



Grammatical Error Correction of English as Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed to discover the insight of error correction by implementing two correction systems on three Iranian university students. The three students were invited to write four in-class essays throughout the semester, in which their verb errors and individual-selected errors were corrected using the Code Correction System and the Individual Correction System. At the end of the study, the students' change of verb errors and individual errors from the first to the last in-class essays were calculated to examine the effectiveness of the two correction systems in this study. Moreover, to uncover the students' perceptions and opinions toward the two correction systems, three researcher-student conferences were conducted each time after the correction. The findings of this study suggested that (1) Conferences are important for students to clarify confusing ideas and enhance their interaction with the teacher and their errors. It is recommended to be used in error correction to make the correction procedure a two-direction communication; (2) Learner-centered correction in which the control rests on learners may contribute to learners' autonomy of learning and intrinsic motivation, and may further result in the effectiveness of error correction; (3) While correcting students' errors, teachers may need to pay more attention to less-advanced students, as they may need more help and may benefit much from the correction; (4) The better way to solve Iranian university students' problem in using English tenses may be to expose them to more authentic English, but not in over-simplified rules; and (5) Teachers should avoid putting answers directly on students' written errors, but adopt more implicit error identification techniques for students to reflect on their own errors.

Keywords: Code Correction, Error Correction, Error Identification Techniques

INTRODUCTION

The effect of error correction on students' writing has always been a popular yet controversial issue

discussed by numerous second and foreign language researchers and teachers. For many writing teachers, correcting students' composition errors is something very important yet difficult to do well. Very often, no matter how much time and

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energy they have spent checking students' papers, they may be frustrated to find the same kinds of errors keep appearing again and again in students' writing.

Research in the past two decades seemed to suggest that error correction on writing might be of little value (Hendrickson, 1981; Semke, 1984; Robb et al., 1986; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996). Nonetheless, most of the studies are experimental designs based on large groups of subjects. Seldom could they pay attention to students' individual differences and include their opinions into the correction procedures.

Therefore, a case study involving two correction systems and three Iranian university students was conducted here, trying to examine the process of error correction in depth. The main purpose was not to measure the effectiveness of the two correction systems in general, but to uncover the potential significant factors which might be involved in and influence the results of the two correction systems in this study. Five research questions were set in the beginning to guide the study: (1) Can the three students in this study reduce their verb errors in their compositions after receiving the Code Correction System? (2) Can the students reduce their individual errors in their compositions after receiving the Individual Correction System? (3) Are the effects of error correction different on the three students of different language proficiency levels? Students of which kind of language proficiency might benefit most from each of the two error correction systems? (4) While using verbs in English writing, which kinds of usage, such as tenses, participles, and gerunds, are more difficult for each of the three students? (5) What are students' perceptions, preferences, opinions, and suggestions about the two correction systems examined in this study? Can they suggest a better way of correcting their composition errors in the end of the study?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Effectiveness of Written Error Correction

There is a great deal of research examining the value of error correction on students' second lan-

guage writing. In the past two decades, research generally seems to suggest that error correction may be of little value. However, most recently, there is a small but growing pool of evidence suggesting that negative feedback- a form of error correction- can contribute to the kind of implicit knowledge used in communication.

Truscott (1996) reviewed more than 100 relevant studies from 1971 to 1995 and concluded that grammar correction was ineffective and should be abandoned in the second language writing classroom. Cohen & Robbins (1976), Hendrickson (1981), Semke (1984), Robb et al. (1986), Kepner (1991), and Sheppard (1992) all found that error correction could not significantly improve students' writing accuracy, fluency, or general language proficiency. However, as pointed out by Ellis (1998), several recent classroom studies on grammar correction have begun to show that "negative feedback in the context of communicative activities may promote interlanguage development" (Ellis, 1998, p. 53). Manley & Calk (1997) examined the effect of communicative grammar instruction on reducing students' composition errors and found drawing students' attention to specific grammar points in the communicative learning context could successfully reduce their composition errors. Similarly, Doughty and Varela (1998) found that in their communicative content-based science class, providing students corrective feedback on their oral presentation and written reports could significantly promote interlanguage development.

