

## **The Impact of Indirect Focused and Unfocused Corrective Feedback on Written Accuracy**

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### **Abstract**

Usually writing teachers feel commitment to provide their learners with corrective feedback (CF) to their linguistic errors. The study investigated whether two types of written corrective feedback, indirect focused corrective feedback and indirect unfocused corrective feedback, produced differential effects on the accurate use of grammatical forms by high intermediate EFL learners. In this study, 54 female EFL learners formed two experimental groups and one control group. One experimental group received indirect focused written CF, and the other experimental group received indirect unfocused written CF for six weeks. The control group, nevertheless, received no particular feedback within this period. Results of performing ANOVA with post-hoc tests revealed the accuracy development of both experimental groups. However, unfocused group achieved the highest accuracy gain scores for simple past tense forms (copula past tense, regular past tense and irregular past tense) subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions. It was further found that unfocused feedback can contribute to grammatical accuracy but its long-term effectiveness is not quite as significant as its short-term effectiveness. The study also suggested that unfocused written CF reflects better teacher's objective as it views writing correction as a whole rather than as a way of practicing grammar.

**Keywords:** written corrective feedback, focused feedback, unfocused feedback, grammatical accuracy

### **Introduction**

In second language (L2) writing, feedback may be given on a wide range of issues including the text's content, appropriateness of the vocabulary, and nonlinguistic errors (e.g. punctuations). However, one type of feedback that has received most of researchers' attention is feedback on linguistic errors that has been commonly referred to as corrective feedback or error correction (Van Beuningen, 2010a).

It is worth noting that some researchers (e.g. Frantzen, 1995; Krashen, 1985; Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 1996, 2007) believed that error correction is unnecessary and ineffective. Truscott (1996), for example, claimed that CF disturbs the natural development of language and results in simple error free language; therefore, it should be abandoned. While other scholars (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002; Rahimi, 2009; Sheen, 2007) made a different point by saying that CF can be effective in improving the accuracy of L2 writers. Doughty (as cited in Van Beuningen, 2010a) has stated that CF is a potential focus on form instrument which induces learners' attention to form in the context of performing a task, and without attention to linguistic form, L2 acquisition could be less successful.

### **Different modes of corrective feedback**

For L2 learners, as Van Beuningen (2010a) pointed out, error cannot be avoided, but how to overcome the occurrence of errors depends on the way they are corrected by giving feedback. Adams (2003) pointed at the advantage of written CF over orally provided feedback. Although both modalities provide learners with the opportunity for noticing mismatches between the target language and their interlanguage system, learners might not be able to make the cognitive comparison in online oral language use (Van Beuningen, 2010a). In writing, on the other hand, learners have enough time to compare their output with the received CF. Moreover, some recent studies (e.g. Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010a; Ellis, Sheen, Takashima & Murakami, 2008; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009) revealed the long-term effectiveness of written CF over oral CF on accuracy development in the writing of new texts.

Earlier studies on the effects of written CF provided inconclusive results, as their conflicting findings were attributed to methodological issues such as time on task differences (Ferris, 2004; Van Beuningen, 2010a), comparison between just two revisions of the same text (Truscott & Hsu, 2008) or the lack of a control group (Van Beuningen, 2010a). Therefore, both opponents and advocates of written CF are required to provide L2 learners with more well designed studies.

### **Direct versus indirect corrective feedback**

An important distinction in categorizing feedback is usually made between direct and indirect CF, which has attracted the attention of many researchers (e.g. Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1995, 2002, 2010; Lalande, 1982; Van Beuningen, Jong, & Kuiken, 2008a, 2012). While direct CF consists of an indication of the correct linguistic form provided by the teacher to the student above the linguistic error (Ferris, 2003; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008), indirect CF just indicates an error has been made. In other words, to provide indirect CF, an error is underlined or coded and left to the learner to correct linguistic form rather the teacher providing its correct form (Van Beuningen, 2010a).

