

The Effect of Post-text Written Corrective Feedback on Written Grammatical Accuracy: Iranian intermediate EFL learners

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Abstract

The main role and responsibility of second language writing teachers is to help learners to write with minimal errors. To do so, teachers need to provide students with appropriate types of feedback. In this research, the researchers examined the effect of post-text written corrective feedback on written grammatical accuracy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In the first phase, Nelson Proficiency Test was administered to 45 intermediate students studying in two different classes at Cambridge Language Institute in Sari. 35 students were selected. Then, they were randomly assigned to experimental and another groups. The research was carried out in 12 sessions. The experimental group received post-text feedback on their writing tasks while the control group received the conventional type. After collecting data, the researchers used paired and independent sample t-tests to analyze the data. The results indicated that those students who received post-text feedback outperformed the ones in the control group. It means that indirect corrective feedback is more beneficial to students than the direct one. Therefore, post-text feedback can be adopted by EFL instructors to promote students' written grammatical ability.

Keywords-- post-text feedback, direct feedback grammatical accuracy, writing

Introduction

In writing, unlike oral communication, we do not have access to our readers, so our writing must be accurate enough to avoid confusion on the part of readers. Many EFL and ESL students have problems with their writing. These problems are that (1) students have few opportunities to respond to teacher feedback thoughtfully and critically, (2) their written texts contain many grammatical inaccuracies and (3) they have negative attitudes toward writing in English.

Since in learning a foreign language, making error is an indispensable part of the learning process, finely tuned and pertinent corrective feedback is an important tool for teachers to prevent their learners' errors from being fossilized and help them progress along their inter-language continuum. Giving relevant feedback based on the mistakes made by a learner has always been a common method for improving learners' speaking and writing skills. Any indication to learners by teachers that their use of the target language is incorrect is referred to as "written corrective feedback" (Lightbrown & Spada, 1999). The study of corrective feedback constitutes one of the richest veins of enquiry in classroom SLA research. In this study, the researcher examined the effect of post-text written corrective feedback on written grammatical accuracy of intermediate EFL learners—while focusing on some grammatical errors such as inappropriate use of verb tense (simple present, past and future tense) and inappropriate use of articles and plurals.

Statement of Problem

There is no doubt that writing is a difficult skill to master. These difficulties lie not only in generating and organizing ideas but also in translating these ideas into readable context. We see writing teachers are very busy struggling with piles of students' papers both at school and at home. They read, review, and provide correction and comments with their red pens until late at night, but the hard work and sweat of writing teachers in finding errors and providing correction on students' writing, sometimes does not work since students do not really learn from it. and most of the time, the corrected papers go to the dustbin as waste. So, what the teacher expects to happen does not always come true. The corrected errors appear repeatedly in students' writing.

Therefore, the teachers need to find other ways for improving the learners writing other than just correcting the errors. In order to help students be aware of their errors; the teacher should provide appropriate feedback for them. There are many types of indirect written corrective feedback that teachers can make use of them for improving the students' grammatical writing accuracy such as metalinguistic feedback, reformulation, post-text and in-text feedback, etc. Making use of these types of feedback, the teacher forces the learners to pay attention to their errors and help them to correct their error.

In this study, since the major concern is to provide appropriate techniques to expand students' grammatical accuracy, that is necessary for improving their writing skill, the researcher provided post-text feedback for the grammatical errors made by intermediate learners in writing tasks to see if this type of feedback leads to more correct revision or no.

Review of literature

Traditionally feedback has been understood as “any numerous procedures that are used to tell learner if an instructional response is right or wrong” (Kulhavy, 1977, as cited in Hawe, Dixon, & Watson 2008). A more expansive view is apparent in a notion of feedback as crucial interaction between teacher and student carried out for furthering students' learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003, as cited in Hawe, Dixon, & Watson 2008).

The main responsibility of writing teacher is to know how well the students have done in writing process. In this sense, writing feedback can help teachers to do so. For students writing feedback is helpful since they can recognize their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Feedback in written language has been the focus of the number of studies (for example, Ferris, 1997; Hyland, 2000; Xiang, 2004). In early 20th century, writing was viewed as product. The most common role of the teacher was to be a judge, critical evaluator of finished product (Karim & Irine Ivy, 2011). In 1960s, writing instruction began to include the entire process of writing invention, drafting, feedback, and revision (Sokolik, 2003, as cited in Karim & Irine Ivy, 2011).