Other research also examined the interaction between the effect of error correction with learner variables. Lalande's study (1982) revealed that the better students might benefit more from error correction than the less-proficient students. Dekeyser (1993) indicated that some intricate relationships might exist between the effect of oral error correction and learner variables. In his study, students with higher previous achievement, higher anxiety, or lower extrinsic motivation scored significantly higher than those with lower previous achievement, lower anxiety, or higher extrinsic motivation from the error correction.

However, Kepner's study (1992) found no significant interactions between feedback types and student's verbal abilities.

Different Methods of Error Correction

Along with the debate on the effectiveness of error correction, much has been written about the best methods of making error correction. Lalande (1982) claimed to have relative effect on his error code correction compared with the traditional teacher correction (directly providing the correct forms). Robb et al. (1986) compared the effectiveness of four types of error correction and found no significant differences among groups. Lee (1997) and Makino (1993) both found that learners have the linguistic competence to correct their composition errors; teachers may not need to write each correct form for them. Makino claimed that "it is important for teachers not to correct learner errors or give the right answers to them immediately; giving cues to the students so they can correct their own errors will further activate their linguistic competence" (Makino, 1993, p.340). Lee also suggested that "conferencing is a particularly useful technique to be used in conjunction with the correction code" (Lee, 1997, p. 472).

Students' Reaction to Error Correction

Most research in this field claimed that ESL/EFL learners were highly positive toward negative feedback and preferred correction on their composition errors or spoken errors (Leki, 1986; Leki, 1991; Schulz, 1996; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Saito, 1994; Cathcart & Olsen, 1976). As for the student preferred correction ways, the 67% college students in Leki's study responded that they wanted their teachers to show where the error was and to give a clue as to how to correct the error, such as referring to a grammar book (most preferred), error codes, prompting arrows, or directly providing the correct form. The least

preferred ways were underlining without any clues, or ignoring errors completely (Leki, 1991, p. 208).

In short, after the brief examination of the literature, it appears that many foreign language students show a strong preference for error correction, while research over the past 20 years revealed lots of evidence against error correction. Although much research had been done to examine the effect of error correction and students' attitudes toward it, little if any had combined the two together, i.e., correcting students' errors according to their demands and preferences.

Here the researcher conducted a case study, trying to include students' preferences and opinions into the procedures of correcting their composition errors. Two kinds of correction methods, using codes and using individual preferred ways of correction, were implemented on three Chinese university students. The purpose of this study was not to measure the effectiveness of the two correction systems in general, but to uncover the potential significant factors which might involve in and influence the results of the two correction systems.

METHODS

Participants

The participants of the study were 3 volunteers from one section of the junior writing course in the Department of Foreign Language and Literatures of Tehran University. The three students were all females, junior students in the university, had started to learn English writing in the second or third year of senior high school, and took the same writing courses in the first and second years. Their major differences were in their language proficiency levels, which were identified by their results of Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). Their pseudonyms and MTELP scores are presented in Table 1.

Table 1**Participants and Their MTELP results**

Pseudonyms	MTELP Score	English Language Proficiency
Mary	88	More-advanced
Jennifer	72	Medium
Susan	64	Less-advanced

Instruments

Two correction systems were examined in this study. One is the Code Correction System (CCS), which was used to correct students' verb errors in their essays. The Code Correction System was developed with three elements: identifying verb errors with codes, asking the students to revise incorrect sentences, and conducting conferences with students to help them learn how to strengthen their knowledge of English grammar. The sys-

tem included a set of verb error codes.

The criterion of categorizing verb errors into a set of codes was based on Chiang's (1981) categories of Chinese university students' verb errors in his study of error analysis. I further developed subcategories for each error type and illustrated one or two sentences for each subcategory with reference to Chiang's data. For example, in the Error Table, the Participle Error was presented as follows:

Table 2**The Participle Category in the Error Table**

Code	Error Type	Explanation	Examples
Par	Participle	①present participle ↔past participle	*Singapore is an <u>English-spoken</u> country. (English-speaking) *About 60 people were hurt, <u>included</u> 50 children. (including)
		②infinitive →participle	*He just <u>sat there to wait</u> for troubles to break out. (sat there, waiting) *There is an animal <u>call</u> the kiwi in Austria. (called)
		③finite verb ↔participle	*I read the book, <u>taking</u> some notes, and wrote a summary of it. (took)

So whenever the students made an error of misusing the present participle for the past participle, I would mark the error with the code "Par-1", meaning that this error belonged to the first type of participle errors, and the students would need to go back and refer to their Error Table to see how they should correct the error.

