

On the Efficacy of Explicit Corrective Feedback on Descriptive Writing Accuracy of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

Since the emergence of the process-oriented approach in second language writing instruction, the issues of writing instruction have been predominantly concerned with what and how error feedback should be given to the students' writing. The present study investigated the effect of explicit corrective feedback on writing accuracy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners (N = 44) in Hamedan Islamic Azad University. The three most frequent occurring errors in EFL learners' writing pre-test were chosen to be targeted. Two groups were formed: the explicit corrective feedback group (N= 22), and the control group (N= 20). Paired samples t-tests revealed that both the explicit and control groups increased their writing accuracy in immediate post-test in comparison with pre-test, but Independent t-test indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experiment groups ($p = 0.65$). In delayed post-test, there was no significant differences between writing accuracy of explicit and control groups ($p= 0.72$). Paired samples t-tests indicated that there was no significant accuracy mean difference between writing pre-test and delayed post-test of the explicit group. The writing accuracy gain of the control group in delayed post-test in comparison with writing pre-test was statistically significant.

Keywords: Corrective feedback, Explicit Corrective Feedback, Accuracy, Second Foreign Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

The process-oriented approach is based on the belief that there will never be the perfect text, but it would seem that producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts of a text help one to get perfection in writing (Nunan, 1999). For drafting and redrafting, students

need getting corrective feedback on their own writing. Believing that feedback is essential to help EFL writers recognize their linguistic shortcomings, language teachers spend a great deal of time offering corrective feedback on the written products of their students (Ferris, 1999, 2004; Lee, 2003; Truscott, 1996).

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Submission date: Jan 10, 2013

Acceptance date: September 20, 2013

It may be surprising to learn that treatment of learners' errors is one of the most controversial areas in language pedagogy (Larsen Freeman, 2003). In Iran, error correction is a relatively unexplored area. Since the way teachers handle students' errors may directly affect student's writing, the aim of this study was to see if explicit corrective feedback was effective in helping EFL writers improve the accuracy of their descriptive writing of new texts over time. Several decades of research on grammar feedback have barely yielded any satisfactory evidence regarding the longterm efficacy of providing foreign language writers with corrective feedback. The pedagogical contribution of this study is related to the effect of explicit corrective feedback on development of learners' interlanguage. There are various terms used in identifying errors and providing corrective feedback in the second language acquisition literature which are sometimes used interchangeably. The most common terms are error correction, evidence, and corrective feedback. Error correction can be defined as strategies used by a teacher or more advanced learner to correct errors in learners' language production (Schmidt & Richards, 2002).

According to Dabaghi Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009), teachers use the explicit feedback to direct the attention of the learners to the erroneous point. Providing feedback is often seen as one of the most important tasks of EFL writing teachers. Many teachers feel that they have done justice to students' efforts if they have written substantial comments on their papers, justifying the grade they have given and providing a reader reaction. Similarly, many students see their teacher's feedback as crucial to their improvement as writers (Richards, 2004).

Error analysis emerged as a reaction to the view of second language learning proposed by contrastive analysis theory which saw language transfer as the central process of language learning. Error analysis

aims to account for learners' performance in terms of the cognitive process that learners make use of in reorganizing the input they receive from the target language. Thus, a more positive attitude was developed towards learners' errors. Learners use their errors to get feedback from the environment and in turn they use that feedback to test and modify their hypotheses about the target language; therefore, learners profit from their errors (Keshavarz, 1994).

In the 1960s and 1970s researches gave rise to the hypothesis that language learning should start first with comprehension and later proceed to production. This is the way that an infant acquires its first language (Larsen Freeman, 2000). Krashen (1982) proposed the input hypothesis. Based on this hypothesis, he claims "a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage I to stage I + 1 is that the acquirer understands input that contains I + 1, where 'understand' means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the message" (P. 21). According to Cook (2003), the idea was that learning would proceed without explanation or correction of errors, but simply by exposure to meaningful input. Error correction is seen as unnecessary, counterproductive, and even harmful. Schmidt (1990: as cited in R. Ellis et al., 2009) in his noticing hypothesis introduces noticing as the linguistic equivalent to attention and argues that noticing is requisite for learning. Noticing is a cognitive activity that is employed by language learners when they consciously attend to a linguistic structure in the input. When conscious attention to linguistic form is considered facilitative to or even a prerequisite for interlanguage development, corrective feedback can be expected to support the second language acquisition process. Corrective feedback can be considered as a cognitive focusing device for learner attention. It enables learners to notice the gaps between their own output and the target language input (i.e. the feedback provided). In written corrective

