

The Effect of Focused Corrective Feedback on ESL Learners' Writing Accuracy

تأثير التقييم التصحيحي المركز على جودة الكتابة لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

The current study set out to examine the effectiveness of focused written corrective feedback (WCF) on ESL learners' writing accuracy; in particular, the grammatical accuracy. It targeted only one linguistic feature (i.e. English articles) using a pre- and post-tests. It compared the effects of focused feedback on writing accuracy with 30 ESL learners at a language program at Washington State University. One sample dependent t-test was used to compare the means of the pre- and post-tests using SPSS. As on group, all participants have had an intervention in which they were exposed to different kinds of writing, and received focused feedback on only definite and indefinite article errors. The results indicate that there was a significant difference between pre- and post-tests in writing accuracy. Participants significantly improved their use of articles during the intervention and, therefore, increased their writing accuracy. This study contributes to other studies in the literature that written feedback is effective, and gives more pedagogical credits to teachers providing WCF.

Keywords: Focused Feedback, Unfocused Feedback, Direct Feedback, Indirect Feedback.

ملخص البحث:

تحاول هذه الدراسة الكشف عن مدى تأثير التصحيحات الكتابية المركزة التي يقدمها أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية على دقة الكتابة عند متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بعدها لغة ثانية، وهذه التصحيحات تركز على نوع واحد من الأخطاء كأدوات التعريف في اللغة الإنجليزية، تم في هذه الدراسة استخدام اختبارين (قبلي وبعدي) لقياس مدى فاعلية هذا النوع من التصحيحات. استهدفت هذه الدراسة ثلاثين مشاركاً من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بعدها لغة ثانية، وتم اختيارهم من مركز اللغة بجامعة ولاية واشنطن بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، وتم استخدام برنامج SPSS لإجراء اختبار المقارنة t-test. أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة فرقاً بين الاختبار القبلي والاختبار البعدي في مدى دقة الكتابة عند المشتركين بالدراسة، مما يعني أن التصحيحات المركزة كان لها دور في تطوير مستوى الكتابة عند المشتركين، وهذا يؤكد صحة نتائج الدراسات السابقة في موضوع هذه الدراسة، على أن التصحيحات الكتابية المقدمة من المدرس لها تأثير على تطوير مستوى الكتابة عند طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية.

Introduction:

Feedback refers to a generic sense of different procedures that are used to inform a learner if an instructional task is right or wrong (Kulhavy, 1977). Feedback occurs when two different individuals are engaged in an instructional procedure in which one side is viewed as the knowledge giver and the other as the knowledge receiver (i.e. output and input). This does not mean that knowledge flows in one direction –from giver to receiver; rather, can it be in both directions with variance in the amount. This notion contributes to Han’s (2001) study in which he concluded that feedback is a two-way interdependent process, involving the giver and the receiver, where both are information providers. The feedback receiver can also argue and positively interact with the feedback he or she receives. Hattie & Timperley (2007) define feedback as a consequence of performance, and as information provided by an agent regarding one’s performance or understanding of instructions. In other words, feedback is employed to reduce discrepancies that occur between current understandings and performance and a goal. Feedback allows for a comparison between one’s actual outcome and a desired outcome based on standards of performance (Mory, 2004).

Literature Review:

The effectiveness of WCF remains a controversial topic; though the gap has slightly decreased in recent years. A number of studies (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995, 2006; Lee, 2008; Sheen, 2007) conclude that teacher WCF does help improve learners’ writing accuracy. These studies are valuable in a way that they provide evidence about relative effects of different types of WCF; however, they fail to provide any evidence of the effects of correcting to not correcting. Bitchener (2008) argues that all studies claiming the effectiveness of WCF on learners’ writing are not accurate because most of them did not include a control group to make a comparison between those who received WCF and those who did not. When measuring only one group, the effectiveness, if any, cannot be interpreted as a result of teacher WCF as there are other factors involved in the learning procedure.



Ferris (2004) and Truscott (1996, 2004) agree that studies that fail to make comparison between control groups and treatment groups do not provide evidence of the effectiveness of the WCF.

