. Almost all dictionaries list these, but rarely do they explain how the usages are related semantically even though such information can be very helpful to learners and to teachers as well. What usages have prepositions in common, dictionaries are unlikely to tell you. (p.1-2).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Experienced language teachers know that giving feedback to students' errors is a very time consuming and challenging job. Some teachers focus their attention on overall writing ability, and some focus on specific grammatical points. How teachers should correct and respond to their learners' errors is a question that needs to be examined carefully. Guenette (2007) states that one of the reasons for the uncertainty lies in the failure to design CF studies that systematically investigate different types of written CF and control for external variables that are likely to impact on how effective the CF is. One way forward, then, might be for researchers and teachers to systematically identify the various options available for correcting students' writing as a basis for both designing future studies and for pedagogical decision making.

A growing body of research has examined the effects of written CF on acquisition of different aspects of a second or foreign language. The results of these studies show that not all types of feedback are effective all the time. Even some scholars have reported that feedback is not effective and must not be used in foreign language teaching settings (Truscott, 1996), but many researchers do not agree and tend to prove the effectiveness of feedback with conducting different research studies

although not all of these studies have yielded fruitful and desirable results and mixed results have been reported (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Frantzen, 1995 ; Kepner, 1991; Laland, 1982;). As Hyland and Hyland (2006) put it ‘‘ while feedback is a central aspect of L2 writing programs across the world, the research literature has not been equivocally positive about its role in L2 development, and teachers often have a sense they are not making use of its full potential’’ (p.83).

Since the process of learning a new language takes a lot of time and energy, language teachers should not expect that providing the correct form of an error will result in immediate improvement. They should not expect that strong focus on language errors will always yield desired results. Rather, it is the appropriate form of feedback which is able to help learners build up their interlanguage system gradually. Although teachers have benefitted from various forms of feedback to fulfill their learners’ needs and make them pay attention to their language errors, the research on written CF has not always been successful in exploring the effectiveness of different types of CF based on individual learners’ strategies in learning special grammatical structures (Sheen, 2007).

Based on the personal experience of the researcher and considering the material she teaches, prepositions are not taught explicitly, and they are

among the troublesome structures which learners always make errors in using them. It is totally left to learners to observe their usages in different contexts and learn to use them appropriately in their pieces of writing. On the other hand, as the researcher has observed, providing learners directly with the prepositional feedback in oral form has not been successful and learners continue using wrong prepositions even after being corrected for several times.

The present study was inspired by the work of Sheen (2007) who examined the differential effects of two types of written CF and language analytic ability on intermediate ESL learners' acquisition of English articles. It aimed to examine the possible effects of three different types of written CF in order to investigate whether different types of feedback namely coded corrective feedback (CCF), uncoded corrective feedback (UCF), and metalinguistic feedback (MF) have any significant different effects on the acquisition of selected prepositions among elementary Iranian EFL learners.

1.2 Statement of the Research Question

To meet the objective of the study and provide possible answers for some the problems in written CF studies, the following research question was posed:

Q: Is there any significant difference among the effect of CCF, UCF, and MF on elementary Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of selected prepositions?

1.3 Statement of Research Hypothesis

In order to investigate the research question, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

$H_{(0)}$: there is no significant difference among the effect of CCF, UCF, and MF on elementary Iranian EFL learners' acquisition of selected prepositions.

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

Coded corrective feedback: refers to the indication of the type of errors based on an abbreviated code system (Sheen, 2007).

Direct correction: refers to the indication of the errors and providing the correct form. Direct correction constitutes a traditional error

correction strategy that consists of indicating the location of an error on the students' texts and the provision of the correct form by deleting and/replacing the error or by adding a linguistic element (Sheen, 2007).

Uncoded corrective feedback: refers to the indication of the errors in the text with a yellow highlighting pen without specifying their type (Sheen, 2007).

Metalinguistic feedback: is defined as indicating the location of errors, providing the correct form and metalinguistic comments that explain the correct form (Sheen, 2007).

Preposition: a word used with nouns, pronouns, and gerunds to link them grammatically to other words. The phrase so formed, consisting of a preposition and its complement, is a prepositional phrase. In English, a prepositional phrase maybe "discontinuous,'' as in who (m) did you speak to?

Prepositions may express such meanings as possession (e.g., at the leg of the table), direction (e.g., to the bank), place (e.g., at the corner), time (e.g., before now). In English, there are groups of words (e.g., in front of, owing to) that can function like single-word prepositions. (Richards J.C. & Schmidt, R, 2002, p. 414,)

Acquisition of preposition: in this research study acquisition of prepositions is operationally defined as the unconscious process of internalizing the rules of using prepositions in different contexts resulting from receiving different types of feedback while the most of the learners' attention is focused on conveying meaning in a piece of writing.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Writing is a complex activity, and teachers always try to enhance their learners' writing ability in terms of coherence, structure, and organization. They know that learners must have access to correct forms, and their errors should be brought up to their attentions. Teachers are also aware of the importance of giving feedback and its possible effects on the process of second or foreign language learning. To help their learners overcome their errors in different pieces of writing, language teachers need to be familiar with various forms of feedback.

As every experienced teacher of English knows, correcting learners' errors and providing feedback in a way which can lead to learning is not always possible. Besides, exploring which type of feedback is more appropriate according to the language proficiency level of the learners and the specific structure is a demanding job. Through investigating the effects