These days the concept of feedback becomes more and more important in L₂ classes and it becomes an inevitable part of the whole writing process. Since Truscott published his article in 1996 “The case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes”, the debates about whether to give feedback to students' grammatical error has been of considerable interest (Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2004; Truscott, 1996, 1999). According to Truscott (1996), the grammar correction has no place in writing courses and teachers should avoid giving feedback on students' grammatical errors in writing (p. 328). Truscott analyzed the studies conducted by Kepner(1991), Semke(1984), and Sheppard (1992), he reached to this conclusion that there is no convincing research evidence that error correction ever helps students improve their grammatical writing accuracy. Truscott claimed that correcting learners' error in a written text might give them the ability to eradicate the same error in an ensuing draft, although it has no effect on grammatical

accuracy in a new piece of writing. He added that, correcting grammar errors is a waste of time and teachers should attempt to use their instructional time in a more constructive way.

Not surprisingly, a Truscott's view has generated considerable debate. Many researchers have strongly reacted to Truscott arguments (Chandler, 2003, 2004; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Lyster, Lightbown, & Spada, 1999; as cited in Nassaji, 2011). Ferris (1999), for example, claimed that Truscott's view was premature and based on inadequate database. Ferris argued that, the rapidly growing research evidence pointed to ways in which effective error correction can and does help at least some student writers providing it is selective, prioritized and clear(cited in Bichner et al, 2005).

Other researchers such as Lyster, Lightbrown, and Spada (1991) and Chandler (2003, 2004) have argued the grammar correction is essential for L2 acquisition.

Despite his call for the abandonment of error correction, Truscott (1999), in his response to Ferris, acknowledged that many interesting questions remain open and that it would be premature to claim that research has proven error correction can never be beneficial under any circumstances(cited in Bichner et al, 2005).

Despite the above controversial views about effectiveness of error correction, it is clear that grammar correction is not a simple issue and there is not a simple solution to it. Although many researchers agree that error correction is effective, there is less agreement among them on how and when it should be provided to be effective (Nassaji, 2011).

Statement of the Research Question and Null Hypothesis

This study was carried out to examine the impact of teachers' post-text written corrective feedback on grammatical development of Iranian EFL learners in written tasks. The specific research question is as follows:

Does the teacher's post-text written corrective feedback have any statistically significant effect on written grammatical accuracy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

Thus, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

Ho: Post-text written corrective feedback does not have any statistically significant effect on written grammatical accuracy of EFL intermediate learners.

Methodology

Participants and Instrumentations

The present study was carried out in two intermediate adult ESL classrooms at Cambridge Language Institute in Sari, Mazandaran province, Iran (henceforth class A and class B). It comprised of 35 learners who were selected from among 45 intermediate students studying Interchange 2 by Richards. Learners attended these classes three days a week, receiving 6 hours of instruction each week. The participants were adult females aged from 16 to 35. The proficiency levels of the students were determined in advance by the placement test, which was administered by the institute. It should be mentioned that in this study three raters scored the students' pre-test and post-test, the researcher and two other raters. The instruments used in this study were: Nelson Proficiency Test for homogenizing students and Pre-test and Post-test.

Procedure

In order to come up with the reasonable answer to the research question, the following procedures were done:

In the first phase, the researchers randomly selected two intermediate classes (class A and class B) at Cambridge Language Institute in Sari. There were 25 students in class A and 20 in class B ($N=45$). Then the researchers administered Nelson Proficiency Test to homogenize the students in both classes. Those whose scores fell between $\pm 1SD$ from the mean were chosen for the present study. Therefore, 18 out of 25 students of class A, and 17 out of 20 students of class B were selected for the study. Then the researchers randomly selected class A as control group and class B as experimental. The experimental group was provided with treatment (post-text feedback) during the research process, while the control group was taught with the conventional method (direct feedback).

A week prior to starting the treatment session, the pre-test was administered to the two groups in order to measure their writing proficiency in use of correct verb tense (simple present, past and future tense) and correct use of articles (definite and indefinite) and plurals (regular and irregular). So, for pre-test, all participants were asked to write a composition on the quality of life in details about 80-150 words. Afterwards, over the next 10 weeks, both groups completed ten written tasks in every other session, each of which followed by corrective feedback treatment session in the following class.

