The Effect of Scaffolded vs. Non-Scaffolded Written Corrective Feedback on EFL Learners' Written Accuracy

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Abstract: Written corrective feedback (CF) has generally been associated with direct and indirect strategies. There is still a debate on both whether or not written CF is helpful and which strategy is more effective. Inspired by the Socio-cultural Theory and in attempt to apply the concept of scaffolding to the context of written CF, the present study proposes scaffolded written CF, aiming to explore how much graduated (stepwise) and contingent provision of written feedback is helpful in improving L2 students' written accuracy.To this end, a quasi-experimental study compared the written accuracy performance of four groups of Iranian EFL students (direct CF group, indirect CF group, scaffolded CF group and control group) on English articles and past tenses across a pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest. The results showed that the effectiveness of CF is much dependent on the type of error to be corrected.While there were no significant differences among the four groups in accurate use of articles in their compositions, the scaffolded CF group outperformed the other groups in accurate use of past tenses. This latter finding suggests that, for certain linguistic categories, the amount and way of CF presentation could also be a determining factor in efficacy of CF.

Key words: Direct feedback · Indirect feedback · Scaffolded written CF · Written accuracy · Student response

INTRODUCTION

In many educational settings, teaching writing is examination-oriented, with accuracy as the most important criterion of evaluating students. Thus, correctness in writing is highly valued in these settings [1] and a main concern of many L2 writing teachers is to help students produce accurate writings. Providing corrective feedback (CF) is a common attempt made by writing teachers in hope of improving their students' writing. Two types of written CF have been employed to date in the literature of responding to students' writing: direct CF and indirect CF. The former refers to supplying students with the correct target language form of their errors; the latter involves indicating that the student has made an error without actually correcting it [2]. There is still a debate about whether written feedback should be direct or indirect. Some researchers have favored indirect CF [3, 4], arguing that indirect CF encourages students to reflect about linguistic forms, which may induce deeper processing and thus promote the internalization of correct forms. Direct CF has also gained support on the grounds that it provides learners with more immediate feedback on their

hypotheses, reduces the type of confusion that occurs if learners fail to understand the feedback and provides learners with sufficient information to resolve morecomplex errors [5].

The Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (SCT) [6], which has recently attracted much theoretical attention, sees learning, including language learning, as essentially a socially mediated process in which the learner moves from object/other regulation to self-regulation, the stage when he or she is capable of independent problem-solving [7]. However, not all social or regulatory encounters lead to internalization (or development). The proponents of SCT argue that "for intellectual growth to occur, interactions need to operate within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)" [8, p.52]. Assistance or other-regulation within the ZPD is referred to as scaffolding [9]. In the scaffolded help, the expert guides the novice through the mechanisms of graduation, contingency and ongoing assessment of the learner's needs and abilities and adjusting the help accordingly [10]. The concept of scaffolding, however, has originally and typically been associated with the context of oral communication and scaffolding through the medium of

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writing has hardly been considered by researchers. In an attempt to apply the concept to the context of written error correction, this study proposes 'scaffolded written CF' as an innovative error correction technique. The term is defined as the provision of stepwise feedback in written form, in which the students are pushed towards identifying and solving their grammatical errors.

The present study sets out to compare the three correction conditions (direct, indirect and scaffolded) and a non-correction condition (control group). In this way, it intends to contribute to two controversial issues in writing. One is whether or not written CF could actually promote the betterment of L2 students' future writings. The other concerns what type of written CF could most effectively enable learners to improve their writing.

Review of the Literature

Views on the Role of Written CF: There is disagreement among L2 writing researchers over the efficacy of written CF [11]. The most omnipresent manifestation of this disagreement is the debate between two prominent researchers into the area of written feedback, John Truscott [12-14] and Dana Ferris [4, 15]. Truscott [12], advancing a number of theoretical and practical problems, challenges the orthodox activity of error correction in writing. He argues that the development of interlanguage involves complex learning processes and this complexity is even furthered if one notes that different linguistic categories are processed differently and that meaning, form and use of a linguistic item depends on the linguistic and non-linguistic context in which it occurs. He seems to be an advocate of the idea that language learning is controlled by genetically-determined capacities, which cause L2 learner to go through a natural route of development operating free from conscious grammar. Truscott notes that teachers are often oblivious to developmental sequences and adopt a simplistic view of learning as the transfer of information from teacher to student. According to him, correcting grammatical errors of a student may only lead tosuperficial and short-lived*pseudo-learning*, which does not conform to real mental processes and "is of little value for actual use of language" (p. 345). Truscott also finds grammar correction harmful and counterproductive on the grounds that it increases students' amount of stress thus making them develop a tendency to shorten and simplify their writing to avoid corrections.In contrast, Ferris [4, 15] adopts an interventionist position, arguing that judicious and skillful way of correcting students' errors can improve their writings. While acknowledging some of the problems

