



## Educational Technology

*Elixir Edu. Tech.* 94 (2016) 40665-40669

**Elixir**  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# The role of Feedback on Iranian EFL learners writing ability

Maryam Talebi

Department of Foreign Language, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Damavand Iran.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 19 April 2016;

Received in revised form:

23 May 2016;

Accepted: 28 May 2016;

#### Keywords

ESL/EFL writing,

Pretest,

Post-test,

Delayed post-test.

### ABSTRACT

Corrective Feedback has been extensively debated in the ESL/EFL writing. Both focused and unfocused corrective feedbacks seem to have a positive effect in ESL/EFL writing. The present study examined focused and unfocused corrective feedback for the target form of articles for elementary group as anaphoric reference in written narrative of Iranian EFL learners. 60 participants were selected via the Oxford Placement Test and were assigned to two elementary and advance groups. Then members of each group were randomly divided to subgroups. One subgroup received focused feedback and another half received unfocused feedback. In other words, the focused group received feedback in the form of the correction of articles while the unfocused group received correction of articles error alongside correction of other errors. The participants were given a narrative writing with some pictures and key terms and after reading them, the narrative writing, but not the pictures, was taken away and they were asked to rewrite the narrative in their own words. This task was conducted three times, as a pretest, a post-test and a delayed post-test. This study attempted to examine whether different kinds of corrective feedback does have any effect on learning of articles for elementary level. An in-group paired sampled t-test was calculated between the scores obtained in the pre-test, the post-test, and the delayed post-test. A close examination of the results the data showed that focused corrective feedback was more efficient and significant. The findings are consistent with other studies conducted under similar circumstances.

© 2016 Elixir All rights reserved.

### Introduction

#### Statement of problem

In spite of quantity of writing courses within the universities, institutions, high schools and the like, obtaining writing proficiency is a difficult task. In the EFL context of Iranian schools, it is the researcher's experience that learners do not properly develop the skill of writing. As writing play an important role in personal and professional lives, thus it has become one of the essential components in English curricula. Unfortunately, EFL education in the Iranian context spends little time on writing. As a result many Iranian students have difficulty with EFL writing. In the EFL context of Iranian schools, ; The learners do not develop a proper skill of writing. The causes for this lack of competence are diverse, including large number of students in a class, lack of specific instruction, etc. Consequently, linguistic accuracy of Iranian learners in writing has becomes the focus of teachers in many EFL classrooms. The results of their study showed that selective written grammatical feedback can produce large short-term gains for functionally complex grammatical features, but that it may prove to be detrimental in the long run. As the use of articles in English is difficult for Persian speakers, it causes many problems for Iranian EFL learners. Some of EFL learners omitted the articles (Robertson, 2000), some of them overused of zero articles especially the learners whose native language do not embody an article system (Agnihotri, Khanna& Mukherjee, 1984; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). Others, substitute "a" for "an" or vice versa and used them randomly (Yamada & Matsuura, 1982). Some studies have presented a solution for the problem.

### Purpose of the Study

Given the problem stated above, the present study was an investigation of the effect of focused and unfocused written corrective feedback in the EFL context with an emphasis on the English article system of elementary students. In other words, the researcher aims at finding out whether utilizing a particular CF technique (focuses and unfocused) concentrating on articles significantly effects the number of errors made by elementary learners.

### Research Questions

Based on the purpose of this study mentioned before the following questions were posed:

1. Does providing focused corrective feedback significantly affect elementary Iranian learners' accuracy level of the articles?
2. Does providing of unfocused corrective feedback significantly affect elementary Iranian learners' accuracy level of the articles?

### Null Hypotheses

In order to investigate the research questions the following null hypotheses were put forward:

H1. The presentation of focused corrective feedback in writing does not improve elementary Iranian female learners' accuracy level of the article.

H2. The presentation of unfocused corrective feedback in writing does not improve elementary Iranian female learners' accuracy level of the article.