In the experimental group, the teacher highlighted the students' errors and wrote comments about them at the end of their texts. For example, if the learner wrote *I go to school yesterday*, the teacher highlighted the word *go* and wrote a comment like, *because of yesterday you have to use past tense*. After doing so, the teacher gave the papers back to the students and asked them to revise their errors based on the comments mentioned at the end of their writing tasks. Then the students had to submit the revised form of their writing to the teacher for further revision and scoring. Finally, one session after receiving the post-text feedback for the last writing task, the learners in both groups were given another writing test as a post-test. In this test, the participants were asked to write in 80-150 words about transportation in present, past and future.

Data Analysis

After administering the test and collecting the data, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS to answer the research question presented in this study. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to ensure the inter-rater reliability of the scores obtained from a pre-test and post-test by the three raters. Afterwards, the scores of the pre-test and post-test were analyzed and compared using independent and paired samples t-test. Table 1 shows the mean, frequency, standard deviation, mode and other descriptive statistics regarding the test of homogeneity, pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Related to Proficiency Test, Pre-test, and Post-test

N	M	St	M	S	Va	M	M
V	ea	d.	ed	D	ria	in	a
al	n	Er	ia		n	sc	x
id		ro	n			o	sc
		r				r	o
		of				e	r
		M					e

that the data were normal (pre-test EXP G $.654 > 0.05$; CON G $.600 > 0.05$ and post-test EXP G $.556 > 0.05$; CON G $.457 > 0.05$); therefore, the spearman product moment correlation coefficient was used to measure the inter-rater reliability of the experimental and control groups' scores given by the raters in both tests. The correlation and coefficient of the scores given by three raters revealed that the scores were positively correlated with each other.

Comparison of means between the pre-tests obtained from the experimental group and control group

The researchers used independent samples t-test to compare the means between pre-test in experimental group and control group. Table 2 below, illustrates the results of independent samples t-test.

Table 2. Independent Samples T-test

	N	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Median	SD	Varianc e	Min score	Max score	
exp group in proficiency test	20	29.0000	1.12858	27.5000	26.00 ^a	5.04715	25.4740	20.00	41.00
control group in proficiency test	25	30.3200	1.00452	30.0000	24.00 ^a	5.02262	25.2270	24.00	40.00
mean of scores in exp G in pre test	17	14.1918	.40704	14.0000	13.00	1.67826	2.8173	11.33	17.33
mean of scores in control G	18	14.4611	.36790	14.4950	15.00	1.56087	2.4363	11.33	17.00

in pre test										
in	exp	17	17.780	.26204	18.000	17.33	1.0804	1.167	15.6	19.66
mean	of		6		0		4		6	
scores										
group	in									
post	test									
mean	of	18		.26493		14.00		1.263		17.33
scores	in		15.091		15.000		1.1240		13.0	
control	G		1		0		0		0	
in	post									
test										

The above table shows that the sig. related to the students' scores in pre-test in both groups, is 0.626 -which is more than 0.05 ($p = 0.626 > 0.05$). This probability value indicates that the control and experimental groups' scores were not significantly different from each other. Therefore, it ensured the researchers that both groups are homogeneous.

Comparison of means between the pre-test and post-tests obtained from the experimental group

In this section, the researchers tried to compare the students' score in pre-test and post-test obtained from the experimental group using paired samples t-test.

Table 3. Paired Samples T-test

	Paired Differences								Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df		
				Lower	Upper				
mean of scores exp group in post test - mean of scores exp group in pre test	3.58882	1.34470	.32614	2.89744	4.28020	11.004	16	.000	

The results of paired samples t-test for the experimental group suggested that there was a huge difference between the scores of the pre-test and post-test. Table 3 illustrates that the probability value is 0.00 which is lower than the critical value of 0.05. Therefore, it can be

concluded that the students' performance in post-test was much better than their performance in pre-test. These results show that post text feedback does have influence on the students' grammatical writing accuracy. Thus, the null-hypothesis stating the non-existence of an effect by post-text feedback was rejected.

Comparison of means between the pre-test and post-tests obtained from the control group

In the previous section, it was mentioned that the researchers used paired samples t-test to compare the results of pre-test and post-test obtained from experimental group. In this section, they compare the results of pre-test and post-test obtained from control group using the same way. Table 4 below demonstrates the results of paired samples t-test.