identified by Truscott, she [4] asserts that these problems could be overcome through "preparation, practice and prioritizing" on the part of the teacher (p. 6). There are three reasons why Ferris [4] argues for the continuation of grammar correction in writing. First, Unlike Truscott, who argues that students desire to be corrected does not necessitate the practice, Ferris attaches great importance to students' feelings and intuitions, holding that "the absence of correction may frustrate students and cause them to lose their interest in writing classes" (p. 8). Second, she points out that not caring about students' grammar errors may negatively affect their academic pursuits, as accuracy matters to many teachers in assessing their students. The third reason concerns the development of self-editing skills in students. To Ferris, training students to use strategies of editing their compositions will enhance their learning and motivation. Ferris contends that Truscott's argument is founded on insufficient and inconclusive studies and that based on limited data, it is unwise to abandon a pedagogical practice that is highly desired by students and also valued by teachers.

Empirical Studies on Written CF: While a growing body of research has pointed to the usefulness of oral CF, L2 writing researchers have failed to provide clear evidence that written CF helps L2 learners improve their writing and facilitates language acquisition [16, 17]. Two major sources have contributed to the uncertainty about the effect of written CF. One is the immense diversity of thedesigns and treatments of written CF studies, which has made it hardly possible to achieve conclusive results [4, 18]. The other is related to the design and methodological flaws involved in many studies [19]. For example,a majority of studies lack a control group, whichis necessary for measuring the effect of CF [19, 20]. A number of studies have failed to control or rigorously control the proficiency level of the groups to be compared [19]. Some studies have only measured students' ability to revise their drafts after receiving CF. Revision studies have been criticized on the grounds that a student's successful editing of his/her text does not constitute evidence for the lasting effect of CF (i.e. accuracy improvement on new writings) [12, 14, 19, 21]. AlsoTruscott [12, 14] criticizes some studies for using isolated sentences and grammar exercises as their instruments.Bitchener [20] comments thata conclusive answer to the question of CF efficacy will not be possible unless researchers conduct well-designed studies having a true control group.

Variability abounds in the research concerning the effects of manipulating the type of written CF by teachers. Some studies have compared CF on form with feedback on content. The studies conducted by Semke [22], Kepner [23], Shepprd [24] and Fazio [25] showed no advantage for the error correction groups in accuracy. Ferris' [11] study showed different results for different error categories. In the study conducted by RashtchiandMirshahidi [26], the error feedback group significantly outperformed the focusing on the dichotomy between direct and indirect feedback. The studies conducted by Lalande [3], Erel andBulut [27] and Liu [28]revealed significantly better performance for the indirect group.Robb *et al*.'s [29] longitudinal studyfound no significant differences among direct CF and three indirect CF strategies. Chandler's [5] study comparing direct CF with three indirect strategies showed better results for direct CF and underlining.A number of researchers have set out to compare different forms of indirect feedback. Studies by Robb *et al*.'s [29] and Ferris and Roberts [30]did not show any significant differences among different indirect feedback strategies. Lee's [31] study showed better performance forunderlining group than margin group.Greenslade and Felix-Brasdefer [32] found significantly better performance for the coding group than underlining group. A small body of research has compared the effectiveness of different types of direct CF. Bitchener *et al*. [33] and Bitchener [20] found that direct CF accompanied by extra metalinguistic explanation worked better than simple direct CF. However, replicating the previous studies,Bitchener and Knoch [34] did not find any advantage for direct CF plus grammar explanation over simple direct CF. Similarly, the study by Sachs and Polio [16] did not show any advantage for the group of students who were more deeply engaged in mental processing.

Research Question: Does the type of written CF (scaffolded CF vs. unscaffolded direct and indirect CF) significantly affect the written accuracy performance of EFL students?