Earlier research studies (Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985) concluded that WCF given by teachers was vague and mostly consisted of negative comments. They think that teacher WCF provides nothing but confusion, takes learners' attention away from the lesson, and teachers misinterpret learners' meanings, and therefore, it should not be used. Zamel (1985: 86) argues:

ESL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.

However, other studies (e.g. Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001) point out the importance of building an interpersonal relationship between learners and their teachers through WCF; and at the same time they emphasize that teacher WCF should be clear, text-specific, and include praise and criticism through teacher-learner interaction. The ongoing debate on whether or not giving WCF to L2 writers is effective and helpful has been more intense between Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) and Ferris (1997, 1999, 2004). Truscott (1996) strongly criticizes WCF. He dismissed error feedback as not only useless, but also as harmful to learners' writing accuracy and, therefore, should be abolished. Truscott (ibid) also argues that teachers should look more seriously at the problems WCF creates. He claims that research supports his objection of feedback, the lack of effectiveness is expected, correction has a negative impact on learners, and any research arguments to keep error correction lack merit.

These claims are supported by previous studies (Hendrickson, 1978; Kepner, 1991; Robb, Ross, Shortreed, 1986; Semke, 1984; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985), which suggested that correction had little or no effect on learner

writing. Ferris (1999) responded to Truscott claims and described them as premature. Ferris first identified three main problems with the research reviews that Truscott used in his paper:

- No comparison between subject groups in the previous studies.
- The paradigms and teaching strategies in these studies are different.
- Truscott ignores other research results that contradict his claims.

However, Ferris (1999) agrees that error correction will not help learners if they are not dealt with carefully. Another criticism to Truscott's claims is the loose definition of the terms. In his article's title, he used '*Grammar Correction*', but he did not specify what kind of grammatical correction he was trying to disapprove. The effectiveness of grammar correction depends to some extent on the kind of grammatical rules to be corrected (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Truscott tried to apply the effectiveness of the grammar correction over all kinds of WCF without considering the positive impact the teacher comment might have on learners. Ferris (1996) concludes that Truscott's claim of eliminating this pedagogical practice is incomplete and has no conclusive evidence.

Kepner's (1991) study also examined the effectiveness of two types of WCF and concluded that the consistent use of L2 teachers' written error correction was ineffective in L2 writing, no matter what level of proficiency learners have. However, Liu (2008) argues that the consistent use of message-related comments used in Kepner's (1991) study was effective for improving overall quality and surface-level accuracy. Liu (2008) also points out that learners were not required to produce a new draft using the teachers' corrections, which engages the learners into self-editing.

In order to better understand the effectiveness of WCF on L2 learners, it is important to dig deeper into the types of WCF that teachers use in treating writing errors. Some studies (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener et al, 2005; Bitchener, 2008) most often view feedback as either direct (explicit or overt) or indirect (implicit or covert). Most studies have made a distinction



between direct and indirect feedback strategies (Ellis et al, 2006; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Bitchener et al, 2005; Chandle, 2003). Direct feedback is the provision of the correct linguistic form or structure by the teacher to the student above the linguistic error (Ferris, 2006). Ferris (2002: 19) describes direct feedback as a response in which “an instructor provides the correct linguistic form for students”. This linguistic form may include crossing out unnecessary words, phrases, or morphemes;

inserting a missing word, phrase, or morpheme; or the provision of the correct form or structure.

On the other hand, indirect feedback “occurs when the teacher [implicitly] indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error” (Ferris, 2002, p. 19). It can take the form of underlining, circling, coding, or recording in the margin the number of errors. Coding is different from the others in that it provides learners with the type of error (e.g. ‘WW’ for wrong word, or ‘Art’ for article). Indirect feedback is used to point out the error that a learner has made without actually providing the correct form (Ellis, 2008). In fact, both types of feedback occur when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form, but the variation occurs on how the teacher responds to the error. Farris and Roberts (2001) also compared these two types of indirect feedback and they found that those who received both underlining and coding in revising their grammatical errors outperformed those who received only underlining. In general, both groups have shown a significant improvement when compared with the control group who received no feedback. Chandler’s (2003) study, though, has shown that direct feedback in which learners are given the correction with simple underlining is more effective. Chandler also noted that using direct feedback works best in producing accurate revision, and that learners preferred direct feedback.