The other correction method examined in this study was the Individual Correction System (ICS), which meant to let students self-decide what kind of errors they wanted to be treated in this study and in what way they preferred these errors to be corrected. Thus, the Individual Correction Method may vary from person to person according to student personal preferences and needs.

Procedures

Students were asked to write four in-class essays at intervals of about one per month throughout the term. The first in-class essay served as the pretest of the study while the last in-class essay was used as the post-test. The four in-class essays were the assignments of the course, so the topics and formats were determined by the instructor of the course.

After the first in-class essays were finished, they were collected and corrected by the researcher. However, during the correction of the first in-class essays, only verb errors were treated with the Code Correction System, since the individual errors and the Individual Correction System would be decided upon by the subjects dur-

ing the first researcher-student conference, which was conducted after the first correction. However, in the second and third in-class essays, both the verb errors and the individual errors were treated separately with the Code Correction System and the Individual Correction System. Each time after I finished the correction, I returned the essays to the students and asked them to revise the erroneous sentences on another piece of paper. Furthermore, to elicit students' opinions and perceptions toward error correction, a researcher-student conference was held each time after students finished their revisions. In short, the whole treatment of error correction in this study included three corrections of students' verb errors, two corrections of their individual errors, three student revisions according to the researcher's correction, and three researcher-student conferences. The conferences aimed to determine the students' understanding of the corrections and to detect their attitudes about grammar, correction, and different correction methods. At the end of the study, there were 12 samples of student writing and 3 conference summaries that become the data of the study.

Data Analysis

To gain a holistic observation about the process of error correction, I analyzed the data from three aspects with three different methods: examining the effect of the two correction systems by error counting, investigating reasons and difficulties of errors by error analysis, and exploring students' perception and opinions through categorizing interview data.

Error Count. To measure the effectiveness of the Code Correction System and the Individual

Correction System, the students' gain (or loss) of verb errors and individual errors in the first and last in-class essays were calculated to examine their improvement or regression after correction. The results were also compared between students of different levels, trying to investigate the interaction between the effect of error correction and students' language proficiency.

Error Analysis. To understand the three students' main difficulty in using English verbs in their writing, I did some analyses on verb errors. At first, I counted the numbers of errors in each of the 11 categories (the 11 Error Types according to the Error Table), ranked them in order, and determined the hierarchy of difficulty of the 11 Error Types for the three students in this study. Afterwards, I made an analysis of the reasons of the students' most frequent error type from the students' verbal reports and my observations.

Categorizing Conference Data. To look for recurring regularities in the interview data, the tapes of the three researcher-student conferences were first transcribed into text, coded into several units of information on index cards, and then categorized into several entities with the Constant Comparative Method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

Error Score

A total of 128 verb errors was found in the twelve in-class essays, in which Maryam committed 30 verb errors in the 4 essays during the treatment, Nasrin made 48 verb errors, and Sara, 50. Students' error frequencies were also calculated to see what percentage of errors would be made when the students used 100 verbs in his or her writing. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Frequencies of Students' Verb Errors

	Maryam	Nasrin	Sara	Total
	%	%	%	%
Essay 1	11.1	16.7	31.3	19.2
Essay 2	5.8	6.9	17.9	9.5
Essay 3	9.9	13.1	14.3	12.4
Essay 4	9.6	6.5	11.3	8.9
Change	-1.5	-10.2	-20.1	-10.3

As the data show, in total, the three students decreased their verb error frequencies by 10.3% from pretest to post-test, indicating that the students on average reduced 10.3 verb errors in every 100 verbs. This result suggested that the Code Correction System was effective in treating the three students' verb errors. However, Sara improved most among the three. She eliminated 20.1% of verb errors in her post-test, which was twice as much as Nasrin. On the other hand, Maryam's improvement was not so obvious. She only

improved by 1.5%. Therefore, according to the data, the Code Correction System might be more beneficial to the less-advanced and medium-level students than the more-advanced one.