MATRIALS AND METHODS

Participants: The participants were 115 male and female Iranian university students majoring in English language. They were all sophomores with low intermediate to intermediate proficiency who were taking a course in basic

writing. They had already passed an English grammar course; thus CF treatment was not intended to teach them new items but to help them restructure and proceduralize their partially learnt knowledge.

Design: The study used a quasi-experimental design with a pretest, posttest and delayed posttest structure, using intact EFL classes. There were three experimental groups (Direct CF, Indirect CF and Scaffolded CF) and a control group.The classes were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups.

Target Linguistic Structures: Two grammatical categories were used to measure the subjects' accuracy performance: English articles and past tenses. English articles constitute a highly complex sub-system because they are multi-functional [35]; however, the present study considered only one and the most common function of each of the definite and indefinite articles; i.e. using 'a' with countable unspecified nouns and 'the' with specified nouns in the narrative compositions the participants were supposed to write. As for the other category (past tenses), different past tenses were taken as a single category rather than separate ones. This was because 'task essentialness' for students' use of sufficient number of past progressive and perfect tensesin the narratives they had to write seemed hardly probable (simple past tense is the typical tense of past narrative genre). Researchers admit that production involving task essentialness is often hard to achieve [36].

The reason for choosing two categories was to explore whether or not CF is sensitive to the type of linguistic category, as claimed by some researchers [12, 15]. There were also reasons for choosing articles and past tenses as the target structures: First, obligatory occasions for the use of articles appear frequently in certain types of discourse (e.g. narratives) [35] and past tenses constitute the essential category of past narratives. Second, since both of the target categories are treatable (rule-governed), they are amenable to be dealt with by indirect CF and scaffolded CF which requires gradual and guided help. Indirect CF strategies are not often suitable for untreatable (idiosyncratic) rules [4]. Third, since the participants had already encountered the target forms in a grammar course, the use of indirect and scafffolded CF seemed readily justified, as, according to Ellis *et al*. [35], "it is not clear how indirect CF can address the internalization of a new linguistic form" (p. 355).

Materials: Prior to the treatment, the reading and writing subsets of the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) were used to measure the groups' general proficiency to ensure that they are homogeneous and thus comparable (The test had already been piloted for its suitability). For the purposes of the treatment, three narrative writing tests were used. Each test involved narrative tasks of two forms: a) story reproduction and b) idea organization. Time allotment for the former was 30 minutes (10 min. for reading the story and 20 min. for reproducing it) and for the latter was 15 minutes. In the idea organization task, the students were to develop short coherent paragraphs from a number of incomplete ideas. There wereno articles in the ideas and the verbs were in the form of infinitive without 'to'. By including this sort of task, the researchers aimed to not only increase contexts for the use of target structures in general but, in particular, to create 'task naturalness' for less frequent past tenses (past progressive and perfect) in the past narrative discourse.

Procedure: The same instructor taughtthe four writing classes involved in the study. During the study, no instruction on the targeted errors was given by the teacher. Direct, indirect and control groups wrote their narratives at sessions 3, 4 and 6 (there was a one week interval between two sessions). The writing of the session 3 was the pretest. At sessions 5 and 7, direct and indirect groups received their papers with CF on them and the control group received their papers without any CF. The immediate posttest was given to these three groups at session 7 and the delayed posttest was administered 4 weeks later.The scaffolded CF group wrote the narratives at sessions 3, 4 and 7 (the longer interval between treatment sessions was because the group received treatment in several stages). The immediate posttest was given at session 10 (the day they received the last phase of treatment) and the delayed posttest was given 4 weeks later.

As for the direct CF group, the teacher provided the correct forms above each student's linguistic errors. He also crossed out the unnecessary items and inserted the missing ones [2]. After receiving their corrected papers, they were given at least 5 minutes to look over their errors and the corrections carefully.

The students in the indirect group received their feedback in the form of underlining. The teacher underlined the incorrect target forms and used a cursor to show the omissions [2]. The students were given at least 5 minuteso self-edit based on the teacher's feedback.

For the scaffolded CF group, the teacher first gave indirect CF to the group through underlining the errors and using a cursor for omissions. The students were given some time to correct their error based on the teacher's feedback. The following session, the teacher returned the students compositions with metalinguistic clues on their wrong uptake (each student's errors were numbered and explanations were given at the end of his/her paper). The students were asked to look over the clues and provide uptake for the second time. At the final phase, the students got back their compositions and saw the remaining errors corrected by the teacher. The scaffolded CF treatment can be schematically shown as follows:

Indirect CF → learner response needing repair → metalinguistic clues → learner response needing repair → direct CF

The students in the control group did not receive any error CF. The teacher only gave very general comments (e.g. good) at the end of the students' papers.

