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Written Corrective Feedback and Teaching Grammar

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of both direct focused and recast written corrective feedback (WCF) on grammatical accuracy of EFL learners' writing. The study also sought to examine whether the effect of direct focused or recast WCF was retained over time. For this, 90 low-intermediate female students were selected through Preliminary English Test (PET) and randomly assigned into three groups: two experimental groups (direct focused and recast) and one control group. The study had a quasi-experimental design with pre-tests, immediate post-tests and delayed post-tests. Group A received direct focused written corrective feedback, group B received recast written corrective feedback and the control group C received no feedback. The statistical analysis indicated that, both experimental groups performed better than the control group and the second experimental group (i.e., the recast group) outperformed the direct focused group. In addition, the lasting effect of recast was more than the lasting effect of direct focused on the grammatical accuracy of EFL learners' writing.

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1. Introduction

Several researchers [1] approved the effective role of CF and specifically different types of WCF in the use of language features. With regard to the importance of writing accuracy in language learning, this quasi experimental study can be a step to investigate the effects of both direct focused and recast CF on the use of grammatical accuracy in L2 writing.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies comparing different types of corrective feedback

A range of studies has investigated whether certain types of written corrective feedback or combinations of different types are more effective than others. These studies have most often categorized feedback as either direct (explicit) or indirect (implicit). Direct corrective feedback defined as the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure by the teacher to the student above the linguistic error [2,3]. Lalande [4] has explained that indirect feedback requires learners to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, therefore, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition. But as SLA researchers of oral L2 production have found, learners must first “notice” [5] that an error has been made. Once the error has been noted, indirect feedback has the potential to push learners to engage in hypothesis testing a process which Ferris [6] has suggested that may induce deeper internal processing and promote the internalization of correct forms and structures.

While not ignoring the value of indirect feedback, those more in favor of a direct approach have explained that teachers and students prefer direct feedback [7]. More recently, Chandler [8] has explained that the greater cognitive effort expended when students are required to use indirect feedback to make their own corrections is offset by the additional delay in knowing whether their own hypothesized correction is in fact correct.

Studies that have investigated the effects of different types of written CF can be classified according to those that have compared (1) direct and indirect types of feedback; (2) different types of indirect feedback; and (3) different types of direct feedback. To mention some of the studies in the first group, Lalande [4] reported an advantage for indirect feedback; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed [9] and Semke [10] reported no difference between the two approaches; and Chandler [8] reported positive findings for both direct and indirect feedback. It is one of the reasons for being tentative in making firm conclusions from this conflicting and limited body of evidence. Moreover, limitations in the design and execution of these studies [11,12] and differences in their contexts and in the proficiency level of their participants make it difficult to assess the value of the claims that are made. It should also be noted that most of these studies did not look at new pieces of writing, so they provide no information about the long-term effectiveness on written accuracy. Further research is therefore required in this area.

Another group of studies has investigated the effectiveness of different types of indirect feedback (coded and uncoded). None of these studies [7,9] found any difference between coded and uncoded options. However, only the study by Robb et al. [9] examined the effect of corrective feedback on new pieces of writing over time. The other studies only measured the effect of corrective feedback on text revisions.

Moreover, several recent studies [13,11,14] have examined the relative effectiveness of different types of direct CF on improved accuracy. For instance, Bitchener et al. [13] compared the effect of different direct feedback combinations typically practised in advanced proficiency classroom settings: (1) direct error correction plus oral metalinguistic explanation in 5 minute one-on-one conferences; (2) direct error correction; and (3) no corrective feedback. They found that that in-group one outperformed both groups two and three for the past simple tense and the definite article but found no such effect for prepositions. They suggested that the addition of oral metalinguistic explanation might have been the crucial factor in facilitating increased accuracy.

Additionally, Bitchener [11] investigated the effectiveness of other direct feedback combinations: (1) direct error correction with written metalinguistic 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. When the study was extended [15,3] to include an additional 69 learners, no difference was observed between the same three treatment combinations. Thus, it is possible that the larger sample size eliminated the difference in effect between group two and the other two treatment groups in the first study [11].

Another study by Bitchener and Knoch [14], investigating over a 10 month period the relative effectiveness of the same four different feedback approaches, found that each of the groups who received one of the treatment options outperformed the control group and that there was no difference in effectiveness between the three treatment groups, suggesting therefore that none of the written CF options was any more effective than another. The special significance of this finding was its investigation over a 10-month period and therefore its longitudinal measurement of the effectiveness of different types of CF on accuracy retention.

