The Effect of Focused Written Corrective Feedback on High/Low Self-Regulated EFL Learners' English Writing Ability

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore whether focused written corrective feedback has any significant effect on improving undergraduate university students' paragraph writing ability; if so, the study further sought to demonstrate whether this effect differs within high/low self-regulated learners or not. For the purpose of the study, 60 BA university students were chosen out of 145 learners through the application of a sample Oxford Placement Test (OPT). Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned into one control and one experimental group. The experimental group was assigned into two groups of high and low self-regulated learners based on Magno's (2009) Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale (A-SRL-S) questionnaire. The control group received feedback in their writings through the conventional procedure, whereas the experimental group received focused written corrective feedback in some selected areas of the grammar. The data analysis revealed that focused written corrective feedback has a significant effect on improving writing ability; in addition, the results showed that high self-regulated learners benefited more from focused written corrective feedback than low self-regulated learners.

Keywords: Focused written corrective feedback; high/low self-regulation; writing ability

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant language skills in second or foreign language teaching and learning contexts is writing skill (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Othman, 2015). The ability to write proficiently, that is generating and organizing ideas and also translating these ideas into readable contexts; is the most difficult skill to master even for a native speaker (Kukurs, 2012).

Learners' written texts contain various errors; the most common ones are grammatical and rhetorical errors (Chelli, 2006). Most learners have a lot of ideas, but they don't have enough language to express what they want to say in a comprehensible way. The learners will be aware of their mistakes and weaknesses through their teacher's given feedback, and they will be able to overcome their problems in order to produce a more proficient text the next time(Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008; Jenwitheesuk, 2009).According to Wiliam (2011)it is the teachers' responsibility to apply appropriate techniques and feedbacks to help their students improve their writing ability.

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Focused vs. Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback

Focused and unfocused feedback concern whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the learners' errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). Teachers' correction of most or all errors in learner writing is named unfocused or extensive corrective feedback, and where they select a few areas to be corrected is called focused or intensive corrective feedback(Van Beuningen, 2010).

Several recent studies have examined the effect of focused and unfocused corrective feedback in EFL context. (Ellis et al., 2008)found the two approaches to be equally effective. Van Beuningen, De long, and Kuiken (2008, 2012)studies also showed that unfocused corrective feedback helped learners improve written accuracy both for the short- and the longer-term; while Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa (2009)showed that the focused approach yielded better results. Sheen (2007), as well, examined whether focused CF, unfocused CF and mere writing practice produced differential effects on accuracy with which ESL intermediate writers wrote. The study included four groups of writers: 1) focused CF (F, receiving correction on article errors only), 2) unfocused CF (U, receiving correction on a few different types of errors including ones involving articles as well), 3) Writing practice (W, receiving writing tasks with no correction), and 4) Control (C, receiving neither the tasks nor correction, but only the tests). All three experimental groups (FG, UG and WPG) gained in grammatical accuracy over time in all the posttests. Although both corrective feedback groups (focused and unfocused) significantly improved in the accuracy with which they used a variety of linguistic features including English articles over time, only the Focused corrective feedback group outperformed the control group. Therefore, findings suggested that while focused feedback was beneficial to accuracy, unfocused feedback was of limited pedagogical value.

Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) investigated the differential effects of two focused direct CF approaches on the linguistic accuracy of prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article, in ESL student writings. It addressed the effect of 3 types of treatment: 1) direct, explicit written feedback and student–researcher 5-minute conferences; 2) direct, explicit written feedback only; and 3) no CF, on writing accuracy of adult migrant students over a 12-week period. The study revealed a significant effect for the complementation of written and conference feedback on accuracy levels in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing but not for prepositions. Generally, however, the findings of this study have demonstrated that upper intermediate L2 writers can improve the accuracy of their use of rule-governed linguistic features (past simple tense and the definite article) if they are regularly exposed to focused oral and written CF.

Self-Regulated Learning Model

According to Graham (2006)skillful writing is an essential factor for students' academic success. Understanding how students manage to self-regulate text composing and to identify the strategies they select to initiate and control their academic writing tasks is, therefore, fundamental. Students use a variety of strategies to regulate their actions facing writing, from general cognitive strategies - as goal setting, planning, and revising- to contextual and behavioral strategies - as environmental structuring, and seeking social assistance (Harris, Santangelo, & Graham, 2010).