### Significance of the Study

The results of this research may provide empirical evidence to aid in the decision for choosing the proper method

of CF in writing for teachers, researchers, and those who are responsible for improving writing of EFL learners.

The results of this research may enable teachers to explain their own error correction methods from the learner's perspective, so they can change their methods based on their learners' needs. Furthermore, the teachers might help learners to notice their errors and use the appropriate techniques to correct them and know that which types of feedback meet the needs of their learners in different level.

**Key Terms:** accuracy, feedback, corrective feedback, focused corrective feedback, unfocused corrective feedback, elementary level

#### Review of the Related Literature

Writing and speaking as a productive skills require greater knowledge of grammar than the receptive skills and even writing more than speaking needs it. Language teachers use different written drills and exercise to assess the students' writing ability. Writing is also use as a means of learning for many students. Writing can help to rehearse the material and save it in long-term memory. Although seeing the language in writing form is not essential for some students, for others the vocabulary, grammar, and patterns are more easily and completely learned by writing and looking at what they are to learn (Chastain, 1988). Halliday (1989) refers to writing as negotiate and explanatory act, requiring great judgment. Celce-murcia (2001) mentioned the ability to write coherently and accurately in second or foreign is a hard work that most of the speakers have difficulty to skilled in it. Learning to write well organize text is a long process that requires much practice and sometimes formal instruction.

Nunan (1999) mentioned that writing emerged in societies because of cultural changes that created new communicative needs. He further added that written language is used for the following purposes:

"For action (e.g., public signs, product labels, television and radio guides, bills, menus,

Telephones, directories, ballot papers, computer manual); for information (e.g., news, papers, current affairs magazines, advertisements, political pamphlets)

for entertainments (e.g., comic strips, fiction books, poetry and drama, newspapers Features, film subtitles)" (p.275).

The advantages of writing have a deep effect on human communications as Coulmas (1989) mentioned:

"It is not risky to call writing the single most consequential technology ever invented.

The immensity of writing record and the knowledge conserved in libraries, data banks, and multilayered information networks, make it difficult to imagine an aspect of modern life is unaffected by writing. Writing not only offers ways of reclaiming the past but also shapes the future as a critical skill" (p 1).

Any information which provides a signal on the result of behavior is called feedback such as, verbal or facial signals that listener gives to speaker to show that he/she understand that the speaker wants to say. Teacher provides the students with correct form. It is the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic error. It may include the crossing out of an unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme, and the insertion of a missing word, phrase, or morpheme (Bitchener, 2008). Some teachers would provide feedback instead of correction. Feedback may be given in different forms (Burt and Kiparsky, 1974) divide the type of feedback into verbal and non-verbal. They also believe that feedback should be provided for consciousness rising.

Meanwhile the writing has got such an importance for learners; the feedback has also a crucial role in learners' writings. One of the crucial roles in writing instruction is the role of the instructor in providing response to students' writing. This response, mostly in the form of various feedback types, attempts to aid students to reflect on their writing and helps them move through stages of writing by revising over whatever feedback they have received from their teacher. Error feedback is a central aspect of L2 writing programs across the world; however, research has not been plainly positive about its role in writing development, and teachers often have a sense that they are not making use of its full potential (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback on students' writings is integral to L2 instruction. Writing feedback would help writing teachers to know how well their students have done in the writing assignments, which is considered one of the most important responsibilities of writing teachers.

The teachers' feedback enables the students to gain more information about the organization of his/her product. The student's attitude toward feedback can affect the way a student responses and implements it in his/her writing process. Moreover, student preferences to written feedback can differ according to students' beliefs of the purpose of written feedback. Therefore, attitudes and expectation of students provide some insight of when and how students respond to feedback. Hedgecock and Lefkowitz (1996) investigated college level writers' (both foreign language (FL) and English as a second language (ESL) students') perceptions of their instructor's feedback on their writing assignments. Interview data showed that instructional practices largely shaped learner's expectations concerning the educational goals of written feedback.

