

The impact of written corrective feedback on EFL learners' writing performance

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تأثير ردود الفعل التصحيح المباشر وغير المباشر

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الملخص:

هناك اختلاف في الرأي حول ما إذا كان يجب على المعلمين الاستجابة للأخطاء النحوية التي كتبها المتعلمين في الأدب. للتحقيق في العوامل التي قد تظهر نتائج متناقضة كهذه، وقد أجريت هذه الدراسة بها للتحقق من تأثير التعليقات التصحيحية المكتوبة على الأداء المكتوب للمتعلمين. لهذا الغرض، تم اختيار 90 من طلاب الابتدائية من إجمالي عدد الطلاب في جامعة فرهنجيان في أورميا. في البداية، تم تعيين الطلاب عشوائياً إلى مجموعة مراقبة ومجموعتين تجريبيتين مع 30 مادة في كل مجموعة. قبل التدريب، شارك الطلاب في اختبار كتابي لتطبيق جميع المشاركين كاختبار مسبق. كتبت كلتا المجموعتين التجريبيتين نفس القدر من التدريب ونفس المواضيع خلال الدورات التدريبية الثمانية، بينما لم تشارك مجموعة المراقبة في أي نوع من التدريب. في النهاية، تم تنفيذ اختبار كتابي (KET) في ثلاث خطوات. أظهرت نتائج التحليل الإحصائي ذلك استفاد المتعلمين بشكل كبير من ردود الفعل التصحيحية في عملهم المكتوب. هذه الملاحظات التصحيحية أكثر تركيزاً وأكثر فعالية من التعليقات. ومع ذلك، كان لدى مجموعات التحكم أداء أقل. وتناقش مفاهيم حول التعليم الذاتي الفعال في المجالات التي تمت مناقشتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ردود الفعل التصحيحية مكتوبة، ردود الفعل التصحيح المباشر وغير المباشر.

Abstract

To date, conflict has existed in the literature on whether or not and how teachers should react to EFL learners' written grammar errors. To shed light on the factors that may explain such conflicting results, this study investigated the impact of written corrective feedback (WCF) on EFL learners' writing performance. For this purpose, 90 male elementary learners were chosen from total number of

learners in Urmia Farhangian University. Based on the result, the students were randomly assigned to one control and two experimental groups with 30 participants in each. Prior to treatment, students took part in a writing test to homogenize all participants as pre- test. Both experimental groups underwent the same amount of teaching and the same writing topics during 8 sessions of treatment while the control group was not engaged in any kind of treatment. At the end of treatment, a writing test (KET) was administered to three groups as immediate post- test and delayed post- test. The results of the statistical analysis demonstrated that learners benefited significantly from corrective feedback in their writing tasks. That is focused corrective feedback is more effective than the other types of feedback and the unfocused one was second effective type of feedback. However, the control groups had the lowest performance which means that this written feedback is effective in improving the performance of students on past simple. The implications are discussed in terms of effective autonomy supportive teaching in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback, Focused and Unfocused feedback

Introduction

This study aimed to find an answer to the question of whether the grammatical accuracy of the students will improve due to (a) focused corrective feedback, or (b) unfocused corrective feedback. The current study followed an intact group design which is considered a quasi-experimental. KET English Test was applied to make sure that all students were homogeneous. Then, participants were assigned randomly into three groups: one group as a control group and two other groups, one as focused (experimental 1) and another as unfocused (experimental 2).

Method

This study comprised Elementary level learners at Urmia Farhangian University. The study was conducted in October, 2014 and three classes were randomly selected and were given a homogeneity test of Cambridge Key English Test (KET).