Direct and indirect feedback can be in two forms. They can be either focused or unfocused. Focused feedback means that a teacher feedback targets only a certain kind of errors. The focused feedback targets a certain kind of

linguistic errors such as English tenses. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) show that learners receiving focused feedback outperformed learners whose errors had not been corrected. Bitchener and Knoch (2008) argue that there are theoretical reasons for expecting the focused feedback to have more positive impact on learners' writing accuracy than unfocused. Their argument is that learners are more likely able to understand their errors and the corrections provided by their teacher if a specific error was targeted. This was supported by Sheen (2007) and Bitchener (2008) whose argument was that feedback targeting a single linguistic feature improved learners' writing accuracy, and that unfocused feedback may not be the effective approach to minimize linguistic errors.

The L2 learners may not be able to handle many linguistic features at the same time.

Bitchener & Knoch's (2008) study has shown that the provision of WCF on a single occasion had a significant effect, and enabled them to use the targeted functions with greater accuracy. Bruton (2009) argues that focused feedback is a form of explicit grammar instruction. However, Farris (2010) argues that using focused feedback might not be sufficient to improve writing accuracy. In other words, improving learners' use of one specific grammatical feature might not be enough to improve the accuracy of learners' writing in general. There are a number of studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2006; Sheen, 2007; Sheen, 2010) that found positive effects of focused feedback. Some studies have demonstrated that focused feedback is facilitative of learning and, thus, have shown evidence against the critics of WCF in general (Bitchener, 2008; Sheen, 2007). More specifically, Sheen's (2007) study suggests that WCF is effective when it is intensive (focused) and targets a specific linguistic feature.

Methodology:

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of WCF on ESL learners' writing using focused (i.e. targeting only two functional error) strategies. The study tried to find out if there is any significant difference in the effect of focused corrective feedback directed at using the definite and indefinite articles.

**Research questions:**

Is there any significant difference between pre- and post tests in the effect of focused WCF on ESL learners' writing accuracy?

Participants:

The participants were 30 (n= 11 females and 19 males) ESL students enrolled in a general language program in Intensive American Language Center (IALC) at Washington State University. The participants came from different countries including Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, China, and Taiwan. Their age ranges from 17 to 35 years old.

This eight-week program prepares foreign students for graduate and undergraduate studies. The participants were randomly selected from the intermediate level classes. A written consent form was given to all participants before the experiment to take their permission to collect their writing papers from the teacher after each task.

Instruments and procedures

Participating group has gone through an intervention using focused corrective feedback (i.e. targeting only English definite and indefinite articles) for the eight weeks. Participants had a 55-minute writing class. During the intervention, the participants were engaged in narrative writing tasks followed by teacher WCF. These narrative tasks involved reading and then rewriting short stories, writing picture book stories, writing about various topics, and writing from a picture. The teacher divided each narrative task into parts that participants had to finish daily. This means that everyday participants submitted one part and received feedback on another. Participants reflect on the feedback as homework. On Fridays, participants worked on last feedback in class and submitted the whole story.

All participant scores were 20 for each test. Each correct answer on the pre- and post- test was awarded one point, and zero was given to the incorrect one. The two tests were analyzed by means of dependent t-test using the SPSS. The dependent variable was the ESL learners' writing accuracy, whereas the independent variables

were the effect of focused feedback strategy and English articles.

Pre- and post-tests

On the first day of the intervention, participants had a pre-test. The pre-test was in the form of 20 multiple-choices in which the participants were asked to choose the correct article (i.e. *a*, *an*, or *the*) to fill the gap in sentences. On last day of the intervention, participants had a post-test which was similar to the pre-test. The post test was not identical to the pre-test; though it was similar in the structure and objective (i.e. it focused on errors on the use of English articles). The post test was designed to show the expected improvement on the use of articles.