The learning strategies construct includes three main types of scales: cognitive, meta-cognitive, and resource management strategies. Similar to Schunk's (2005)definitions of meta-cognitive and cognitive processes in self-directed learning, cognitive strategies focus on student use of strategies by which to process information or knowledge gained from lectures or textbooks. Meta-cognitive strategies involve the strategies that students use to monitor or control their own cognition, such as goal planning or the monitoring of one's comprehension. They are measured by two subscales: planning and monitoring. Resource management refers to one's ability to manage time, effort, or resources, and is measured by four subscales,

which are time and study environment management, effort management, peer learning, and help-seeking (Pintrich , Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993). The learning strategies construct is aligned with performance or volitional control phase and self-reflection phase in a three-step self-regulation cycle proposed by Zimmerman (1989).Self-regulated learning is defined as an active process whereby individuals set goals to monitor and control emotions, thoughts and behaviors for learning, a process which is determined by the context where learning takes place (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011).

Self-regulation in writing was presented in the study of Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999). In their study, the participants who shifted in their writing revision activity from process to outcome goals, outperformed the participants who focused on outcome goals in their writing. After the study has been done by Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1999), few studies addressed self-regulated strategies in writing (Hauth, 2012). Gerde, Skibbe, Bowles, and Martoccio (2012)studied the effect of several variables including self-regulation on the early writing. He found a positing relationship between self-regulation strategy and early writing.

Kaplan, Lichtinger, and Gorodetsky (2009) investigated variations in the use of 14 self-regulated writing strategies between 211 ninth-grade students from different educational environments. In order to assess students' strategy use, the authors developed a self-report questionnaire. Their questionnaire included meta-cognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies for writing. They found contextual characteristics made the use of certain strategies more relevant for students' goal orientation for engagement.

Objectives of the Study

Writing is most neglected by both students and teachers (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). It is also observed that the majority of teachers are not familiar with appropriate techniques to help their students improve their writing ability. In addition, considerable numbers of students, including those at higher levels of second language learning, fail to use accurate grammar needed for acceptable writing. (Kukurs, 2012;

Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Othman, 2015). It is often observed that learners' second language writings contain numerous errors, which renders the piece of writing as far from native writing norms (Wiliam, 2011).

According to Allwright (1995), Claudron (1977), and Long (1977) (as cited in Tatawy, 2002)several problems such as inconsistency, ambiguity and ineffectiveness of teachers' correction have been identified by the researchers. They put the lack of the effectiveness of corrective feedback down to the ambiguous and unsystematic approaches adopted by the majority of teachers.

The researcher was highly motivated to compare traditional direct error feedback, with the correction which addresses selected grammatical points, focused written corrective feedback. In other words, the researcher in this study intended to explore the most efficient techniques for providing proper feedback to a written product made by L2 learners so as to introduce to the teachers of the most efficient ways of improving the accurate use of linguistic forms and structures in writing.

Furthermore, it is teachers' responsibility to help learners to develop strategies for self-correction and regulation. Self-regulation has been used in different areas of the study, social, political and academic researches(Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). However, as Pajares (2006) and Hauth (2012)stated, there are few studies that investigated the relationship between second language achievement and self-regulation. So, what seems to be missing in previous researches is the investigation of interaction between self-regulation and language learners' writing performance (Hauth, 2012) as well as the effect of self-regulation training on improving inferencing ability.

Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to determine the effect of focused written corrective feedback on the improvement of BA university students' paragraph writing ability. And then, the researcher intended to investigate whether learners' learning strategy, in particular self-regulation strategy and their level of self-regulation strategy, has any influence on how much they benefit from focused written corrective feedback.

Research Questions

The researcher aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ 2: Does focused written corrective feedback have any significant effect on BA university students' paragraph writing ability?

RQ 2: Does the effect of focused written corrective feedback on BA university students' paragraph writing ability differ within high/low self-regulated learners?

METHODS
Participants

An oxford placement test (OPT) was run and 60 learners were chosen out of 145 participants. The selected participants were assigned in two groups, one control and one experimental group, 30 learners for each group; and the rest remained in classes without knowing that their final or post-test papers will not be included in the statistical procedures of the study. Then the participants of the experimental group were given a questionnaire in order to differentiate between high and low self-regulated learners. Based on their performance on the questionnaire of Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale (A-SRL-S), they were assigned into one high and one low self-regulated learners. Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale (A-SRL-S), was derived by Magno (2009) based on the model of Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons. The questionnaire contains 55 items which measures students' academic self-regulation under seven sub scales: Memory strategy, goal-setting, self-evaluation, seeking assistance, environmental structuring, responsibility, and organizing.

The aim of the application of such distinction was to see whether the learners' learning strategy affect their writing performance, and to see whether the level of their self-regulation strategy influences on how much they benefit from focused written corrective feedback.

Procedure

The teacher administered a witting test as a pretest in both control and experimental group. It was a paper and pencil test in which the participants were asked to write about a topic which was developed by the researcher. The participants' writings were rated by 2 raters.