On the side of individual errors, a total of 16 individual errors was found in the 12 in-class essays, in which Maryam made a total of 5 individual errors, Nasrin 4 individual errors, and Sara 7 individual errors. Table 4 presents the numbers of individual errors made by the three students in each in-class essays.

Table 4
Numbers of Students' Individual Errors

	Maryam	Nasrin	Sara	Total
Essay 2	3	3	5	11
Essay 3	2	1	2	5
Essay 4	0	0	0	0
Change	-3	-3	-5	-11

As the data show, in Essay 4 (the post-test), all the three students made no individual errors at all, suggesting that the Individual Correction System could successfully eliminate the three students' individual errors. Among them, the less-advanced student improved most by decreasing 5 errors.

Error Analysis

The 128 student verb errors were analyzed by the 11 Error Types to see their hierarchy of difficulty. The number and percentage of errors in different error types are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Number and Percentage of Verb Errors in 11 Error Types

	Maryam	Nasrin	Sara	Total	
				Sum	%
Tense	13	20	13	46	35.9
Diction	3	7	12	22	17.2
Participle	5	6	3	14	10.9
S-V Agreement	2	3	4	9	7.0
Gerund	1	4	3	8	6.3
Infinitive	1	3	4	8	6.3
Spelling	1	2	4	7	5.5
Transitivity	3	1	1	5	3.9
Copula	0	2	2	4	3.1
Usage	0	0	3	3	2.3
Voice	1	0	1	2	1.6
Total	30	48	50	128	100

Table 5 shows the distribution of verb errors of the three students in 11 Error Types. Among the 128 verb errors, 46 were errors with tense uses, which comprised the biggest part (35.9%) of verb errors in the corpus, suggesting that the three students might meet most difficulties in tenses when they used verbs in their writing. Thus, the hierarchy of difficulty of the 11 Error Types for the three students in this study should rank as: (1)Tense, (2)Diction, (3)Participle, (4)S-V agreement, (5)Gerund (or Infinitive), (6) Infinitive (or Gerund), (7) Spelling, (8) Transitivity, (9) Copula, (10)Usage, and (11)Voice.

Interview Data

This study conducted three researcher-student conferences, which generated a large amount of qualitative interview data. The Constant Comparative Method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was adopted to analyze the interview data. The results of the analysis are summarized as follows:

- Nasrin and Sara reported that with reference to the codes and the Error Table, they would know how to correct their errors, but sometimes, they did not know the reasons of correction.
- The more-advanced student tended to choose the more implicit correction method to correct her individual errors, while the less-advanced student preferred more explicit one.
- Maryam would spend much time on shaping the idea before she wrote. As she wrote, she usually paid attention to the grammar accuracy of her writing.
- Nasrin seldom reread her essays after she finished them. Neither did she pay much attention to the grammar during the process of writing.
- Sara relied much on dictionaries as she wrote. When she had no access to it during the in-class essays, she would make errors of parts of speech and spelling.
- The students would avoid using the complicated structures which they were not familiar with in their writing.

- Maryam and Nasrin increased their use of Error Table during the study. However, the more they used the table, the less they would think about their errors, and the less they would benefit from the correction.
- Maryam and Nasrin preferred the ICS to the CCS, because they wanted to think of the answers of errors more on their own. They reported that in the CCS, they tended to find the answers directly from the codes and the Error Table. Sara preferred the CCS to the ICS. Her reason was that she found herself more likely to forget the correction I made for her in the ICS.

DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: Can the three students reduce their verb errors in their compositions after receiving the Code Correction System?

As revealed by the data, the three students could reduce their verb errors in the essays after receiving the CCS. They made 48 verb errors in their first in-class essays and reduced them to 24 errors in the fourth group of in-class essays, which were half of their original error numbers.

This result suggests that the Code Correction System (CCS) was effective to eliminate the three students' verb errors in their English compositions, which was not consistent with the conclusion in other research of error correction. By comparing the CCS with the various correction methods in the literature review, I found that the uniqueness of the CCS was the containing of the conference stage due to its advantage of three limited subjects. Moreover, from the students' oral reports during conferences, I also found that the conference stepping in the error correction process was quite beneficial for them. In the words of Maryam, "the conference was important for me...I think it's good to meet you for each essay. After all, it didn't take long." According to Nasrin, "I liked that you could check the answers for me during the conference."