In teaching, feedback is the information given to the learner about his or her performance on a task (Ur,1996). The definition of CF used here refers to Lightbown and Spada's (2006) definition as: an indication to a learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect. Ramaprasad (1963) defined feedback as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (p.58).

Bitchener and Knock (2008) reviewed many studies that have investigated the effects of written corrective feedback. They divided these into studies with and without control group. All five of the studies without the control group (Chandler, 2000; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2006; Lalande, 1982) reported improvement in grammatical accuracy following feedback.

In general the focus of SLA research in regards to CF has been to examine "how it affects learning processes... and changes in linguistic competence" (Sheen, 2010b, p. 204). Written CF can be regarded as a positive way "to draw L2 learner's attention to linguistic forms in their writing products and thus improve their acquisition of L2" (p. 208).

There are different ideas and researches about the effectiveness of F and UF written corrective feedback. Teachers can decide to correct all of the students' errors in the case of unfocused CF or, alternatively they can select specific error types for correction in the case of focused; for example, teachers could choose to correct just articles errors.

Studies which have looked at focused feedback presume that all of the participants are ready to acquire the form being focused on. There are many reasons to believe that it is highly unlikely that all participants in a study will be ready to acquire the same form at the same time; therefore, a more student-

centered approach to feedback is necessary. On the other hand, studies assessing the effect of unfocused feedback tend to seek an increase in accuracy.

Some researchers believe F corrective feedback has positive result and some are disagree. (Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa (2009)) have assert "focused corrective feedback may enhance learning by helping learners to (a) notice their errors in their written work, (b) engage in hypothesis testing in a systematic way and (c) monitor the accuracy of their writing by tapping into their existing explicit grammatical knowledge" (p.567).

According to Widdowsom (1990), some teachers believe that learners can manage to learn a second and/or foreign language without any dependence upon grammar; however, others have persisted in a more traditional view that learning a language is essentially the same as the learning of grammar (p.79). Despite the existence of the traditional view mentioned above, Widdowsom comments that "grammar is not always necessary for communication, especially when the context of shared knowledge makes it possible to use minimal cues, even in some occasions single words" (1990, p.82).

The English article system has been a subject of interest for linguistics, given its complex usage and the difficulty involved in analyzing it. In describing articles, theorists have generally agreed the English articles are typical realizations of marking definiteness (Halliday, 1976; Chesterman, 1991; Lyons, 1999). They are used with noun phrases to indicate that something (whether in the real world or not) is definite or not. That is, an entity referred to by a noun phrase cannot be known as definite or non-definite without the occurrence of an article. Although the English article system compared with other aspects of grammar, may seem petty and trivial contribution of effective communication. Inappropriate use of the system undoubtedly reflects non-nativeness of a learner's language proficiency and may even bring about confusion and misunderstanding in written text.

#### Research design

The design to carry out the present study was quasi-experimental because in this research a pretest and two posttests and 4 experimental groups, and a treatment were involved. In addition, the participants were not randomly selected. This study consisted of two independent variables and a dependent variable. Written linguistic accuracy was the dependent variable and focused and unfocused written CF were the two independent variables respectively. Gender was the moderating variable.

#### Participants

In order to meet the goal of present research and to reach to reasonable answer to the research question, thirty female EFL Iranian students in Safir institutes participated in two groups of about fifteen pupils in each class on the basis of their scores which they obtained on the Oxford Placement Test (i.e. 105-119 for elementary level). Solely 30 candidates out of 45 obtained the required scores and the rest of candidates scored below or upper the passing point. So the researcher had homogenous groups as far as general knowledge of English in two groups of elementary.

