The Effect of Post-writing Activities on the Writing Proficiency of Iranian EFL Learners

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	There is a controversy over providing error correction feedback on L2 writing. Some researchers propose that it should be totally abandoned. Other researchers claim that the basis for the proof of these studies is insufficient and further investigation is required. In this research, it was examined whether the type of corrective feedback (direct, explicit writing feedback along with student-teacher conferencing; direct, explicit writing feedback alone; no corrective feedback) on three types of error (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) had any significant effect on writing accuracy of Iranian university students. For this purpose, 60 university students majoring in English Language Teaching were selected and they were separated into three groups. Each group was exposed to a distinct corrective feedback. The study found significant effect for the application of the first corrective feedback (direct, explicit written and conference feedback) on students' writing accuracy in the case of past simple tense and the definite article. But these feedback types had no significant effect on writing accuracy when the three error types were considered as a single group.

Introduction

There are various claims against and in behalf of the application of corrective feedbacks. One of the researchers disapproving them is Truscott. In his 1996 article he debated against giving feedback on students' writing (Truscott, 1996, 1999). He took a position towards abandoning the application of grammar correction. His justification included two domains. First, he argued that the present error correction practice does not take into account current SLA theories concerning the complicated acquisition processes of language structures. Second, he was dubious about teachers' ability and tendency for providing effective error correction.

In opposition to these claims, Ferris (1999) disapproved this line of research and claimed that previous research was inconclusive regarding the present developments in research findings. He advocated the application of statistical procedures for obtaining significant differences. Ferris provided reasons for error correction by teachers. One of the routine reasons is that students regard these feedbacks highly valuable.

Only a few studies have attempted to directly investigate whether L2 students who receive written corrective feedback on their errors are able to improve the accuracy of their writing compared with those who do not receive error feedback. Each of these studies (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck, &Leder, 1998; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) reported that there was no significant difference in the writing accuracy of the students. However, it needs to be noted that three of the studies (Polio et al., 1998; Robb et al., 1986; Sheppard, 1992) did not include a non-feedback control group. Although Fathman and Whalley (1990) found that fewer grammatical errors were made by students who received error feedback, this particular study examined text revisions and not new pieces of writing over time.

An increasing number of studies have also been investigating whether certain types of corrective feedback are more likely than others to help L2 students improve the accuracy of their writing. In reviewing some of these studies, Truscott (1996) reported that none of them (Kepner, 1991; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992) found significant differences across any of the different treatment groups (content comments only; error correction only; a combination of content comments and error correction; error identification, but no correction) but when the evidence from studies that have considered other feedback distinctions is examined, it is clear that such a conclusion should at this stage be treated with caution.

A good number of studies have distinguished between direct and indirect feedback strategies and investigated the extent to which they facilitate greater accuracy (Ferris, 1995a,b; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form, while indirect strategies refer to situations when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but does not provide a correction, thereby leaving the student to diagnose and correct it. Additionally, studies examining the effect of indirect feedback strategies have tended to make a further distinction between those that do or do not use a code. Coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of error involved is indicated with a code (for example, PS means an error in the use or form of the past simple tense). Uncoded feedback refers to instances when the teacher underlines an error, circles an error, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error.

On the other hand, the studies by Lee (1997) and Ferris and Roberts (2001) did have control groups which received no corrective feedback. Lee's study of EFL college students in Hong Kong found a significant effect for the group whose errors

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were underlined, compared with the groups who received no corrective feedback or only a marginal check. Ferris and Roberts (2001) examined the effects of three different feedback treatments (errors marked with codes; errors underlined but not otherwise marked or labeled; no error feedback) and found that both error feedback groups significantly outperformed the no feedback control group, but, like Robb et al. (1986), they found that there were no significant differences between the group given coded feedback and the group not given coded feedback. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that Ferris and Roberts (2001) investigated text revisions rather than new pieces of writing over time.