Ninety male students of Urmia Farhangian University whose ages ranged from 20 to 22 constituted the population of this study. According to Morgan Sample Selecting Table, about 28 students will be randomly selected among the population. The materials which were used by the researcher consisted of:

- 1 Pre-test: Having established homogeneity among the groups in terms of their language proficiency, the researcher selected a topic covered in the students' books for which the learners were required to write a composition. Prior to any treatment, a meaningful guarantee for the homogeneity of the participants' writing ability in all the groups was obtained.
- 2 *Cambridge Key English Test (KET)* :It is the first level Cambridge English for Speaker of Other Languages (ESOL) exam intended to measure the ability to cope with everyday written and spoken communications at a basic and elementary level- Ket is at level A2 of Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR)- an internationally recognized framework, and as international standardized test, its validity and reliability have already been established (McGraw, 2004). KET tests three different section of ability: the first section includes reading and writing, the second section is test of listening, and the third section deals with speaking. In this study only the writing part of KET was used to check the initial differences between participants in terms of writing ability.

3 *Course Book* :The book used in this study was entitled “Concepts and Comments” which included passages with multiple-choice and essay type questions on vocabulary as well as reading comprehension questions. Also, the book has focused on some grammatical points.

4 *Post-test*: Finally, post-tests (i.e., immediate and delayed) were administered to close the practical phase of the study. The tests were comprised of the topic for which learners were asked to write in pre-test phase in order to explore the effect of treatments in the short term and the long run.

Procedure: KET was given to participants as pre- test to make sure that all of them were homogenous having similar writing ability. Then, the question sheet with 15 blanks was given to the students to use the correct form of the verbs in sentences (pre-test). Their writing grades were based on the frequency of grammatical errors. During the treatment, the learners were divided into three groups we had three groups in this study.

The first group received focused corrective feedback in their writing. In this group, teacher underlined only the past- simple tense errors, and then the corrected forms were given back to the students the next session. The second group received unfocused written corrective feedback, that is, all types of errors were corrected by teacher. The third group or control did not receive any feedback and revision on the grammatical features.

The experimental groups were under treatment for one month and another examination was applied again as immediate post-test in this stage. After one month, for two experimental groups, another examination was applied as delayed post-test. Finally, the data collected from pre-test, immediate post- test, and delayed post-test were analyzed .The papers were corrected by the researcher as follow: first, the number of correct instances of past simple as focused type of correction for experimental group “1” and the number correct instances of all verbs as unfocused type of correction for experimental group “2” were counted and then this number was divided by the total number of past simple tenses (experimental group one) and all types of tense (experimental group two) in the text, for example, if a student used 10 past simple tenses, and 7 of them were correct, then, %70 of his tenses were correctly used and his score was out of 100. In fact, the scores were based on the percentage of the correct instances of past simple tenses.

The data will be analyzed through utilizing SPSS (version 19) and via running a number of statistical analyses, including Kolmogrov-Smirnov and ANOVA and post-hoc Scheffe Tests.

The present chapter deals with statistical analysis of the present study. The data, having been collected were fed into SPSS and the following results were revealed. The chapter is organized in three sections. First, the pre- test is analyzed, then, immediate post- test and after that the delayed post- test.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for focused, Unfocused and Control Groups (Pre- test)

		focused Group(n=29)		Unfocused Group(n=30)		Control Group(n=30)	
		statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error
Mean		38.62	3.56	46.66	5.41	39.66	4.58
995% Confidence	Lower Bound	31.30		35.60		30.28	
Interval for Mean	Upper Bound	45.93		57.73		49.04	

5% Trimmed Mean		38.46		45.74		38.88	
Median		40.00		45.00		35.00	
Variance		369.4		878.1		630.9	
Std. Deviation		1.92		2096		2.511	
Minimum		10.00		10.0		.00	
Maximum		70.00		100.0		90.00	
Range		60.00		90.0		90.00	
Interquartile Range		35.00		50.0		32.50	
Skewness		.080	.434	.289	.427	.502	.427
Kurtosis		-1.079	.845	-1.153	.833	-.543	.833

Table 2: Test of Normality for Three Groups at Pre-test

	Groups	Kolmogorov- Smirnov (a)			Shapiro- Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	statistic	Df	Sig.
Pretest	Focused	.121	29	.200*	.936	29	.077
	Unfocused	.149	30	.86	.919	30	.026
	control	.150	30	.84	.941	30	.097

As the above tables reveals, three groups of the present study did not enjoy normal distribution, in other words, the distribution of scores was non- normal, therefore, the researcher had to apply non parametric statistics and in so doing decide to run the non parametric test of Kruskal- Wallis.