#### Writing assignments

The researcher used three writing assignment for them. Topic1 was used as pre-test that contained 30 articles. In order to check the success of the participants' writing performance at the end of the treatments, after receiving teacher's feedback in focused and unfocused CF, the participants wrote a narrative writing as their immediate post-test. Topic 2 applied

as immediate post-test that have 30 articles, and Topic 3 was utilized as delayed Post-test that have 32 articles. The delayed post-test was administered about 2 weeks after corrective feedback was given to the participants. All the tests involved narrative writing based on pictures stories. These topics were selected because they were appropriate for their stage with simple grammar structure and beautiful pictures that was interesting for lower level learners and the most important reason was the frequent uses of different articles in their narrative writing. The goal would be to encouraging the students to complete a written narration on three distinct topics). In narrative writing, the students used articles to describe the story. Therefore, it was an appropriate writing type to examine the definite and indefinite articles in narrative writing. It's necessary to mentioned that the pre-test in this study also is the test of homogeneity for writing and used as independent sample t-test.

The scores for each student was calculated by dividing the total number of correctly supplied articles by the total number of obligatory occasions and expressed as proportion of one. The participants in focused group just received written corrective feedback on their errors on articles and were not made aware of their scores. The students in unfocused group receive written corrective feedback, both on articles errors alongside other linguistic errors and also they were provided with feedback not the results or scores.

#### Rating Scale

The rating scale in this study was calculated by means of obligatory occasion analysis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In other words, the scores for each student was calculated by dividing the total number of correctly supplied articles by the total number of obligatory occasions and expressed as proportion of one.

#### Data Collection Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of this study, the procedure of this study was pre-test, immediate post-test, delayed post-test and the entire study took 5 weeks. On the first week, the researcher administered the placement test to put students in their appropriate homogeneous level.

One week after placement test, the researcher conducted the pilot study. Prior to its main administration, the researcher conducted a pilot test with 5 similar to the target sample and item analysis and reliability estimate were conducted accordingly.

#### Data Analysis

To compare the effect of the CF component, that were focused and unfocused feedback on learners use of definite (for first mention) and indefinite article (for anaphoric) writing test scores calculated by means of obligatory occasion analysis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In other words, the scores for each student was calculated by dividing the total number of correctly supplied articles by the total number of obligatory occasions and expressed as proportion of one.

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants in this study the Oxford Placement Test was carried out and then the participants were assigned to elementary level. For this purpose candidates who obtained scores from 105 to 119 were selected as elementary group in this study.

#### Results

##### Testing Null Hypothesis 1

After ensuring the homogeneity of the group, the participants in groups were trained in writing in accordance to their treatment conditions; the focused group received feedback just on articles errors and unfocused group received

feedback on all the linguistic errors that they committed. The participants were instructed for 5 sessions. After the treatment, they had writing assignment test, which had same nature and characteristics as the pretest, was given to the participants in the focused and unfocused group. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the participants' scores. The result of the t-test is shown in Table 2. The researcher used paired t-test.

**Table 1.****Descriptive statistics**

	Feedback	Groups	M	SD	N
Pre-test	Focused	Elementary	0.6333	0.17593	15
	Unfocused	Elementary	0.6533	0.19952	15
	Total	Elementary	0.6433	0.18511	30
Immediate post	Focused	Elementary	0.4267	0.15337	15
	Unfocused	Elementary	0.6533	0.18465	15
	Total	Elementary	0.54	0.20274	30
Delayed Post-test	Focused	Elementary	0.3533	0.09155	15
	Unfocused	Elementary	0.5733	0.13345	15
	Total	Elementary	0.4633	0.15862	30

The above descriptive statistics table contains mean and standard deviation of pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test's scores that received focused and unfocused treatment. As shown the means of post-test and delayed post-test are more near to zero. In fact we had decreases in mean scores.