Ferris (1999) introduced a distinction between ''treatable'' and ''untreatable'' errors, suggesting that the former (verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, article usage, plural and possessive noun endings, and sentence fragments) occur in a rule-governed way, and so learners can be pointed to a grammar book or set of rules to resolve the error, while the latter (word choice errors, with the possible exception of some pronoun and preposition uses, and unidiomatic sentence structure, resulting from problems to do with word order and missing or unnecessary words) are idiosyncratic and so require learners to utilize acquired knowledge of the language to correct the error. This distinction has been examined in two recent studies (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

The Ferris et al. (2000) study, for example, found that learners made substantial progress over a semester in reducing errors in verb tense and form (''treatable''), made slight progress in reducing lexical (''untreatable'') and noun ending errors (''treatable''), and regressed in the sentence structure (''untreatable'') and article errors categories (''treatable''). Ferris and Roberts (2001) also reported a reduction in verb and noun ending errors in text revisions. Additionally, whereas Ferris et al. (2000) found no reduction in article errors, Ferris and Roberts (2001) reported some increase in the accurate use of articles. This difference in findings for articles is not altogether surprising when one considers the complex rule structure associated with the correct usage of definite and indefinite articles in different linguistic environments (Master, 1995).

Research Question

Does the type of post-writing activity of corrective feedback on linguistic errors determine accuracy performance in new pieces of writing?

Methodology

Participants

From among two hundred and fifty undergraduate students majoring in English Language Teaching at Ahwaz Azad University, one hundred students were randomly selected. The participants took part in a TOEFL test. Based on the mean and standard deviation of the obtained scores, sixty students were selected as the intermediate proficiency group. These students scored between one standard deviation above the mean and one standard deviation below the mean. These students randomly divided into three groups including 20 participants. These groups were exposed to the same writing skill instruction during a semester.

Design

The participants were divided into three treatment groups. Despite different amounts of instruction, the same amount of time was spent teaching grammar in each of the three classes. Because the focus of the all classes was on writing, all three classes received the same amount of attention in this skill area. Group one, including 20 participants, received direct written corrective feedback and a 5 minute student–researcher conference after each piece of writing. Group two, including 20

participants, received direct written corrective feedback only. Group three, including 20 participants, received no corrective feedback on the targeted features but, to satisfy ethical requirements, they were given feedback on the quality and organization of their content.

Direct written feedback took the form of full, explicit corrections above the underlined errors (see example in Appendix A).The conference sessions gave participants the opportunity to ask questions about their errors and the corrections they had received as well as the chance to receive additional explanations and examples. Each conference session began with the researcher asking the student which corrections he or she did not understand or wanted further examples of. When additional explanations of the corrective feedback were given, the researcher wrote down a new sentence with the same error in it for the student to correct. The researcher then referred to other instances of the error in the student's text and asked him/her to correct them. The researcher drew particular attention to errors that were made in different linguistic environments. In each conference session, all three targeted categories of error were discussed (if errors had been made in these categories).The content of these sessions was controlled by the fact that only one of the researchers participated in the conferences. This researcher was not involved in teaching any of the groups.

Writing tasks

Each participant completed four 250 word writing tasks during the 12 week period, staged at weeks 2, 4, 8, and 12. Each writing task was of a similar type—an informal letter which varied in content but which nevertheless provided participants with the opportunity to use the targeted linguistic forms (see the example in Appendix A). One task, for example, asked participants to write a letter to anIndian friend who they used to know in Iran but who later went to work in the student's native country. They were given 45 minutes to write about (1) what they had been doing since the Indian friend left Iran 6 months ago and (2) the activities they could do together when the student returned to their native country at the end of the year (see the example in Appendix A).

Analysis

In order to investigate interactions between factors as well as the effects of individual factors, two-way repeated-measures ANOVA was chosen as an appropriate statistical procedure. Additionally, if a test revealed statistical significance, post hoc tests to evaluate differences among specific means were also conducted. Each participant was exposed to all combinations of levels of two qualitative within-participant factors: (1) linguistic error at three levels (prepositions, past simple tense, definite article), and (2) time at four levels (week 2, week 4, week 8, week 12). In addition, there was a between-participants factor: feedback at three levels (conference and written, written only, none). For each combination, participants were measured on a quantitative variable: accuracy performance. This was calculated as the percentage of correct usage of each targeted linguistic form.