A further distinction that needs to be examined is between ‘unfocused’ and ‘focused’ CF. Sheen [1] 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, 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.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research hypotheses

H₀₁. providing feedback doesn’t have any significant effect on the grammatical accuracy of Iranian EFL learners’ writing.

H₀₂. There is no significant difference between the effect of direct focused and recast written corrective feedback on the grammatical accuracy of Iranian EFL learners’ writing.

H₀₃. The effect of direct focused or recast written corrective feedback on the grammatical accuracy of Iranian EFL learners’ writing is not retained over time

3.2. Participants

To accomplish the objectives of the study, 120 female low intermediate EFL learners with the age range of 16-24 were chosen non- randomly among intact classes. As a result of these students’ performance in a PET, 90 students who scored between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen as the target participants. The selected participants were randomly divided in three main groups of 30 students.

3.3. Instruments

The first instrument utilized in the present study was an actual PET proficiency test developed by Cambridge ESOL (2006). The other instruments were three short fables, based on Aesop’s fables, which were used as written narrative tasks in treatment sessions. Additionally, to examine the effects of the two types of treatments on learners’ use of the simple past verbs, three different picture compositions taken from Byrne (1967) were used as narrative writing tests in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test.

3. 4. Procedures

After administering a PET, 90 participants were randomly assigned to 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 target structure. 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 seven sessions, all three groups completed three written narrative tasks in every other session, each of which followed by a WCF treatment session in the following class. The narrative tasks involved reading and then rewriting fables. The first experimental group received direct focused WCF; the second experimental group received recast WCF, while the control group received no feedback. Then, one session after receiving WCF for the last writing task, the learners were given another narrative writing test (picture composition) as a post-test. Finally two weeks later the third narrative writing test was given to the participants as a delayed post-test. Writing test scores were calculated by means of counting the total number of correct and incorrect grammatical forms involving past tense copula verbs, irregular verbs and regular verb as well as the total number of the correct

target grammatical forms of those. Then the latter was divided by the former to generate the accuracy score for each student in the form of a ratio of the correct to incorrect use of each grammatical feature [13].

4. Result

As Table 4.1 shows, the mean scores of two experimental groups were different from the mean scores of control group in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test. Both experimental groups, which direct focused (DG) and recast (IG) performed better than the control group (CG). Also, the effect of recast WCF is more than the effect of direct focused WCF. Therefore, the first and null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

As Table 4.2 shows, the effect of both direct focused and recast WCF retained over time. In addition, the effect of recast WCF was more than the effect of direct focused WCF in post-test and delayed post-test. Therefore, the third null hypothesis of the study was rejected.

Table 4.1 Post Hoc Tests

Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^b	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^b		
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
DG	IG	-3.522*	1.344	.010	-6.194	-.851
	CG	4.300*	1.344	.002	1.629	6.971
IG	DG	3.522*	1.344	.010	.851	6.194
	CG	7.822*	1.344	.000	5.151	10.494
CG	DG	-4.300*	1.344	.002	-6.971	-1.629
	IG	-7.822*	1.344	.000	-10.494	-5.151

Table 4.2 Post Hoc Tests

Test Time	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^b	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^b		
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Pre-test	Post-test	-5.622*	.142	.000	-5.904	-5.341
	Delayed post-test	-7.367*	.179	.000	-7.722	-7.011
Post-test	Pre-test	5.622*	.142	.000	5.341	5.904
	Delayed post-test	-1.744*	.119	.000	-1.982	-1.507
Delayed post-test	Pre-test	7.367*	.179	.000	7.011	7.722
	Post-test	1.744*	.119	.000	1.507	1.982

5. Conclusion

The results of present study showed that both experimental groups, (i.e., DG and IG) outperformed the control group (CG). The findings also indicated that the IG performed better than DG in both post-test and delayed post-test.

The results also demonstrated that although the performance of the control group improved in the post-tests, it was significantly lower than the experimental groups performance. Besides, the results showed that the performance of both DG and IG on the use of target grammatical structure is retained in their writing in delayed post-tests. The lasting effect of recast WCF was more than the lasting effect of direct focused WCF in delayed post-tests. These findings emphasize the significant role of recast WCF in helping learners to self-edit their own writing over time. In fact, recast WCF would encourage them to look more critically at their own L2 writing and notice their problems.

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