**Table 2.****A Paired Samples t-test**

pair differences							
		M	Std.	Std. error mean	t	df	sig.2tailed
Pair1 Pretest-immediate posttest		.20667	.190	.04925	4.1	14	.001
Pair2 Posttest-delay posttest		0.0733	74	0.0502	96	14	0.166
		3	0.19	1	1.4	61	

The results of dependent t-test show that the observed  $t=4.196$  for Pretest and immediate posttest is significant at the level of  $\alpha=0.05$ . So, the zero hypothesis is rejected. It means that there is significant difference between pre-test scores mean and immediate post-test in elementary focused group. Thus, it can be concluded that the mean of pre-test scores is higher than mean of immediate post-scores. The results of dependent t-test show that the observed  $t=1.461$  for Posttest and delay post test is not significant at the level of  $\alpha=0.05$ . So, the zero hypotheses is not rejected. It means that there isn't significant difference between mean of immediate post-test and mean of delayed post-test in elementary focused group.

**Table 3.****A Paired Sample t-test**

		M	N	Std. Deviation	Std. error Mean
paired1	Pretest	.6333	15	.17593	.45543
	Immediate posttest	.4267	15	.15337	.03960
	Delayed post-test	.3533	15	.09155	.02364

A close analysis of above tables imparts to us that for the learners, focused corrective feedback has more effect on the scores of post-test and delay post-test. At pre-test, there isn't any difference between the scores but when the teacher used focused feedback, the scores had significance differences compared to unfocused feedback. Also, it demonstrates that in focused group, the scores of delayed post-test decreased more compare to post-test.

## Testing Null Hypothesis 2

Before the administration of the treatment, the writing ability of learners was evaluated. The purpose of testing learner's writing ability before the treatment was to observe whether the participants were in the same level of ability and are homogenize in their writing ability or not. The results of pretest showed that all the students were in the same level in each group.

After the administration of the pre-test, the researcher gave the students WCF on their writing assignments. The participants in elementary group divided to two groups. One group received focused feedback and the other group received unfocused feedback the results are displayed in the Table.

**Table 4.****A Paired Sample t-test**

		M	Std. Deviation	Std. error Mean
Pre-test		.6533	15	.19952
Immediate post-test		.6533	15	.18465
Delayed post-test		.5733	15	.13345

**Table 5.****A Paired Samples t-test**

pair differences							
		M	Std.	Std. error mean	t	df	sig.2tailed
Pair1 Pretest-immediate posttest		0.000	0.10	0.02582	.000	14	1.000
Pair2 Posttest-delay posttest		.08000	.00	.03266	2.44	14	.028
			.126		9		
			49				

The results of dependent t-test show that the observed  $t=0.000$  is not significant at the level of  $\alpha=0.05$ . So, the zero hypothesis is not rejected. It means that there isn't significant difference between pre-test scores mean and immediate post-test in elementary unfocused group. Thus, it can be concluded that the mean of pre-test scores is equal to mean of immediate post-scores.

The results of dependent t-test show that the observed  $t=2.449$  is significant at the level of  $\alpha=0.05$ . So, the zero hypothesis is rejected. It means that there is significant difference between immediate post-test scores mean and delayed post-test in elementary unfocused group. Thus, it can be concluded that the mean of immediate post-test scores is higher than mean of delayed post-scores.

The result of above table demonstrates that the elementary learners get more benefit from focused corrective feedback and it has more effect on the scores of post-test and delayed post-test of them. There isn't any significance difference between the pre-test's scores, but when the learners receive focused feedback, the scores have change significantly compare to the learners that receive unfocused feedback.

## Discussion

Data analysis for Null-Hypothesis 1 revealed that focused CF had a positive influence on the writing ability of elementary participants. Out of 15 learners in focused elementary group 10 scored lower on pre-test than in the immediate post-test while no one scored higher and 5 the same in the two tests. These differences in the scores of pre-test and immediate post-test are significant and tell that focused CF had powerful effect on the writing ability of learners.

But in contrast the data demonstrated that there isn't significant difference between mean of immediate post-test and mean of delayed post-test in elementary focused group.

So the feedbacks are ineffective in long term.

