

*In the Name of
God*



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Entitled

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

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Dedicated to

My Beloved Family

for their undying support

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Building on previous studies on the effectiveness of different types of written corrective feedback, the present study aimed at investigating whether direct focused corrective feedback and direct unfocused corrective feedback produced any differential effects on the accurate use of English articles by EFL learners across two different proficiency levels (low and high). In current study, the participants were divided into low and high proficiency levels by administering a TOEFL test. This led to formation of two proficiency levels, 60 participants in each level, totaling 120 participants. Then, each proficiency level was classified into three groups, two experimental groups and one control group. The first experimental group received focused corrective feedback; the second experimental group received unfocused corrective feedback, while the third one, as a control group, received no feedback. The ANOVA tests with post-hoc comparisons 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.</p>	

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List of Abbreviations

CF: Corrective Feedback

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

ETS: Educational Testing Service

HP: High Proficient

LP: Low Proficient

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0. Introduction

Writing is a form of expression that requires an audience. The audience must be able to interact with the author and share in the presented reality. If interaction does not occur, the text can seem illogical and hard to follow. Writing is complex in that it evaluates a person's ability to use a language and the ability to express ideas. As a result, a person needs to write not only coherently but correctly. When this happens in a learning environment, and you are the instructor, how do you guide your students? How do you address their mechanical, lexical, grammatical, or syntactic errors? Should you even comment on them? If so, what do you comment on? Where should you direct your student's attention? Therefore, for ESL or EFL writing instructors, these are some of the questions they have to address when considering their feedback practices in order to help learners improve their writing proficiency.

1.1. Background of the Study

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 language and it is something most native speakers never master. Therefore, Raimes (1991) calls the need for more of everything for L2 writer: strategy training, direct teaching, support systems, teacher response, practice, etc. Generally, overcoming the occurrence of errors depends on the way they are corrected and written feedback is an essential aspect of any English Language Writing course especially with the predominance of the process approach to writing.

Also, 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.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), providing written feedback to students is one of the ESL writing teacher's most important tasks, offering the kind of individualized attention that is otherwise rarely possible under normal classroom conditions.

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), CF (corrective feedback) 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.

The written CF literature (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998) indicates that teachers and L2 writing researchers have favored the use of indirect feedback (i.e., where errors are indicated and students are asked to self-correct) and placed the emphasis on the revision process. Relatively few studies have investigated direct feedback (i.e., where learners are given the corrections) by comparing an experimental and a control group that did not receive any feedback.

Moreover until recently, few studies have examined the differential effects of focused and unfocused written CF (i.e., CF directed at a single linguistic feature). They have demonstrated that focused CF is facilitative of learning and thus have provided evidence to refute the critics of written CF (see Bitchener, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009). More specifically, the findings of Sheen's (2007) study suggest that written CF works when it is intensive and concentrated on a specific linguistic problem. Her study, in effect, constituted a challenge to the traditional, unfocused approach to

correcting written errors in students' writing. Also, there are solid theoretical reasons for believing that focused CF will be more effective than unfocused CF. Learners are more likely to attend to corrections directed at a single (or a limited number of) error type(s) and more likely to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of the error and the correction needed.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Since learners find writing in an L2 a big challenge, they come to class both to improve their language proficiency and become more confident in their writing abilities. Instruction should provide students with ample amounts of language input and instruction, as well as writing experience and feedback to fulfill their goals. Feedback is seen as a key for encouraging and consolidating learning. Different researchers (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006) have argued that feedback plays a central role in learning this skill. Freedman (1987) believes that if students fail in well performance, further feedback is necessary to help them take correct actions on their writing in order to improve it and reach an acceptable level of performance.

To date, the findings of researches on feedback types have revealed some interesting patterns, but the inconsistency of the findings makes it clear that more research is needed. Among different strategies of providing written CF, more recent studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009) emphasized the effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF on the acquisition of the targeted grammatical features. Although some positive results have been reported about the efficacy of focused CF, there are studies like Ellis et al.'s (2008) which did not find any difference in effectiveness of these two kind of CFs, so there is an obvious need to investigate more in this specific field to reach consolidated answers.

However, most of the available research has examined the efficacy of the focused and unfocused CF on learners at the same proficiency level, intermediate level, and has not taken into account the probable differences of learners' performances across different levels. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate not only differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on the improvement of learners' accurate use of two functions of English articles (the indefinite article 'a' as first mention and the definite article 'the' as second mention), also the extent to which the effectiveness of these two types of CF is dependent upon the proficiency level of learners.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research question 1: 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?

Null Hypothesis 1: 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.

Alternative Hypothesis 1: There are significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by low-proficient EFL learners.

Research question 2: 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?

Null Hypothesis 2: 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.

Alternative Hypothesis 2: There are significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on accurate use of grammatical forms by high-proficient EFL learners.

Research question 3: What are the similarities and differences between the effects of focused and unfocused written CF across two different proficiency levels?

Null Hypothesis 3: There are no significant similarities and differences between the effects of focused and unfocused written CF across two different proficiency levels.

Alternative Hypothesis 3: There are significant similarities and differences between the effects of focused and unfocused written CF across two different proficiency levels.

1.4. Definition of Key Terms

- **Corrective Feedback**

Lightbown and Spada (1999) define corrective feedback as "any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect. This includes various responses that the learners receive" (p. 171). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), in teaching, feedback refers to "comments or other information that learners receive concerning their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teacher or other persons"(p. 199).