Results

This section presents the results of investigating the extent to which different types of corrective feedback on three targeted linguistic errors helped learners improve the accuracy of their writing when producing new texts. The means and standard deviations for each treatment combination are shown in Table 1. As an example of the information revealed in this table, it can be seen that in using the definite article in the first piece of writing (time one), participants who received no written feedback had a mean score of 55.31 and a standard deviation of 29.15. The data

were then used to find out whether there was an effect for the different types of feedback on accuracy performance.

Table 1. Mean performance score (percentage of correct usages)

	Type of corrective feedback					
	Both conference and written		Written only		None	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Preposition score time 1	82.21	7.03	83.71	10.56	80.31	10.64
Preposition score time 2	79.93	8.22	80.64	11.53	79.69	7.81
Preposition score time 3	77.93	11.75	81.36	8.05	81.00	8.50
Preposition score time 4	84.79	8.92	75.79	10.09	77.38	7.97
Past simple score time 1	91.64	8.66	81.07	18.49	75.69	17.14
Past simple score time 2	82.64	28.89	56.93	33.18	75.31	31.67
Past simple score time 3	59.86	38.58	58.21	44.86	68.31	27.08
Past simple score time 4	91.50	11.22	77.86	15.91	82.92	11.17
Definite article time 1	63.00	37.22	69.29	30.60	55.31	29.15
Definite article time 2	62.29	17.39	54.79	28.13	42.62	28.60
Definite article time 3	58.36	19.23	61.57	19.52	58.92	26.94
Definite article time 4	83.93	14.40	61.93	17.57	47.62	25.45

Firstly, we were interested in seeing if there was a differential effect for any of the feedback options on the targeted error categories when they were considered as a single group rather than as three separate error categories. An ANOVA test revealed that there was not a differential effect for any of the feedback options at the 0.05 level ($F(2, 38) = 2.7$, $p = .081$).
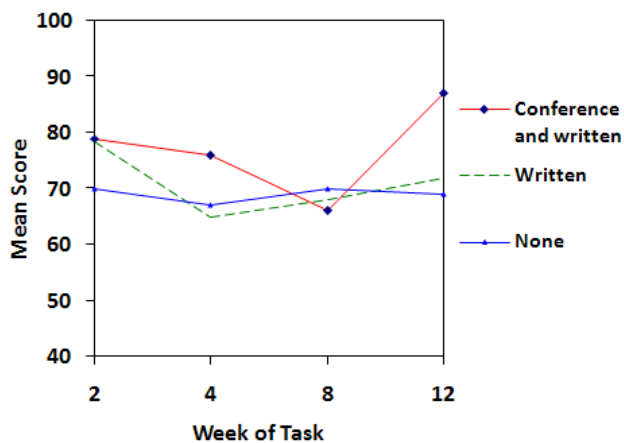

Fig. 1. Mean performances for types of feedback irrespective of linguistic form

However, Fig. 1 below indicates that the typical performance of the participants over the 12 week period differed according to each feedback option. For example, we can see that group one(receiving both written mehdi conference/ feedback) improved from week 8 toweek 12.An ANOVA test confirmed that the effect of interaction between feedback types and time was statistically significant (Wilks' $\Lambda = .64$, $F(6, 72) = 3.00$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, although average levels of accuracy overall were not significantly different, patterns of improvement or

decline were significantly different for the different feedback types according to which of the four times in which the writing was produced. Consequently, we were interested in investigating these separate patterns. Firstly, we examined the effect of the different feedback types on each linguistic error category (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article). Then, we investigated the interactional effect of feedback type and time on each error category.