Whereas direct CF enables learners to instantly internalize the correct form provided by the teacher, indirect CF does not provide the correct form to the learners to test if their own hypothesized corrections are accurate (Chandler, 2003). Van Beuningen et al. (2008a, 2012) claimed that direct CF might be more advantageous than indirect CF since it was observed that learners receiving direct CF significantly outperformed those receiving indirect CF. The explicit correction of limited linguistic forms makes the processing load manageable for learners while unfocused approach runs the risk of overloading students' attentional capacity (Sheen, 2007). Furthermore, adult language learners need to be corrected directly to avoid fossilization and develop linguistic competence (Doughty & Varela cited in Soori, Kafipour, & Soury, 2011; Ellis, 1998; Ferris, 2004; James, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Tomasello & Herron, 1989). However, learners whose errors are corrected indirectly are engaged in a more profound form of language processing when they are self-editing their writing (Ferris, 1995; Lalande, 1982). "Indirect CF requires learners to engage in guided learning and problem solving and, as a result, promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, p.415).

### **Focused versus unfocused corrective feedback**

Van Beuningen (2010a) argued that approaches to written error correction may differ concerning their explicitness or implicitness, their focus, the person who provides the feedback, the type of feedback, and so on. Studies considering the type of feedback fall into three groups: those evaluating the effectiveness of selected or focused CF, those examining the effectiveness of

comprehensive or unfocused correction, and those comparing the effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF approaches.

Research studies on the effectiveness of focused approach, which targets specific linguistic features and leaves errors outside the focus domain uncorrected, indicated the robust positive effects of focused CF and durable accuracy gains. As compared to the growing number of studies on the effectiveness of focused CF, the number of studies investigating the potential effects of comprehensive or unfocused CF is still scarce. In a study conducted by Truscott and Hsu (2008), it was revealed that unfocused CF did not lead to accuracy gains in a new text. One possible explanation for this could be a probable ceiling effect (Bruton, 2009). Having investigated the benefits of comprehensive CF, Van Beuningen et al. (2008a, 2012), however, have come to the conclusion that unfocused CF, which concerns the correction of all errors in a learner's text, not only helps accuracy development in the revision of a particular text, but it also yields a learning effect.

Two studies addressing the relative effectiveness of focused and unfocused are Ellis et al. (2008), and Sheen et al. (2009). Ellis et al.'s study did not find any significant difference in accuracy gain between focused and unfocused CF groups. However, it has been expected that focused approach could be more beneficial to accuracy development than unfocused CF. Learners are more likely to notice and understand corrections when they target a specific error type.

Sheen et al. (2009) approved the results of Ellis et al.'s (2008) study by expressing that focused approach was more beneficial than unfocused approach. But they stated that one of the methodological issues with Ellis et al.'s study was that the focused and unfocused CF were hardly distinguished (i.e., article corrections marked strongly in both). However, some problems exist with both the aforementioned studies that need to be taken care of. The present study was an attempt to overcome such problems. One of the problems associated with these studies is that students in the focused group received more feedback on the target errors than those in the unfocused group. Furthermore, the implications drawn from these studies are quite narrow because they all targeted relatively simple linguistic problems such as article errors. It means that they did not examine whether focused CF could contribute to the accuracy of structures not targeted by the CF (Truscott, 2010; Ferris, 2010).

From a practical perspective, targeting only specific type of error might not be enough since a teacher's purpose in correcting his or her students' writing is improving accuracy in general. Additionally, students become perplexed when some errors are corrected but others are not (Ferris, 2010). It seems that the superiority of focused CF approach is under question. Focused CF is rather a form of explicit grammar instruction than a focus on form intervention (Bruton, 2009), whereby "Comprehensive CF seems to be the most authentic feedback methodology" (Van Beuningen, 2010a, p.20).

The point to be made here is that previous studies have involved short term feedback treatments on only one or two language features such as articles so that they do not reflect the reality of the natural use of language in the classroom. When learners focus on just one language feature, their received CF seems to constitute written grammar exercises rather than authentic writing tasks (Ferris, 2010; Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, further research studies should focus on the potential use of unfocused CF, which is addressed in this study, rather than focused feedback, as teachers who give CF opt to improve the overall accuracy of their learners' writing, not just the use of one specific linguistic feature.