feedback, learners have enough time to compare their output with the corrective feedback they receive, which increases the likelihood of learners' noticing gaps in their interlanguage (Beuningen, 2010). As Doughty (2003) asserts, it is now widely accepted that effective second language pedagogy should at times involve attention to linguistic forms (cited in Beuningen, 2010). Without such attention, acquisition of second language could be slower, more difficult, and less successful. Form-focused instruction and accompanying corrective feedback to language learners can help to accelerate the interlanguage development and acquisition of various linguistic structures.

Bitchener and Knoch (2009) recount the benefits of the explicit corrective feedback as: (1) explicit corrective feedback reduces the type of confusion that language learners may experience; (2) explicit feedback provides language learners with information to help them resolve more complex errors (for example, syntactic structure and idiomatic usage); (3) explicit feedback provides language learners with more input on hypotheses that may have been made; and (4) it is more immediate.

Bitchener et al. (2005) in a study investigated the effects of the different types of feedback (direct, explicit written feedback and student-researcher 5 minute individual conferences; direct, explicit written feedback only; no corrective feedback) given to 53 adult migrant students on three types of error (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article). Their study found a significant effect for the combination of written and conference feedback on accuracy levels in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing but no overall effect on accuracyim provement for feedback types when the three error categories were considered as a single group.

In line with that, the present research focused on the following research question and hypothesis.

Does providing explicit corrective feedback have any impact on accuracy of the descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

H0. Providing explicit written corrective feedback has no significant impact on accuracy of the descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

2. Research Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 44 Iranian university EFL learners both male and female. Turkish was the first language of most of the subjects and others had Persian and Kurdish as their first language. None of them had lived in an English speaking country. The age of the subjects ranged from 21 to 28, with the mean age of 23.

2.2 Instrumentation

A demographic questionnaire was administered to elicit relevant information on the subjects' age, gender, their first language, the number of years they have lived in an English-speaking country, and their major of the study. Prior to starting the treatment, subjects were required to take TOEFL test and writing-oriented pre-test to make sure that they were homogeneous EFL learners and writers. Students were assigned with three writing tasks during the course. Two descriptive writing tests were used as an immediate post-test and a delayed post-test to check the potential differences in writing performance of the subjects over time at the end of the treatment.

2.3 Procedure

The study was conducted in Hamedan Islamic Azad University at two English writing classes in the winter and spring of 2012. The term lasted 12 sessions and classes met once a week of two hours. Subjects had three writing tasks. Treatment group received explicit feedback. In explicit corrective feedback, the errors, their location, and description of the violated

Table 1. Mean Scores of Groups in Pre-test and Immediate Post-test

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control Group Pre-test	44.0000	18	13.56900	3.19824
Immediate Post-test	69.6111	18	14.06346	3.31479
Explicit Group Pre-test	49.9118	17	18.21764	4.41843
Immediate Post-test	71.5882	17	11.18067	2.71171

Table 2. Paired Samples T-test on Pre-test and Immediate Post-test Scores

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group	Pre-test Immediate- Post	-25.61111	17.59057	4.14614	-34.35870	-16.86353	-6.177	17	.000
Explicit Group	Pre-test Immediate- Post-test	-21.67651	20.62230	5.00164	-32.27948	-11.07346	-4.334	16	.001

rules were provided. At the end of the treatment two post-tests administrated. There was a gap of 3 weeks between the writing immediatepost-test and the writing delayedpost-test when the students in two groups followed their regular study. During this period, none of the groups received any corrective feedback of any kind. In order to reduce the possible subjectivity and increase the reliability in scoring, two raters scored the papers. The agreement rate was calculated for scoring by two raters.

3. Results and Discussion

Obligatory uses of the targeted features (accurate use of the subject, verb, and definite/indefinite articles) were first identified and corrected for each text on each of the writing occasions. Statistical procedures used to analyze all of the data included mean scores, paired sample t-tests, independent t-test. SPSS version 20 (2011) for windows was used for statistical analysis.