Table 3: Ranks and Kruskal- Wallis Test for Three Groups at Pre-test

	Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig
Pre- test	Focused	29	43.24	.988	2	.610
	Unfocused	30	48.78			
	Control	30	42.92			
	Total	89				

As table 3 indicates, the unfocused groups enjoyed the highest rank with the focused group being the second highest and the control group the last. However, in order to find out if these differences were significant or not, the researcher applied the Kruskal- Wallis test.

The Kruskal- Wallis test showed us that the difference between groups was not significant (sig> 0.05). therefore the researcher was confident to decide that the three groups were similar at the outset of the study and the treatment was given to the groups.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for focused, Unfocused and Control Groups (Post- test)

		focused Group(n=29)		Unfocused Group(n=30)		Control Group(n=30)	
		statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error
Mean		70.00	4.152	51.33	4.99	47.00	4.26
995% Confidence	Lower Bound	61.49		41.10		38.27	
Interval for Mean	Upper Bound	78.50		61.55		55.72	
5% Trimmed Mean		70.38		50.92		46.48	
Median		70.00		50.00		50.00	
Variance		500.0		749.8		545.8	
Std. Deviation		2.236		2.738		2.336	
Minimum		30.00		10.00		.00	
Maximum		100.00		100.00		100.00	
Range		70.00		90.00		100.00	
Interquartile Range		45.00		45.00		22.50	
Skewness		-.247	.434	.131	.427	.215	.427
Kurtosis		-1.190	.845	-.993	.833	.518	.833

Table 5: Test of Normality for Three Groups at Immediate Post-test

Groups	Kolmogorov-Smirnov(a)			Shapiro- Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Focused	.155	29	.71	.911	29	.018
Unfocused	.107	30	.200*	.951	30	.179
control	.149	30	.088	.952	30	.191

As the above tables reveal, three groups of the present study did not enjoy normal distribution, in other words, the distribution of scores was non- normal, therefore, the researcher had to apply non parametric statistics and in so doing decided to run the non parametric test of Kruskal- Wallis.

Table 6: Ranks and Kruskal- Wallis Test for Three Groups at Immediate Post-test

	Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi- Square	df	Sig
Immediate Post-test	Focused	29	58.40	12.157	2	.002
	Unfocused	30	40.67			
	Control	30	36.38			
	Total	89				

As table 6 divulge, the focused groups enjoyed the highest rank with the unfocused group being the second highest and the control group the last. However, in order to find out if these differences were significant or not, the researcher applied the Kruskal- Wallis test.

As the above table reveals, the difference between groups turned out to be significant ($\text{sig} < 0.05$). the focused type of feedback was more effective than the other types of feedback and the unfocused type was the second effective type of feedback. However, the control groups had the lowest performance which means that this written feedback is effective in improving the performance of students on past simple.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for focused, Unfocused and Control Groups (Delayed Post- Test)

		focused Group(n=29)		Unfocused Group(n=30)		Control Group(n=30)	
		statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error	statistic	Std. Error
Mean		82.414	3.353	52.667	5.294	52.000	4.272
995% Confidence	Lower Bound	75.545		41.838		43.262	
Interval for Mean	Upper Bound	89.283		63.495		60.738	
5% Trimmed Mean		83.621		52.778		51.667	
Median		90.000		50.001		50.000	
Variance		326.108		840.920		547.586	
Std. Deviation		1.80585E1		2.89986E1		2.34006E1	
Minimum		40.00		.00		10.00	
Maximum		100.00		100.00		100.00	
Range		60.00		100.00		90.00	
Interquartile Range		30.00		42.50		30.00	
Skewness		-.857	.434	-.030	.427	.071	.427
Kurtosis		-.371	.845	-.807	.833	-.052	.833

Table 8: Test of Normality for Three Groups at Delayed Post-test

Posttest	groups	Kolmogorov- Smirnov (a)			Shapiro- Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
	Focused	.249	29	.000	.857	29	.001
	Unfocused	.096	30	.200*	.957	30	.262
	Control	.167	30	.031	.947	30	.144

As the above table reveals, three groups of the present study did not enjoy normal distribution, in other words, the distribution of scores was non- normal, therefore, the researcher had to apply non parametric statistics and in so doing decided to run the non parametric test of Kruskal- Wallis.