Example:

1- man saved my child. man was on ... bike.

a. the

b. an

c. a

Schedule of data collection

Week	Writing tasks	
Day 1	Pre-test	
1&2	Topic of participant choice	Participants write in-class task and receive WCF from previous task
3&4	Topic of teacher choice	
5&6	Picture	
7	Short story	
8	Picture book	
Day 9	Post-test	

To establish a baseline on their writing accuracy, particularly on the use of articles, all participants had a pre-test prior to the intervention. On day one and two, the teacher asked all participants to write a short essay on a topic of their choice; and then provided them with a corrective feedback targeting only articles. On day three and four, the teacher again asked them to write a short



essay on a topic from the teacher's choice. On day five and six, the participants were shown a picture and asked to write a short essay about it. On day seven, the teacher asked them to write a short story about a chosen topic. Last day of the intervention, all participants were given a picture book (i.e. a book that has only pictures with minimum text) and asked to write the story in a textual format. The aim of the use of different tasks was to make sure that the participants were exposed to various writing genres and topics. It is important to mention that after each writing task the participants received a written corrective feedback that targeted mainly the use of English articles; and this was considered as the intervention that the researcher expected to make the change on their writing accuracy.

Analysis & Results:

In order to identify whether or not ESL learners differed statistically between pre- and post-tests, one sample t-test was conducted using SPSS. The p. value was set at (0.05) and (df) 29 (30 -1). This test compared the means of the participants before and after the intervention. The null hypothesis here is that no difference exists in the ESL learners' writing accuracy before and after the intervention; whereas the alternative hypothesis is that there is a significant difference in the writing accuracy before and after the intervention.

$$H_o : \mu_1 = \mu_2$$

$$H_a : \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$$

Table. 1 One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	30	8.5000	1.19626	.21841
Posttest	30	15.8333	1.41624	.25857

Table. 1 shows a huge difference in the mean between the pre-test and post-test. This difference indicates that ESL learners performed much better on the post-test. However, this difference could not be enough to decide that there was a significant difference between the two tests, neither could it allow us to reject the null hypothesis.

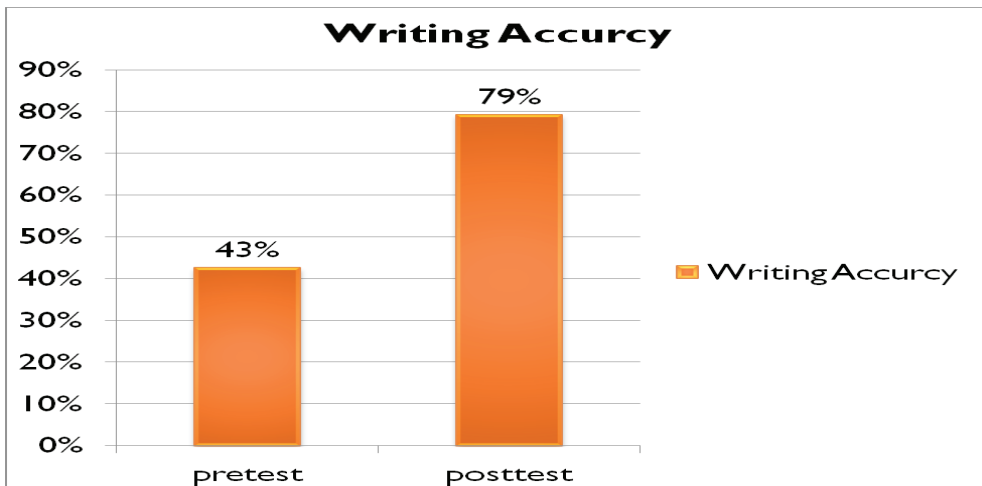
Therefore, it was essential to look at the significance on the dependent t-test on table. 2.

Table. 2 One-Sample Test

Test Value = .05						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Pretest	38.689	29	.000	8.45000	8.0033	8.8967
Posttest	61.041	29	.000	15.78333	15.2545	16.3122

Based on the data analysis as shown on table. 2, the difference between the pre- and post-tests is (.000), which is less than (p.05), which means a significant difference exists between pre- and post-tests. In other words, ESL learners' have improved during the intervention; and that the focused WCF did help them to use English articles correctly.