The experimental group contained of 15 low and 15 high self-regulated learners received focused written corrective feedback. In each two sessions, one specific area of grammar was focused on and the students were given feedback only on that area. Six parts of linguistic errors were selected to be focused on within each two sessions. These errors will be chosen by the researcher to be targeted in the research based on the frequency of their occurrence during the first writing task (the per-test). The researcher identified and categorized these errors. Afterwards, it was decided that the first six error types with the highest frequency would be focused on; they were proposition, articles, singular vs. plural verb, tense, modal and comparison.

At the start of the second session, participants were given back the corrected writing tasks they had performed during the first session and they were given some time to reflect on their own performance. Next, the teacher asked them to produce another text with the same topic as before. She asked them to submit their papers in order to receive feedback on their performance based on the specific error types which were targeted. This procedure took place within each two sessions with a different topic of writing and a specific error type to be corrected.

The participants in the control group performed the same tasks and followed the same procedures as the participants in the experimental group within the same period of time and number of sessions. The only difference between them and the participants in the experimental group was the type of feedback they were provided with. As for the control group, the instructor used the conventional method of error correction, which included underlining the error and providing the correct written form. When the instructor gave the writing back for the second draft, the participants checked their errors and wrote the final drafts by using the teachers' corrections.

After twelve sessions of instruction the groups of the study -the control and the experi-

mental groups- were given a test of writing as a post test. The post test was rated by 2 raters.

RESULTS

Before comparing the two groups on their post-test of writing, the researcher checked the test of normality to choose the appropriate test. Table 1 shows result of the test of normality.

Table 1.
The Test of Normality for the writing Scores of the Control and the corrective feedback Groups

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.
Con_post	.758	30	.000
Corrective_post	.542	30	.000

The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the two sets of scores (Sig<.05). Therefore, the appropriate test for mean comparison would be the Mann-Whitney U test. The descriptive statistics of the two groups is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics for the writing Scores of the Control and the corrective feedback Groups

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Con_post	30	52.00	67.00	61.9667	3.50845	12.309
Corrective_post	30	53.00	69.00	65.7333	4.07628	16.616
Valid N (listwise)	30					

The mean and standard deviation of the control and the corrective feedback groups are 61.96, 3.5 and 65.73, 4.07 respectively.

Table 3.
The Result of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the Comparison of the writing Scores of the Control and the corrective feedback Groups

	Post_Scores
Mann-Whitney U	103.500
Wilcoxon W	568.500
Z	-5.189
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

According to Table 3, the focused written corrective feedback group performed significantly better on the posttest of writing than the control group did, $U = 103.50$, $P< .05$.

Hence, the researcher safely rejects the first null hypothesis that focused written corrective feedback does not have any significant effect on BA university students' paragraph writing ability.

As it is proved above, the focused written corrective feedback had a significant effect on BA university students' paragraph writing ability. Then the researcher aimed to examine whether this effect differs within high and low self-regulated learners.

Before comparing the high/low self-regulated groups on their paragraph writing scores who received focused written corrective feedback, the researcher checked the test of normality to choose the appropriate test. Table 4 shows result of the test of normality.

Table 4
The Test of Normality for the Paragraph Writing Scores of the High/Low Self-Regulated Learners

	High_Low	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
Corrective_post	high	.716	15	.000
	low	.605	15	.000

The result of the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality shows that the data are not normally distributed for the three sets of scores (Sig<.05). Therefore, the appropriate

test for mean comparison would be the Mann-Whitney U test. The descriptive statistics of the two groups is shown in Table 5.

Table 5.
Descriptive Statistics for the Paragraph Writing Scores of the High/Low Self-Regulated Learners

	High_Low	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Corrective_post	high	15	67.5333	.74322	.19190
	low	15	63.9333	5.18882	1.33975

The mean and standard deviation of the high and lowgroups are 67.53, .74, and 63.93, 5.18 respectively. In orderto compare the two groups together, the Mann-Whitney U test was run.

Table 6.
The Result of the Mann-Whitney U test for the Comparison of the Paragraph Writing Scores of the High/Low Self-Regulated Learners

	Corrective_post
Mann-Whitney U	27.000
Wilcoxon W	147.000
Z	-3.805
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Based on Table 6, there has been a statistically significant difference between the high and low groups on their posttest of writing who received the focused written corrective feedback, U = 27, P < .05. Therefore, the researcher rejects the second null hypothesis that "the effect of focused written corrective feedback on BA university students' paragraph writing ability does not differ within high/low self-regulated learners".