Table 4. Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences		Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation		Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 mean of scores control group in post test - mean of scores control group in post test	.63000	1.07218	.25271	.09682	1.16318	2.493	17	.023

The difference between the means of scores in pre-test and post test is 0.63. This shows that the traditional way of giving feedback did improve the students' scores although this improvement was not very significant. So, the direct written corrective feedback does affect the grammatical writing accuracy of the students but not as much as post-text feedback.

Comparison of means between the post-tests obtained from the experimental group and control group

Here, the means between the post-text obtained from the two groups were compared using independent samples t-test.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-test

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error of the Difference	95% Confidence Interval	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.082	.776	7.209	33	.000	2.68948	.37307	1.93047	3.44849
Equal variances not assumed			7.218	32.988	.000	2.68948	.37263	1.93134	3.44761

The above table shows that the sig. related to the Leven's test confirms the equality of the variances and the sig. belonging to the t-test demonstrates a significant difference between the scores obtained from the post-tests of the two groups. In this table, the probability value is zero. This means that the possibility value was smaller than 0.05 ($p=0.00 < 0.05$) indicating that the experimental and control groups' scores were significantly different from each other. This shows that the experimental group, which received post-text feedback, performed much better than the control group which received direct feedback. As a result, the null-hypothesis stating the non-existence of an effect by post-text feedback was rejected.

Results

There are not many practical studies examining the effect of post-text written corrective feedback. This study highlights the importance of providing students with post-text written corrective feedback to improve the students' grammatical accuracy in writing. The students who received post-text written corrective feedback could significantly improve their grammatical ability. They felt greater commitment to improving their writing when the teacher gave them the chance to correct their errors based on useful comments written at the end of their text. Students found the elaborated comments on specific elements of their writing more helpful in guiding their revisions. So, this study indicates some support for the use of post-text written corrective feedback rather than the use of conventional type (direct feedback). In fact, applying post-text feedback in students' writing tasks motivates, encourages and prepares learners to notice their mistakes, revise and redraft their writing work to produce target-like sentences in their writing tasks and store them in their internalized grammatical system, which they could use later when needed.

Findings and Conclusion

According to the achieved statistics, post-text written corrective feedback affects the learners' grammatical accuracy in writing skill. Furthermore, the control group, which received direct written corrective feedback, could not make any significant statistical difference. In other words, the group which received indirect feedback performed better than the one which received direct feedback. The findings completely contradicts Truscott's point of view (1996) who stated that written corrective feedback has no effect on written grammatical accuracy of learners. Nevertheless, many studies conducted after Truscott's had claims about the ineffectiveness of written corrective feedback. They revealed that corrective feedback is likely to contribute to the acquisition of grammatical features (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Bitchner, 2003, 2008, 2009; Bitchner & Konch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Fatman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Frantzen, 1995; Kepner, 1991; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986; Sachs & Pdio, 2007, Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). They indicated that indirect error feedback is more

beneficial to students than direct error feedback because students' attention can be drawn to structures and problems (Ferris, 2003, p. 52).

Researchers have suggested that indirect feedback is generally preferred to the direct one because it forces students to engage in “guided learning and problem solving” (Lalande, 1982) and helps them build skills as “independent-self-editors”(Bates et al., 1993 as cited in Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The present study highlights the importance of providing students with post-text written corrective feedback to improve the students' grammatical accuracy in writing. The students who received post-text written corrective feedback could significantly improve their grammatical ability. They felt greater commitment to improving their writing when the teacher gave them the chance to correct their errors based on useful comments written at the end of their text. Students found the elaborated comments on specific elements of their writing more helpful in guiding their revisions. Actually, the study indicates some support for the use of post-text written corrective feedback rather than the use of conventional type (direct feedback). Applying post-text feedback in students' writing tasks motivates, encourages and prepares learners to notice their mistakes, revise and redraft their writing work to produce target-like sentences in their writing tasks and store them in their internalized grammatical system, which they could use later when needed.

The findings of this study can be illuminating for teacher training courses. Trainers can teach and inculcate this type of feedback to their trainees. EFL instructors can adopt post-text feedback as a means of promoting students' grammatical accuracy in writing. Schools and language institutes can add this to their syllabi and curricula as well.

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