Given the value of CF, the purpose of this article was to investigate the relative impact of indirect focused and unfocused written CF on the accurate use of grammatical forms by EFL secondary school students. Then, the study set out to address first, the effects of indirect focused and unfocused approaches on past tense forms (copula, regular and irregular) and on a broader range of grammatical structures (past tense copula, regular and irregular past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles and preposition), and second, the long-term effects of providing grammar feedback on students' writing. Therefore, the following two research questions guided the study:

1. Is there any significant difference in the effects of indirect focused and unfocused written CF on the accurate use of grammatical forms by EFL learners of secondary school?
2. Is there any significant difference in the long-term effects of indirect focused and unfocused written CF on the accurate use of grammatical forms by EFL learners of secondary school?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants in the present study were 54 (2 classes) female upper intermediate students from Arabic speaking backgrounds. Students were randomly assigned to three groups, namely two experimental groups (focused and unfocused) and one control group, of 18 each. Students with incomplete data sets were excluded from the final data analysis. Students were all 17 years old enrolling at third year of international secondary school, which adopted content-based approach to EFL in Iran.

### **Instruments**

The first instrument used in this study was an adapted version of a receptive vocabulary test utilized by Van Beuningen (2011) to obtain an indication of learners' overall language proficiency. The original test developed by Hazenberg and Hulstijn (1996) includes 140 target words, each of which is embedded in a contextually neutral carrier sentence, to assess non-native test takers' L2 vocabulary knowledge. The adapted version employed in this study contained 108 words with multiple-choice items. From the 140 target words, 32 words were taken out due to their archaic character. A vocabulary test was chosen to assess learners' general proficiency since vocabulary knowledge can be used as an indication of overall language proficiency (Zareva, Schwanenflugel, & Nikolova, 2005). The other instruments were twelve short fables taken from Aesop.'s fables (e.g. The Eagle and the Fox, see Appendix p. 11) as written narrative tasks. The last instruments were four different picture compositions taken from Byrne (1967) as narrative writing tests to examine the effects of CF on learners' use of past tense and three grammatical forms such as subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions. These picture-composition tests consisted of six pictures shown sequentially and the learners were asked to use them and write a coherent story.

### **Procedure**

This quasi experimental study utilized the design of pretest-treatment- immediate posttest-treatment and two delayed posttests. After assigning the participants into upper-intermediate proficiency level by administering Hazenberg and Hulstijn (1996) test, they were classified into three groups, two experimental groups (focused and unfocused) and one control group. The linguistic structure for focused treatment was simple past tense. It was selected based on the feedback received from pilot-testing. A narrative writing pretest was given to all participants in order to assure their homogeneity. The test consisted of six sequential pictures and the students were asked to write a coherent story based on them. The participants were asked to use the

pictures and write a story in detail about 200 words long within 40 minutes. Through pretest it was observed that students had difficulty with the use of different forms of past tense. The function of past tense refers to a completed action in the past which can be expressed through the use of past tense copula (was or were), regular verbs and irregular verbs (Frear, 2012). The unfocused CF treatment included in the study targeted a range of linguistic structures such as copula past tense, regular past tense, irregular past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions.

Over the next six weeks all groups completed 12 written narrative tasks two times per week followed by a CF session in the next class. The procedures of accomplishing narrative tasks adapted from Sheen et al. (2009) involved reading and then rewriting fables. The Second week, one session after receiving CF, students were given a narrative writing test (picture composition) as immediate posttest with the writing task instructions on top of the paper. Then, the narratives were collected and photocopied for data analysis. The original narratives were corrected and returned to the students in the next session. They were asked to pay attention to their errors corrected indirectly (implicitly) and to a general content comment provided by the teacher at the end of their papers. Focused group and unfocused group had received indirect CF on a specific type of error (past tense) and a range of targeted errors (past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles and prepositions) respectively while control group received no particular feedback. Then, the same procedure was repeated in the fourth week for the first delayed posttest. Finally, the second delayed posttest was administered with a four-week interval. Students in the focused and unfocused groups received the same procedure. They were provided with indirect CF on their narrative writing tasks twice per week until sixth week.

The results of the error correction tests over four testing sessions were obtained and analyzed in a quantitative manner i.e., one point awarded for the wrong use or omission of the linguistic feature, and another one point for providing correct form. All tests from the four testing times were scored collaboratively with an English teacher.

### Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations (descriptive statistics) on the productive writing tests that measured the accuracy of simple past tense forms and a limited number of various grammatical categories over the pretest and three posttests. The results indicate that the mean scores of the learners on the three posttests are different from each other across the three groups. After receiving the treatment of the study, all groups showed different performances. It means that the given treatment had different effects on the development of learners' written accuracy.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics for Writing Test Measuring the Accuracy of Simple Past Tense*

Grade	Pretest			Immediate posttest			First delayed posttest			Second delayed posttest		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Unfocused	18	16.72	1.776	15	14.13	3.021	16	16.50	1.414	16	16.69	1.078
Focused	17	16.35	2.029	16	10.94	2.932	15	14.20	1.424	15	14.47	.640
Control	15	10.47	.516	16	10.38	.500	12	10.67	.778	11	11.18	.751
Total	50	14.72	3.233	47	11.77	2.898	43	14.07	2.667	42	14.45	2.350

One way AVOVA was employed to see whether differences across the three groups were statistically significant. The results show statistically significant differences among the three groups at the three different testing times (Fpost test 1 (2, 46) = 10.65,  $p = .000$ ; Fpost test 2 (2, 42) = 71.84,  $p = .000$  and Fpost test 3 (2, 41) = 133.75,  $p = .000$ ), see Table 2. Therefore, the accuracy performance of students significantly differed by receiving two different types of CF on a range of linguistic structures such as copula past tense, regular past tense, irregular past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles and prepositions.

**Table 2.** One Way AVOVA of the Writing Test Scores across the Three Testing Sessions

Grade	Post Test (1)					Post Test (2)					Post Test (3)				
	SQ	D F	MS	F	Sig .	SQ	D F	MS	F	Sig .	SQ	D F	MS	F	Sig .
Between Groups	126.0 05	2	63.0 02	10.6 5	.00 0	233. 72	2	116. 86	71.8 4	.00 0	197. 59	2	98.7 9	133. 75	.00 0
Within Groups	260.4 21	44	5.92			65.0 7	40	1.63			28.8 1	39	.739		
Total	386.4 26	46				298. 79	42				226. 41	41			

Although One-way ANOVA determines that differences exist among the means, it provides no information about the source of the difference. Therefore, Tukey's post hoc pair wise comparisons were applied to determine which means differed with an alpha level of .05. As can be seen in Table 3, there is a significant difference between unfocused group and focused group ( $p = .002$ ), as well as between the unfocused group and control group ( $p = .000$ ) in the first posttest. In the second and third posttests, there are also significant differences between unfocused group and focused group ( $p = .000$ ) and between unfocused group and control group ( $p = .000$ ). Post-hoc comparisons indicated that the unfocused group outperformed more significantly the focused and control groups. However, mean differences between unfocused group and focused group revealed that indirect CF elicited a slight reduction in unfocused group from immediate posttest ( $M=3.196$ ,  $SD=.874$ ) to second delayed posttest ( $M=2.221$ ,  $SD=.309$ ). Therefore, indirect CF is effective in the short run, but its effect reduces in the long run.

**Table 3.** Tukey's Post-hoc Pair Wise Comparisons to Determine the Exact Location of Means Differences

Post Test	Test Type	(I) Group	Type	(J) Group	Type	MD (I-J)	SE	Sig .
Post Test (1)		Unfocused		ocused		3.196*	.87 4	.00 2
				ontrol		3.758*	.87 4	.00 0
Post Test (2)		Unfocused		Focused		2.300*	.45 8	.00 0
				Control		5.833*		

				.48	.00
				7	0
Post Test (3)	Unfocused	Focused	2.221*	.30	.00
				9	0
		Control	5.506*		
				.33	.00
				7	0

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

In response to the predicament of error correction, although Truscott (1996) claimed that the writing process alone would lead to the development of accuracy, the general effects of written CF, apart from its specific type, focused or unfocused, on the development of accuracy was more considerable in the present study. In general, leaving students' errors untouched may cause the fossilization of ungrammatical structures. Thus, corrective feedback can be used as an effective tool to prevent learners from making possible linguistic errors in their writing tasks.