Data Analysis: Based on the scores obtained from the proficiency test (PET) administered before the treatment, a few students with extreme scores were excluded from the study. The one-way ANOVA test was used to examine how homogeneous the groups were before the treatment. Writing test scores (pretest, immediate and delayed posttest) were calculated by means of obligatory occasion analysis [10]. That is, all the obligatory occasions for the use of a target category were identified and a student's accuracy score was obtained by dividing the total number of the correct uses of the category by the total number of obligatory occasions. For example, 5 correct use of an article from 10 obligatory occasions gave a score of .5 or 50%. To examine the reliability of the writing tests, 40 texts from the pretest were randomly selected from the four groups and re-scored by the same researcher one month after the initial scoring. The texts were also scored by another writing teacher. The intra-rater reliability was 97.8 and the inter-rater reliability was 89.8. The scores of the narrative writing tests were analyzed by means of a two-way ANOVA, withwritten CF type and time as independent variables and students' accuracy scores as the dependent variable.

RESULTSAND DISCUSSION

A one-way ANOVA used to compare the proficiency level of the groups prior to the treatmentshowed no significant differences among the four groups (F (3, 111) = 2.48, P < .05), indicating the comparability of the groups. Before performing the ANOVA test, the One-Sample K-S Test had shown normal distribution of scores for all groups, allowing the researchers to use parametric tests.Also two one-way ANOVAs revealed no significant differences among the four groups in their pretest scores for articles (F (3, 108) = 1.189, p < .05) and past tenses (F (3, 108) = 1.07, p < .05). The two-way ANOVA used to analyze the performance of four groups across three times yielded the following results:

Regarding the students' accuracy performance on articles, none of the factors of feedback type, time and the interaction of feedback type and time had a significant effect. This suggests that no feedback type was significantly better than the others in improving the students' written use of articles and that time did not have a moderating effect on feedback (Figure 1).

For the past tenses (as a single category), the effect of feedback type was significant. The post hoc Tukey showed that the scaffolded CF group significantly outperformed the direct CF group and control group. It was also better than the indirect group, but the difference between them was not significant. Also, the difference among direct, indirect and control groups was not significant. The effect of time was also significant. The Tukey test showed significant difference between the pretest and the two posttests (immediate and delayed), but the difference between the posttests was not significant. This indicated that there was a significant increase in accuracy of past tenses from the pretest to the posttest 1 and this improved knowledge was maintained in the delayed posttest. The effect of the interaction of feedback type and time, however, was not significant, implying that time did not have a moderating effect on the feedback type and the patterns of improvement over time were similar for all four groups (Figure 2).

The findings of this study showed that the type of linguistic error plays an important role in the effectiveness of written error correction. This supports Truscott's [12] argument that different linguistic categories are learnt differently. There were no statistically significant differences among the four groups (three experimental groups and one control group)involved in the study in their accuracy performance on articles. The students in the scaffolded CF group who were made to get more mentally engaged by being pushed through three stages toward resolving their errors could not do better than the other groups. This result might have been partly due to the complex nature of English articles and partly due to their non-salient communicative function, which often makes students play fast and loose with articles.
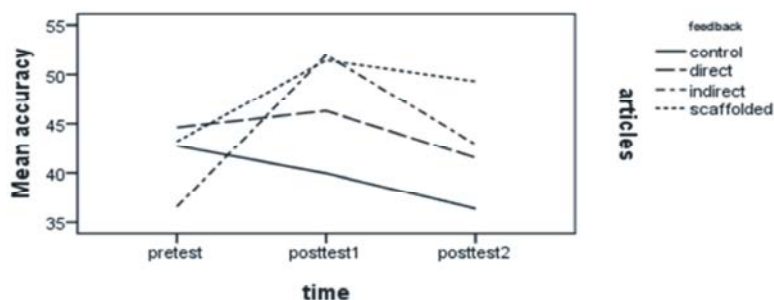