Prepositions

For prepositions, the average accuracy performance did not vary according to the type of feedback provided. However, when we examined whether there was an effect for the interaction of feedback type and time, the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference across the four writing times (Wilks' $\Lambda = .77$, $F(6, 96) = 2.26$, $p < 0.05$).For example, Fig. 2below shows that group one (receiving both written and conference feedback) performed differently across the four times to the other two groups and most noticeably so between weeks 8 and 12.
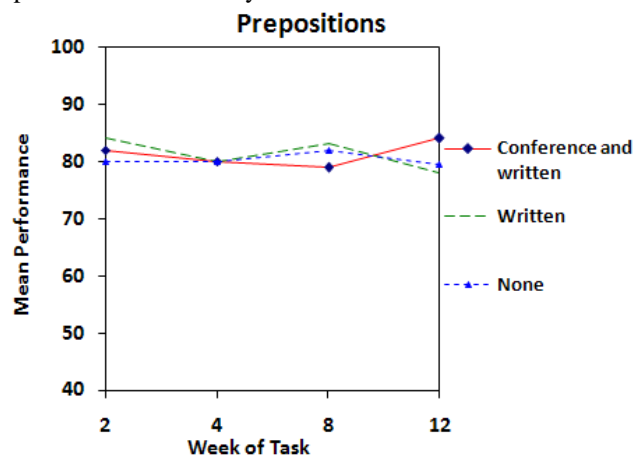

Fig. 2. Preposition performance score by feedback.

The past simple tense

For the past simple tense, the average accuracy performance differed according to the type of feedback provided ($F(2, 40) = 3.58$, $p < 0.05$). As Fig. 3 indicates, group one (receiving both written and conference feedback) had a significantly higher performance average than group two (receiving written feedback only). The interaction effect of feedback type and time was not significant, implying that patterns of improvement over the 12 weeks were similar for the three types of feedback. In other words, time did not have an effect on the three types of feedback.
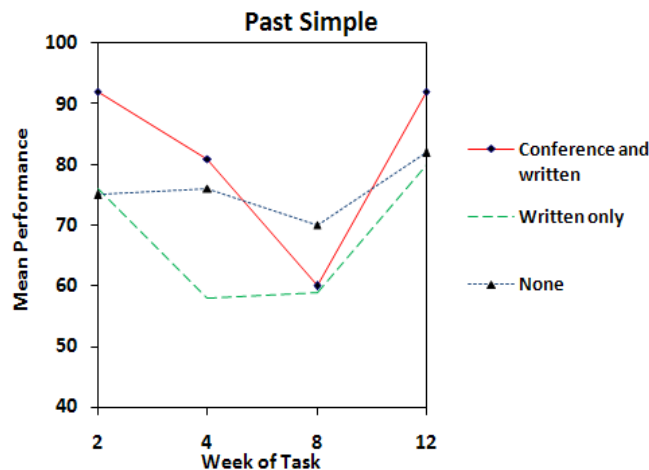

Fig. 3. Past simple performance score by feedback.

The definite article

For the definite article also, the average performance differed according to the type offeed back provided ($F(2, 48) =$

4.42, p < 0.05)(Fig. 4). Group one (receiving both written and conference feedback) had a significantly higher performance average than group three (receiving no corrective feedback). The interaction effect of feedback type and time was not significant, indicating that the pattern of improvement over time was similar for the three feedback types.
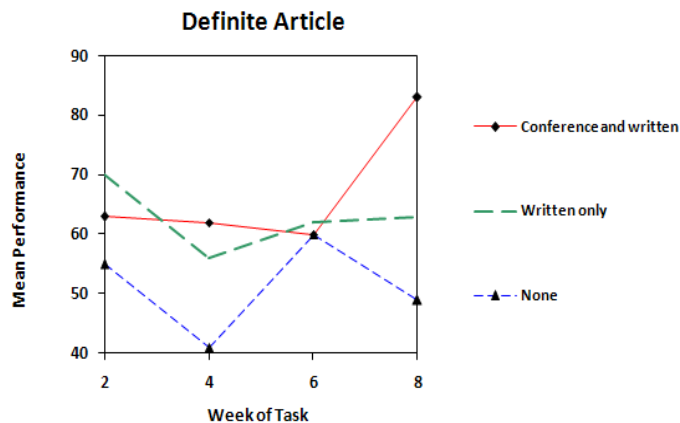

Fig. 4. Simple main effect: definite article performance score by feedback.