The current study aimed at investigating differential effects of indirect focused and unfocused written CF on written accuracy. The results of the study are not in line with those done by Sheen et al. (2009) as well as Bitchener and Knoch (2010b). Sheen et al. and Bitchener and Knoch found that advanced L2 writers were able to make further gains in accuracy as a result of focused written CF rather than unfocused CF. However, the findings of the study revealed that generally providing both focused and unfocused groups with indirect CF had positive effects on their written accuracy performance. However, the unfocused group significantly outperformed the focused and control groups on immediate and delayed posttests. In other words, students who had received CF on a range of linguistic structures such as past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles and prepositions produced fewer errors in their new writing tasks. In contrast, learners who were corrected on a specific type of error (simple past tense) did not pay attention to the other possible ill-formed structures so that they became permanently established in their interlanguage. Furthermore, it sounds that they practiced grammar exercises rather than doing authentic writing tasks (Van Beuningen, 2010a).

The second question of the study concerned with the long-term effects of indirect CF on the development of written accuracy in focused and unfocused groups. Post-hoc pair wise comparisons yielded a significant difference between focused and unfocused groups receiving indirect CF on both delayed posttests. It shows that unfocused group can produce long-term gains on a new writing test provided that students are constantly provided with CF. The results of the study corroborate those of Ferris's study (2006), who found that indirect CF was more beneficial to accuracy development than direct CF. He stated that learners will benefit considerably from indirect CF because it induces deeper internal processing and as a result, it contributes more likely to long-term learning. It should be pointed out that the present study stressed on the durable effects of indirect CF and failed to demonstrate the benefits of direct CF. although there was a significant difference between focused and unfocused groups on second delayed posttest, the mean differences between both groups revealed that the long-term effectiveness of indirect CF was reduced in unfocused group. It can be argued that as learners no longer received CF after the first delayed posttest, they could not effectively internalize the correct form on their new writing tasks.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the differential effects of two different approaches to written correction on EFL learners' errors in content-based classes. The results of the study showed that indirect focused and indirect unfocused CF produced significantly positive effects on written accuracy in comparison to control group that received no particular feedback. Nevertheless post-hoc pair wise comparisons revealed that unfocused group who were provided with feedback on a range of grammatical structures (simple past tense, subject-verb agreement, articles and preposition) significantly outperformed the focused group and the control group. The findings indicate that students opt to improve the overall accuracy rather than a specific type of linguistic feature.

From the pedagogical point of view, the findings of the study would be useful for teachers to adopt an unfocused (comprehensive) approach to the correction of linguistic errors. They should realize that providing CF on a limited range of linguistic structures is more beneficial for learners to develop the general written accuracy than giving feedback on a specific kind of error. However, low proficient learners do not feel comfortable with indirect feedback since they have limited linguistic knowledge to self-correct their errors (Ferris, 2002). Therefore, teachers are required to use effective methods and strategies to develop low-proficient L2 learners' awareness of their errors. It is important to give such students a clear understanding of what to do next on their errors just underlined by the teacher and need to be self-corrected.

The present study is not without limitations. This study was conducted with upper-intermediate students in a secondary school. Therefore, further research is required to study the effectiveness of different types of written CF (focused and unfocused) with university students at high levels of proficiency and to examine whether the proficiency level of L2 learners affects the results. Moreover, the current study could not examine the learners' personality traits like gender differences due to the practical limitations. It has been suggested that various personality factors may have differential effects on the success of CF (Sheen, 2007). Also, further study would be needed to answer the question to what extent gained accuracy is due to the possible avoidance of complex structures.

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## Appendix

The Eagle and the Fox: a fable taken from Aesop's fables

AN EAGLE and a Fox formed an intimate friendship and decided to live near each other. The Eagle built her nest in the branches of a tall tree, while the Fox crept into the underwood and there produced her young. Not long after they had agreed upon this plan, the Eagle, being in want of provision for her young ones, swooped down while the Fox was out, seized upon one of the little cubs, and feasted herself and her brood. The Fox on her return, discovered what had happened, but was less grieved for the death of her young than for her inability to avenge them. A just retribution, however, quickly fell upon the Eagle. While hovering near an altar, on which some villagers were sacrificing a goat, she suddenly seized a piece of the flesh, and carried it, along with a burning cinder, to her nest. A strong breeze soon fanned the spark into a flame, and the eaglets, as yet unfledged and helpless, were roasted in their nest and dropped down dead at the bottom of the tree. There, in the sight of the Eagle, the Fox gobbled them up.