Table 9: Ranks and Kruskal- Wallis Test for Three Groups at Delayed Post-test

	Groups	N	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig
Delayed posttest	Focused	29	64.12	23.987	2	.001
	Unfocused	30	36.58			
	Control	30	34.93			
	Total	89				

As table 9 shows, the focused groups enjoyed the highest rank with the unfocused group being the second highest and the control group the last. However, in order to find out if these differences were significant or not, the researcher applied the Kruskal- Wallis test.

Discussion

This study concerned the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on the learning of English simple past tense. The results indicated that the Focused CF group outperformed not only the Control group but also the unfocused group in immediate posttest. In other words, in the short term, focused written error correction directed at simple past tense errors resulted in greater accuracy than unfocused correction. Also in the longer term, the Focused CF group outperformed both groups as well. Moreover, the Unfocused CF group performed better than the Control group in both stages. These results suggest that Focused CF is more effective than unfocused CF. In other words, focused CF was influential in inducing the noticing and intake of the target form both in short-term and the long-term.

The study grants support to some studies that included a control group and investigated the short-term and long-term efficacy of error correction (e.g. Ashwell, 2000; Ferris, 1997; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007) and found that participants whose errors were corrected were able to make more accurate revisions than learners who did not receive any CF.

Regarding the focused type of the feedback (simple past) in this study, the findings are in line with Bitchener and Knoch (2010a) who showed that students who had received focused CF continued to outperform students whose errors had not been corrected. Furthermore, researches on the effectiveness of focused approach, which targeted specific linguistic features and left errors outside the focus domain uncorrected, indicated robust positive effects of focused CF and durable accuracy gains (Van Beuningen, 2010).

Regarding the long-term effect of written corrective feedback types, the results indicated that Focused group outperformed Unfocused and Control groups. The results of the current study were very similar to those of Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2011), Araghi and Sahebkhair (2014) and Sheen et al., (2009). They proved that the group receiving focused CF achieved the higher accuracy scores than the unfocused CF and the control groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that firstly, providing written CF is an effective way for responding to EFL learners' written performance in general. Secondly, focused written CF has more positive effect on these learners' acquisition of the targeted structures than the unfocused written CF. Focused CF may enhance learning by helping learners to notice their errors in their written work, engage in hypothesis testing in a systematic way and monitor the accuracy of their writing by tapping into their existing explicit grammatical knowledge.

These results differ from those of Ellis et al. (2008) who failed to find significant differences in the effects of Focused and Unfocused CF, with both proving to be more effective than no correction in a

delayed posttest. Truscott (1996, 2004, 2007) has consistently argued that learners should be allowed to just practice writing and that CF can negatively affect grammatical accuracy.

The finding of this study is valuable from a learning-to-write perspective because it shows that CF has the ability to help learners develop more effective revision and self-editing skills (Ferris, 2010). However, the results contradict Polio, Fleck, and Leder (1998) and Semke (1984), who found that CF had no effect on students' accuracy. Moreover, Kepner (1991) did not find any significant differences in error counts between learners who were provided with CF, and students who received content-related comments on an initial piece of writing.

While the current study does not lend full support to this claim, it does suggest that learners' accuracy can improve with any corrective feedback. To conclude the study, it can be stated that research projects in the literature mostly accept the influential effect of written corrective feedback over time and our results challenge his suggestion that the time spent on dealing with corrections could be allocated more efficiently to alternative activities, such as additional writing practice (Truscott, 2004).

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