Discussion and Conclusion

Truscott claimed that error correction does not have a significant effect on improving L2 student writing. The present study investigated the effect of post-writing activities including three different types of feedback on the accuracy performance of three targetedlinguistic error categories in new pieces of writing. The study found that the type of feedback provided did not have a significant effect on accuracy when the three targeted error categories were considered as a single group. From this study, we can conclude that Truscott (1996) was right when he claimed that the provision of corrective feedback on L2writing is ineffective. But the results of the investigation into the effects of different types of feedback on individual linguistic features indicates that this type of examination is more fruitful because it acknowledges the fact that different linguistic categories represent separate domains of knowledge and that they are acquired through different stages and processes (Ferris, 1999,2002; Truscott, 1996).

The present study found that the type of feedback provided had a significant effect on the accuracy with which the participants used the separate linguistic categories in new pieces of writing. The provision of full, explicit written feedback, together with individual conference feedback, resulted in significantly greater accuracy when the past simple tense and the definitearticle were used in new pieces of writing. However, this was not the case with the use of prepositions. Whereas the use of the past simple tense and the definite article are determined by sets of rules, those concerning the use of prepositions are more idiosyncratic. As Ferris (1999) suggests, the former are more readily ''treatable'' than the latter. It is clear from this study that the two more ''treatable'' categories (the past simple tense and the definite article) were amenable to the combination of written and oral (conference) feedback. By comparison, participants in group two who received only written feedback were not given the opportunity to discuss their corrected errors and those in the control group were not given any written or oral feedback on the targeted linguistic features. Consequently, it is suggested that classroom L2 writing teachers provide their learners with both oral feedback as well as written feedback on the more'' treatable'' types of linguistic error on a regular basis.

The present study also found that accuracy performance was inconsistent across the four writing occasions. Although time comparisons have not been directly investigated in earlier

error correction research, SLA research has consistently found that learners, in the process of acquiring mastery over the use of linguistic features, will accurately use a given feature on one occasion but fail to do so on other occasions even when the linguistic environment is the same. Consequently, in order to be able to observe patterns of consistent improvement, it is suggest that there is a need for research to examine the effects of corrective feedback more longitudinally. Investigations over several semesters would be ideal.

The findings of this study have demonstrated that intermediateL2 writers can improve the accuracy of their use of rule-governed linguistic features if they are regularly exposed to oral and written corrective feedback. Further research would need to be undertaken to see if this finding also applies to L2 writers at other proficiency levels andwhether it is also true for other linguistic forms where rules of usage are more complex and more idiosyncratic than they are for the use of the past simple tense and the definitearticle.

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Appendix A. Sample instructions and text

The following example illustrates the type of instructions that students were given before writing their texts and the type of correction they were provided with.

Instructions for learners

Write a letter to an English-speaking friend living overseas. In his/her last letter he/she asked you questions about your family:

1. Where is your family living?

2. How many close relatives do you have (e.g. cousins, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.)?

3. What was the last family occasion you spent together (describe, for example, a birthday, afestival, etc.)?

Include any news that your friend might be interested in about your life in Iran.

Head up and end the letter appropriately for an informal letter.

Write on alternate lines.

Write a minimum of 250 words in the text of the letter.

Part of one student's text

[Note: the corrective feedback provided in brackets was written above the underlined error inthe student's text.]

Dear John

I have received [wrong past tense — use past simple tense] your letter for [no preposition] 2weeks [word missing — add the word 'ago']. I'm so sorry that I wrote the letter to you late. I am very good. How are you?

Last Sunday I moved the [no definite article] house and now I lived [wrong tense — usepresent simple tense] in Ahwaz. It was [wrong tense — use present simple tense] very close[preposition and article missing—add 'to' and 'the'] city center because I studied [wrong tense—usepresent simple tense] English in [articlemissing—add 'the'] city center. My house is not very large, but very nice and sunny.