So, what did I do during the conferences? I opened a dialogue with the students to discuss their errors, examined their revision of erroneous

sentences, invited them to reflect on the reasons of making errors, offered them chances to communicate or even to argue for their errors, and cleared up the grammar points which they were still confused with. As a result, the process of error correction became no longer a one-way prescription of correcting superficial errors, but a two-way “error communication” of reflecting and then clearing up each twilight zone. So maybe the interaction between the researcher and the students during the conferences was the key that contributed to the success of error correction in this study.

Research Question 2: Can the three students reduce their individual errors in their compositions after receiving the Individual Correction System?

Again, the answer would be affirmative. At the end of the study, the three students eliminated all of their individual errors in their last essays.

The ICS was an innovation in the field of error correction. The design of the ICS came from the idea of Learner-centered Teaching, which emphasizes that teachers should “give learners more control over what and how they learn and encourage learners to take more responsibility for their own learning” (Richards et al., 1992, p. 359). When applying this to the field of error correction, it could mean to let students control their own correction procedures. Types of errors which might need to be corrected could be identified by students themselves, and the methods of treating those errors could also be self-determined by individuals, according to their personal needs and preferences. Brown (1994) indicated that one of the advantages of Learner-centered Teaching should be to “...help to give students a sense of ‘ownership’ of their learning and thereby add to their intrinsic motivation” (p. 80).

Contrasted with the more traditional Teacher-centered correction in which control rests on the teacher, the learner-centered ICS could develop students’ autonomy but not their dependence, satisfy learners’ particular needs, and enhance

their intrinsic motivation. Like Nasrin said in this study, “Since I chose this method by myself, of course I liked it. It’s clear for me!”

Research Question 3: Are the effects of error correction different on the three students of different language proficiencies? Students of which kind of language proficiency might benefit most from each of the two correction systems?

According to the data, the effect of the CCS was different on the three subjects. Sara’s verb error frequency decreased by 20.1% from pretest to post-test, which was nearly twice as much as Nasrin’s 10.2%. Maryam, however, only decreased by 1.5%. On the other hand, Sara reduced 5 individual errors by the ICS throughout the study, Nasrin reduced 3, and Maryam reduced 3, too. Therefore, in this study, the CCS might interact with learners’ language proficiencies while such interaction in the ICS was not so obvious.

What did the result enlighten us about the practice of error correction? It might indicate that if the teacher used the same kind of error correction method, for example, the CCS, on a group of learners, some of them might benefit much from it, while others might not, or even *suffer* from it. However, if the teacher turned to consider student individual differences and used several *different* correction methods according to their needs, demands, and preferences, then the effect might be more satisfying for each student.

Another important issue is that while the less-advanced student might benefit more from the error correction, they may also need more help from the teacher during the correction process. From the students’ oral report, Maryam said, “Usually, as soon as I reread the sentences that you corrected for me, I would know where I was wrong,” while Sara reported, “It’s (the ICS) not bad, but if you can also make an Error Table for my individual errors, it would be better.” Therefore, writing teachers may consider to spend more time and energy on less-advanced students when they correct students’ papers.

Research Question 4: While using verbs in English writing, what kinds of usage, such as tenses, participles, and gerunds, are more difficult for each of the three students?

Table 5 revealed that the hierarchy of difficulty of the 11 Error Types in this study should rank as: (1)Tense, (2)Diction, (3)Participle, (4)S-V agreement, (5)Gerund (or Infinitive), (6) Infinitive (or Gerund), (7) Spelling, (8) Transitivity, (9) Copula, (10)Usage, and (11)Voice.

In this study, tense was found to be the most difficult verb usage for the three students. With further examination, I found that a large portion (67.4%) of these tense errors came from the students' difficulty in distinguishing the simple present from the simple past tense-aspect.

Research seemed to suggest that first language interference was the major reason causing Iranian university students' difficulty in learning English tense-aspect forms. Recall Maryam's explanation for her tense errors in Conference 3: "I think it is the problem of concept and thinking mode." She reported that it was not easy for her to get rid of the concept that past events must be described with the past tense.