3.1. Total Writing Accuracy Gain in Immediate Post-test and Delayed Post-test

The Control group increased its mean score from 44 in pre-test to 69.61 in immediate post-test (see Table 1). By exploring Table 2, it reveals that the mean difference of the control group's writing accuracy (MD=-25.61) was statistically significant, $p= 0.00 < 0.05$. According to Table 2, mean difference of the explicit group' writing accuracy (MD =21.67) was statistically significant, $p= 0.01 < 0.05$. Explicit group increased its mean score from 49.91 in pre-test to 71.58 in immediate post- test (see Table 1).

According to the statistics, mean difference of writing accuracy scores (MD = -1.97) of the explicit and control groups was not statistically significant in immediate post-test, $F(33, 32.09) = 1.62, p = 0.65 > 0.05$ (see Table 3). Thus, the null hypothesis of the study accepted in that explicit corrective feedback has no

significant effect on writing accuracy of EFL learners in the short run. Since the control group improved its writing accuracy in immediate post-test in comparison with writing pre-test, writing accuracy gains of the explicit group cannot be attributed to the treatment. The gains in accuracy can be attributed to writing practice, maturation, and other factors.

Delayed post-test was administrated to investigate the effect of explicit corrective feedback on writing accuracy over time. In order to eliminate the effects of practice, students were not told when they would be required to write another description. After a three-week interval, the second post-test was administrated. Table 4 and Table 5 indicate that writing accuracy mean score of

the control group increased from 43.26 in pre-test to 53.42 in delayed post-test and this writing accuracy gain was statistically significant, $p = 0.01 < 0.05$. Table 13 and Table 14 also indicate that writing accuracy mean score of the explicit group increased from 50.30 in pre-test to 51.13 in delayed post-test, but this writing accuracy gain was not statistically significant, $p = 0.90 > 0.05$.

As Table 6 presents, mean difference of control and explicit group ($MD = 2.28$) was not statistically significant, $F(35, 34.69) = 0.39$, $p = 0.72 > 0.05$. It can be concluded that the experimental group did not perform better than control group after the treatment. Thus, the null hypothesis is strongly accepted.

Table 3. Independent T-test on Immediate Post-test Scores of the Control and Explicit Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Interval of the Difference	Confidence of the Difference
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
Immediate Post-test	Equal Variances assumed	1.652	.211	-.459	33	.650	-6.177	4.31118	-10.74831	6.79403
	Equal Variances not assumed			-.462	-32.095	.647	-4.334	4.28266	-10.69961	6.74537

Table 4. Mean Scores of Groups in Pre-test and Delayed Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control Group	Pre-test	43.2632	19	13.57220	3.11368
	Delayed Post-test	53.4211	19	18.84237	4.32274
Explicit Group	Pre-test	50.3056	18	17.75250	4.18430
	Delayed Post-test	51.1389	18	19.58076	4.61523

Table 5. Paired Samples T-test on Pre-test and Delayed Post-test Scores

		<i>Paired Differences</i>			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control Group	Pre-test Immediate-Post	-10.15791	16.53368	3.79309	-18.12687	-2.18892	-2.678	18	.015
Explicit Group	Pre-test Immediate-Post-test	-.83333	29.24038	6.89202	-15.37423	-13.70761	-.121	17	.905

Table 6. Independent T-test on Delayed Post-test Scores of Control and Explicit Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Immediate Post-test	Equal Variances assumed	.390	.536	.361	35	.720	2.28216	6.31673	-10.54151	15.10581
	Equal Variances not assumed			.361	34.691	.720	2.28216	6.32348	-10.55921	15.12356

4. Conclusion

By referring to the statistical findings of this study, it can be concluded that write-ten corrective feedback by offering EFL writers opportunities to notice the gaps in their developing foreign language system and engage in metalinguistic reflection does not have the ability to foster foreign language acquisition and to lead to writing accuracy development. Providing feedback on EFL learners' language performance is based on the positive role of consciousness in language acquisition and on noticing hypothesis. The findings of this study are in line with Truscott and Krashen theories.

Truscott (1998) has argued that noticing hypothesis does not have theoretical and psychological basis. Krashen (1982), by proposing the acquisition-learning distinction, asserts that corrective feedback helps conscious language learning. Conscious learning is available to the language performer as a monitor, and it is not sufficient condition for language acquisition to occur. As Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996) argued, the improvements in immediate post-test were caused by EFL writers metalinguistic knowledge and conscious control over their output. Since these superficial changes do not reach EFL

writes' competence, they tend to disappear over time(as shown in delayed post-test).

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