DISCUSSIONS AND LIMITATIONS
The primary concern of this study was to explore whether focused written corrective feedback has any significant effect on improving BA university students' writing ability; if so, does this effect differ within high/low self-regulated learners or not.

Several procedures were involved in the present study in order to give answers to the aforementioned research question. First of all, an OPT test was administered as the pre-test and to ensure the homogeneity of all the par-

ticipants in terms of their overall language proficiency. Then the participants of experimental group were assigned into two groups, a group of high and a group of low self-regulated learners, based on their performance on the questionnaire of Academic Self-regulated Learning Scale (A-SRL-S). Groups, the control and the experimental group were given a test of writing as a pretest which was rated by two raters. After twelve sessions of instruction they were given another witing test as a post test, it was also rated by two raters. The collected data were analyzed through the application of Mann-Whitney U test. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that both experimental groups, which were provided focused written corrective feedback, had better performance in the post test than control group in which no focused feedback was used. However, among two control groups, high self-regulated learners outperformed low self-regulated ones.

Thus, Concerning the use focused written corrective feedback in developing EFL learners' writing ability, the results obtained in this study support the results obtained by Sheen et al. (2009), Bitchener and Knoch (2010); Hashemnezhad and Mohammadnejad (2012). They concluded that unfocused corrective feedback has a limited pedagogical value while focused corrective feedback can contribute to grammatical accuracy in L2 writing. On the other hand, the results obtained in the present study are not in agreement with the results obtained by Ellis et al. (2008), and Van Beuningen et al. (2008, 2012).Ellis et al. (2008) found that focused and unfocused groups benefited equally, he observed no sig-

nificant differences in the performance of focused and unfocused groups of participants. Van Beuningen et al. (2008, 2012)in their studies observed that unfocused corrective feedback helped learners improve written accuracy both for the short- and the longer-term.

Furthermore, concerning the effect of self-regulation strategy in EFL learners' witting quality, the results of the present study, support the results obtained by Strickland et al. (2002), and Isaacs and Trofimovich (2012). They assume that witting will be more skillful when the learners enjoy higher level of self-regulation strategy.

The study has also several limitations. Language teaching in the Iranian educational system begins in junior high school and continues through high school and university. It is quite likely that research into the earlier stages of language instruction in Iran could be of greater importance, and any improvement in the methods and techniques used at the beginning levels will prevent problems and shortcomings later on. The present study concentrates, however, on English taught at the tertiary level, rather than schools, because, the researcher believes, it is in the university where students are supposedly more motivated and are in greater need of learning English as an ancillary language in their educational pursuits.

CONCLUSIONS

The main concern of this research was whether or not using focused written corrective feedback can make any effect on the improvement of high / low self-regulated BA university students' writing ability.

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that, there was a significant difference between the results of the pre-test and post-test, it was observed that focused corrective feedback has a significant effect on the writing accuracy of BA university students' paragraph writing ability. The results show that, utilizing focused corrective feedback in the experimental group led to a better writing performance of the students in the post test. So it can be concluded that focused corrective feedback can be used for not only revising

students writing but also for instructional purposes.

As this study showed, focused corrective feedback can be a means of assessing students' accuracy, and also it can help learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor themselves and learn to be responsible for their own errors. So, they become more independent learners and can develop their academic writing autonomy.

There are some disadvantages and problems in implementing focused corrective feedback. However, the advantages overshadow the disadvantages. The most important disadvantage for the teachers is that it requires a lot of care and attention regarding helping the students to overcome their problems and revise their written texts. So if writing revision and assessment systems were used with less crowded classes, it will be more effective and result in great improvements in student's writing accuracy.

The results also revealed that how much the learners benefit from the focused written corrective feedback is positively related to the level of their self-regulation strategy. In other words, there is a positive relationship between the self-regulation of language learners, and the extent they take advantage of focused written corrective feedback.

The study also enjoys some implications for the readers. The results of the present study have proved that focused corrective feedback is a very effective method in writing because the learners have the opportunity to learn English grammar rules from their own errors, and they can reduce those errors through the teacher's constant focused corrective feedback, and this helps them improve their writing skills and accuracy.

The main pedagogical implication of written corrective feedback is that the teachers have a great role in motivating the students to make use of accurate language forms and structures. Therefore, language teachers can have an important role in promoting student's understanding of focused corrective feedback and its application in language learning and teaching. University and institute teachers and

professors should help each other to enhance and develop focused corrective feedback for all areas of study.

The study also revealed that the self-regulation strategy plays a crucial role in the writing performance of language learners; therefore, language teachers continually need to reflect upon their teaching strategies and activities in order to help language learners manage, control, and enhance their self-regulation abilities. The general implication of the study is that, individual differences of learners play an important role in the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

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