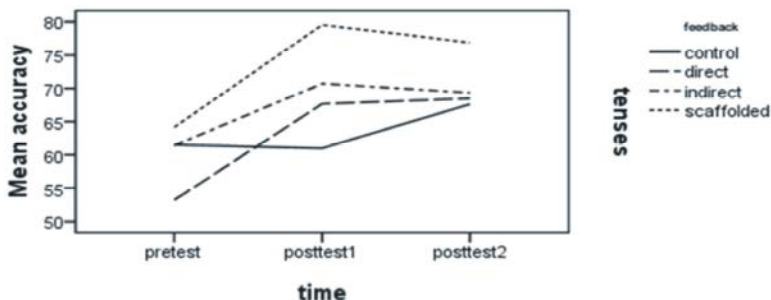Fig. 1: Four groups' accuracy performance on articles

Fig. 2: Four groups accuracy performance on past tenses

On the other hand, the type of CF did take effect in improving accuracy performance on past tenses. This is at odds with Truscott's [12] argument that grammar correction practice is futile. The study supports Ferris' [4, 15] idea that the way in which the teacher presents CF could have a determining role. According to Dabaghi and Basturkmen [37], "having an idea of the extent to which explicit and implicit error correction can be effective in restructuring the learners'interlanguage is theoretically and psychologically critical" (p. 83). When Robb *et al*.'s [29] study involving direct strategy and indirect strategies of varying degrees of implicitness showed progress for all groups but did not find significant differences among them, the researchers concluded that the degree of explicitness does not matter in error correction and that "less time-consuming methods of directing student attention to surface errors may suffice" (p. 91). The results of the present study, however, demonstrated that if the pattern of CF provision starts from implicit feedback and then becomes more and more explicit on account of the learner's wrong response, the learner is more likely to gain successful learning at least in certain linguistic categories. The students in the scaffolded CF group could display better accuracy performance on using past tenses in narrative than the other groups.

The present study also found that the traditional direct CF strategy, which is most commonly practiced in many writing classes including those in Iran, did not turn out to be an effective correction method in improving Iranian students' accurate use of past tenses. Those researchers preferring indirect feedback to direct feedback argue that both error detection and correction are the teacher's responsibility in direct CF provision, while, in indirect CF strategy, the student is intellectually engaged in the correction process, making them more susceptible to incorporating a rule. This study, however, did not find significant differences between the direct CF and indirect CF strategies, although the latter had a higher average mean in using past tenses. The problem with the indirect CF strategy is that it may often leave students out on a limb. In fact, the students in the indirect CF group constantly complained that they were not sure of their success in self-correcting their errors, desiring to learn about the correct form of their errors after receiving the indirect CF. Although indirect CF pushed the students and made them mentally involved, many students (particularly those of low proficiency) found this push incomplete and meager, thus becoming rather discouraged. The present study highlights the importance of the teacher's *follow-up* of the indirect CF so that

students are gradually and contingently guided into the solution of a problem. The study emphasizes the importance of the amount of written push in written CF context, supporting the argument that the efficacy of feedback depends to a large extent to "the degree of meaningful transactions between the learner and the teacher" [38].

CONCLUSION

To contribute to the research on the value of CF to L2 student writers, this study investigated the extent to which different types of written feedback on two error categories could help EFL students improve their written accuracy over time. It compared the scaffolded written CF with the commonly practiced direct and indirect correction as well as a no-feedback condition. The results showed that the kind of linguistic error affects the efficacy of the correction practice. While none of the groups were successful in improving their written accuracy of the articles, the scaffolded CF group made out significantly well in using the past tenses.

Three main pedagogical implications could be derived from the study. First, error feedback is more likely to fare wellif teachers select for correction the errors which are serious and communicatively important for students. Second, the success of the scaffolded CF suggests that L2 student writers need to be made to participate in solving their own problems, but in gradual and contingent manner. In other words, teachers should encourage pushed output until it leads to modified output [39]. Third, the amount of written feedback is a determining factor. For certain linguistic errors, the students need extended written push and simply a single push given through the indirect CF may often make them feel confused.

The present study also offers some suggestions for further research.The linguistic errors targeted in this study were articles and past tenses. Researchers could replicate the study with other linguistic categories. The subjects of this study were low intermediate university students. Replications can be done with students at other proficiency levels.Also, the present study was conducted with Iranian students whose L1 was Persian. Persian lacks definite article, which, among other factors, could have contributed to the obtained results. Studies need to be done with the students with other L1 backgrounds to see to what extent students' first language can impact on the success of feedback provision.

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