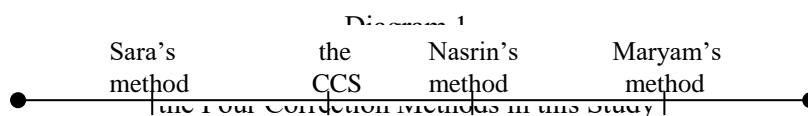
In Iran, due to the large class in school and the limited time of 4-5 hours per week for English classes, grammar instruction, including the introduction of the English tense system, is traditionally conducted in ways of explicit explanation of rules followed by a bunch of pattern practices. As a result, Iranian students might be fully familiar with the rules of tenses after six years of training before entering universities. However, as I discovered in this study and as has been proposed in other research, tense errors still prevail in Iranian students' writing, suggesting that their prior study of the rules would not guarantee their correct use of the rules. Therefore, I would suggest that

teachers in Iranian schools expose the students to more authentic materials, which can exemplify the English use of tenses in real situations, but not in over-simplified rules. From time to time, teachers may also draw pictures or diagrams to introduce the idea conveyed through different tense-aspects, turning the abstract idea of time and tense into tangible objects before students' eyes. It is my belief that in this way, students' confusion about the English tense system could be eliminated, and their errors in this area could be best minimized.

Research Question 5: What are students' perceptions, preferences, opinions, and suggestions about the two correction systems examined in this study? Can they suggest a better way of correcting their composition errors at the end of the study?

Generally, the three students had a positive attitude toward the correction procedures. As Maryam wrote in her last essays, "I think it is great, because now I have some prerequisite knowledge about writing, then I start to learn more about grammar." Sara added, "I would easily memorize the mistake that I have made ... So I think that I really benefit from it." However, they had different preferences for each of the two correction systems. Maryam and Nasrin preferred the ICS more since they wanted to think of the answers more on their own without the help of the codes and Error Table. Sara, on the other hand, liked the CCS better because she found herself more likely to forget the correction I made for her in the ICS.

By examining the students' individual correction methods, I found that when compared with the CCS, their methods differed in 4 degrees of explicitness, which could be exemplified in Diagram 1.



Explicit

Maryam's preferred individual correction method was for me to only circle the errors in her writing, which was more implicit, compared with Nasrin's method of giving her a grammar lesson about all of the usage of prepositions in the beginning, and then circling her preposition errors. The CCS, which included more detailed teacher hints of errors types, explanations, and examples, would be a more explicit method, when compared with Maryam's and Nasrin's preferred individual correction methods. However, Sara's method was to directly offer her the correct answers, and to provide short explanations for more frequent errors, which made it the most explicit among the four correction methods.

From the students' reports, I found that the reason why Maryam and Nasrin preferred their individual methods in the ICS was that they thought the CCS was too explicit, and they wanted to contemplate the errors more on their own. Sara preferred the CCS to her method, because her method was too explicit to help her contemplate and memorize the errors. Therefore, it seemed that the main reason for the students to prefer one method to another was due to the explicitness of the methods and opportunities the methods could offer them to examine and contemplate their errors.

This finding would reveal something to the field of error correction; that is, English writing teachers may want to stop providing answers directly for students on their essays; In fact, students may want and need to contemplate their errors more on their own. This would also ex-

Implicit

plain why the traditional correction methods in which the teacher directly write answers on papers usually failed to eliminate students' errors (Cohen, 1976; Lalande, 1982). Simply supplying the correct answers may not offer students the time and space to examine, to contemplate, and to reflect on their errors deeply. Therefore, the key premise to successful written correction may well be to provide chances for *reflection*. Writing teachers should abandon traditional way of correction, and adopt more implicit error identification techniques which may vary from person to person according to individual needs.

CONCLUSION

In short, this study found: (1) Conferences are important for students to clarify confusing ideas and enhance their interaction with the teachers and with their own errors; (2) Learner-centered correction in which the control rests on learners will contribute to learners' autonomy of learning and intrinsic motivation, and may further result in the effectiveness of error correction; (3) While correcting students' errors, teachers may need to pay more attention to less-advanced students, as they may need more help and may benefit much from the correction; (4) The better way to solve Iranian university students' problem in using English tenses may be to expose them to more authentic English, but not in over-simplified rules; and (5) Teachers should avoid putting answers directly on students' written errors, but adopt more implicit error identification techniques for students to reflect on their own errors.

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