We can also assume that targeting fewer types of errors has positive effects on ESL learners' writing accuracy. Therefore, we reject the H_o , and find a significant difference between ESL learners pre-test ($\mu_1 = 8.5 \pm 1.19$) and post-test ($\mu_2 = 15.8 \pm 1.41$). $t(29) = .000, p < .05$





Discussion:

The current study is different from other studies in the literature in that it targeted only one linguistic feature and tested only the learners' writing accuracy; in particular the grammatical accuracy. During the study, the teacher did not specifically teach articles, rather did he provide WCF on participants' papers. The results demonstrate that the ESL grammatical accuracy over the intervention time improved significantly more as the ESL learners were required to correct certain types of errors. Sheen (2007) justified this kind of improvement to the fact that the corrective feedback provided to the participants was limited to one grammatical form (i.e. articles), which made the processing load manageable.

Targeting fewer types of errors may significantly contribute to theories of mind which argue the limitation of learners' mind processing (Merriënboer & Bruin, 2014). Second language learners' processing capacity is limited, and engaging them into multi-task classroom error correction does not seem to be a good idea. According to the current results, it is possible that L2 learners can attend only to limited number of corrections that address various issues at the same time.

That is, WCF targeting many types of errors at the same time may tax ESL learners' ability to comprehend. The current study points to the importance of a selective approach to correcting ESL learners' errors.

Articles were taught through teachers focused WCF only, which means that the acquisition of the definite and indefinite articles might have resulted from the WCF. The ESL learners' exposure to WCF targeting only one type of errors helped them to use articles with greater consistency. The results of this study responded to Truscott's (1996, 1999) claims that WCF does not help students in improving their writing accuracy. Since the post-test mean (15.83) and standard deviation (1.41) is way higher than the pre-test mean (8.50) and standard deviation (1.19), it is clear that ESL learners can significantly improve their writing accuracy when targeting one of two types of errors. In other words, when learners focus on

one or two types of errors, they more likely use them correctly in the following tasks. As a response to the research question, there was a significant difference in the ESL learners' writing accuracy, in particular the use of articles, before and after the intervention, and teacher WCF does help learners improve their writing accuracy. It is important to note that some of the participants performed well in the pre-test; and this might affect the internal validity. Some participants seemed to have a good knowledge of the use of definite and indefinite articles. Their scores on the pre-test were average and on the post-test were very high.

Limitation:

In the current study, English definite and indefinite articles were used as a measure in the writing accuracy; however, this kind of linguistic functions may not be generalized, because they are rule-based. From a grammatical point of view, articles have fixed rules which enable learners to follow easily. This means that WCF can be very helpful in reminding the learner with grammar rule. Other grammatical rules are not fixed, and depend to a great extent on learners' perceptions and intentions, such as English modals and tenses. Therefore, targeting non-rule-based linguistic features might not result in significance between pre- and post-tests. Some participants performed well on the pre-test which might affect the internal validity. If the number of those who performed well was high, it might decrease the precision and statistical power of the test. Those participants seemed to have a good knowledge of the articles before the pre-test. The intervention may not be the only source of improvement as other courses may discuss English articles. It is possible that participants have significantly improved after as a result of other courses (e.g. grammar, reading comprehension) and not from the intervention alone.

Conclusion:

The current study indicates that focused WCF can be effective in promoting accuracy in both grammar as well as writing. However, concrete research evidence is required to show that focused corrective feedback can affect a wide



range of grammatical features, not just definite and indefinite articles. Therefore, further research is needed to show if ESL learners can significantly improve using different errors other than definite and indefinite articles. To be more specific, it can be concluded that focused WCF does help ESL learners to develop greater control over some writing errors which are fixed and rule-based. Looking back to the literature, most of the research supporting the effectiveness of feedback has mostly been focused, targeting only few numbers of linguistic features.

The current study was designed to address the research question, is there any significant difference between pre- and post tests in the effect of focused WCF on ESL learners' writing accuracy? According to the analysis, the answer is 'yes'. This 'yes' clearly positions the current study in the Ferris's (1999) and Bitchener's (2008) camp, and opposes Truscott's (1996) camp.

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