### Conclusion

The results of post-test show that the increase in control over the use of articles was maintained for learners, with the learner from the focused group achieving more accuracy. Thus improvements are representative focused feedback on two groups. both groups improved significantly from pre-test to post-tests and all were better able to correct the article errors in their writing and also CF helped learners to enhance their understanding of the use of article to express as the results shows. This improvement is valuable because the learners didn't give any metalinguistic explanation on their errors. Thus their understanding is because of direct feedback.

The most important aim of educational research is to investigate the role of factors that involved in learning. To shed light on one of the most important factors that influence on writings of learners, the present study carried out. It investigated the effect of different feedbacks and the achievement of learners' writing in foreign context. The aim was to show whether in classes where the students receive feedback, there is any improvement in writing of elementary learners or not. It was found that a fair degree of feedback exists in language classes and it is positively affected to student's achievement.

Focused and unfocused are two complementary issued within the framework of any piece of writing-hence the reason why the focused and unfocused feedback evinces success enhancing the students' linguistic accuracy. It seems that supplying well-chosen and suitable feedback to the learners via focusing upon one point of grammar provides a situation from which students are capable of finding their areas of mistakes and removing them to prevent their repetition in the subsequent draft of writing. The learners showed that they possess the capability to write well-organized pieces of writing via receiving focused feedback of a written discourse.

### References

Agnihotri, R. K., Khanna, A. L., & Mukherjee, A. (1984). The use of articles in Indian English: Errors and pedagogical implications. *IRAL*, 22, 115–129.

Beare, K. (2008), (n.d.) Error correction. Retrieved on November 3rd, 2010 <http://esl.about.com/feedback>. *ELT Journal*, 63(3), 204–211.

Bitchener, J., & Knoch, U. (2008). The value of a focused approach to written corrective

Burt, M. and Kiparsky, c. (1972). *The Gooficon: A Repair Manual for English*. Rowley, Mass: Newburn House.

Celce-Murica, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (3rd ed.). Heinle&Heinle Publishers.

Chastain, K. (1988). *Developing second-language skills theory and practice*. Harcourt BraceJovanovich, Inc.

Chandler, J. (2003). The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2

student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12(3), 267-296.

Chesterman, A. (1991). *On definiteness: A study with special reference to English and Finnish*. Cambridge University Press.

Columas, F. (1989). *The writing systems of the world*. Oxford: Basil.

Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H., & Loewen, S. (2001). Learner uptake in communicative ESL lessons. *Language Learning*, 51, 281-318

Ferris, D. R (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multi-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 33-35.

Ferris, D. R. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 315-339.

Ferris, D. R., & Roberts, B. (2001). Error feedback in L2 writing classes. How explicit does it need to be? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10(3), 161-184.

Halliday, M. A. K., & R., Hasan. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. UK, Longman Group Ltd.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing*. London: Pearson Education.

Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, F. (2003). Focusing on form: Student engagement with teacher feedback. *System*, 31(2), 217-230. Development of second language writing skills. *Modern Language Journal*, 75(3), 305-313.

Hedgcock, J., & Leftkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity in second language writing. *Journal of Second Language writing*, 3(2), 141-163.

Hollings Worth, H. & Eastman, S, (1988). *Teaching writing in every class: a guide for grades 612*. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.

Lalande, J. (1982). Reducing composition error: An experiment. *Modern Language Journal*, 66, 140–149.

Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (2006). *How Languages learned* (3rd Ed.) Oxford University Press (233 pages).

Lyons, C. (1999). *Definiteness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston: Heinle&Heinle Publisher.

Parish, B. (1987). A new look at methodologies in the study of article acquisition for learners of ESL. *Language Learning*, 37, 361–383.

Ramaprasad, A. (1983). On the definition of feedback, *Behavioral Science*, 28, 4-13.

Sheen, Y., Wright, D., & Moldawa, A. (2009). Differential effects of focused and unfocused written correction on the accurate use of grammatical forms by adult ESL learners. *System*.

Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: practice and theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yamad, J., & Matsuura, N. (1982). The use of the English article among Japanese.