

The Effect of Hedged-form Feedback vs. Uncoded Feedback on Grammatical Accuracy of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

The extent to which teachers' written corrective feedback (WCF) is conducive to ESL learners' improvement has been discussed since Truscott's claim in 1996. The mentioned debate continues because there has been lots of contrastive research studies with different results. This paper presents the results of a 2-month study of the effectiveness of WCF to 65 low intermediate Iranian learners. In the first phase, the students were divided into two groups of hedged group and control group, which received uncoded feedback. The learners produced 8 pieces of writing (Nelson Test was given to students to homogenize the groups). The first piece of writing was considered as the pretest and the 8th piece of their writing was considered as their posttest. Independent and paired sample t test were used to analyse the data statistically. The result of comparing the mean performance of the two groups in posttest indicated that the probability value was less than .05 ($p = .000 < .05$) which means that the mean performance of the two sets of scores in post test is significantly different and the hedged form feedback group has outperformed the one who received uncoded feedback.

Keyword: feedback, uncoded feedback, indirect feedback, hedged form feedback, writing.

Introduction

Writing, as a complicated process, has been viewed as a way of communication since 6000 years ago. According to Zamel (1982), writing well is not an acquired skill, but a type of learned or transmitted skill which can be achieved in instructional settings.

Responding to students is a complex and time consuming process which results in teachers' critical decisions about students' learning and progress. In Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (2002, p. 199), feedback is defined as "... any information that provides information on the result of behavior. In teaching, feedback refers to comments or other information that learners receive, concerning their success on learning tasks or tests, either from the teachers or other persons".

Truscott (1996) claimed that written corrective feedback (WCF) is harmful and suggested that teachers should abandon the practice, although teachers use written corrective feedback, everyday in most frequently used methods and consider it as a way to improve accuracy. Ferris (1999), however, claimed that Truscott's claims were premature and there are also strong reasons to keep on giving feedback.

Drawing an analogy of researches between Kepner (1991), Polio and Ledar (1998), and Truscott and Hsu (2008) to support Truscott's claim and Ashwell (2000), Bitchener (2008), and Bitchener and Knock (2009) to fully endorse the effectiveness of WCF for linguistic form and structure denotes the significance of WCF for both teachers and students. Ellis et al. (2008) and

Bitchener et al. (2005, 2009) found that direct WCF is entirely effective in language improvement, especially in form.

As regards the effectiveness of WCF, the variety of types of WCF is under investigation (Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, 2009). Likewise, the researchers are in favor of finding the most useful feedback to help learners improve their written accuracy.

Due to the contrastive viewpoints which express the disparity existing between different results of the research studies, there is a growing need for further research into the effectiveness of WCF.

On the other hand, socio-cultural factors, motivation, self-schema and scaffolding are effective in WCF. According to Skehan (1989) learners' different levels of motivation and interest may influence their performance and improvement. The aforementioned factors which will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter, construct learners' attitude toward language learning and WCF.

In this research, two types of written corrective feedback, hedged form and imperative form, are considered to be examined and investigated to determine whether any improvement occurs in intermediate learners of English after they receive hedged imperative corrective feedback during the writing course. This paper also attempts to examine if there is any superiority over one of the two mentioned types of feedback or not.

Literature Review

Effectiveness of the corrective written feedback is a very important issue to make students proficient in the second language languages. Sometimes L2 teachers become disappointed with students' results and performance in the target language. But it is also true that the methods of providing feedback to the students affect their performance in the target language. The direct and indirect corrective feedback are the most common methods used by the instructors to respond, comment and correct grammatical errors on students' written works. Direct corrective feedback is provided when the teacher writes the correct form on the student's paper (Lalande, 1982 and Robb et al. 1986), while indirect feedback is provided when the teacher indicates the location of the error on the paper by underlining, highlighting or circling it without providing the correct form (Lee, 2004). Several studies have been conducted in this area to know the impact and effectiveness of the direct and indirect feedback on students' writing ability. Direct corrective feedback has the advantage that it provides learners with explicit guidance about how to correct their errors. (Rod Ellis). Ferris and Roberts (2001) suggest that direct corrective feedback is probably better than indirect corrective feedback with students having low levels of proficiency in writing. A recent study by Sheen (2007) indicates that direct corrective feedback can be effective in promoting acquisition of specific grammatical features. Guenette (2007) defines direct feedback that it refers to the teacher's correction of errors. According to Lee (2004), direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher picks out errors and gives the correct forms.

On the other hand, indirect feedback is a feedback that the teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction. Lanlande (1982) suggests that indirect feedback is indeed more effective in enabling students to correct their errors but others, for example, Ferris and Roberts' own study found no difference between direct and indirect corrective feedback. Guenette (2007) states that indirect feedback mentions the teacher's indication of errors by underlining, highlighting or coding them and then letting learners do the corrections. According to Lee (2004), indirect correction refers to situations when the teacher marks that errors have been made but does not supply the correct forms, requiring the learners to diagnose and correct their errors. Further, she distinguishes indirect feedback strategies with a code.

The present research was carried out to find out the effect of providing two types of indirect corrective feedback (hedged and uncoded feedback) on the grammatical accuracy of writing proficiency.

In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), hedging means "to avoid giving a direct answer to a question or promising to support a particular idea".

In *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2002, p. 237) hedging is defined as... "linguistic devices that writers use either to indicate the writer's lack of commitment to the truth of a statement or a desire not to express that commitment categorically...." Some items such as perhaps, somewhat, sort of, might, to a certain degree, it is possible are considered as hedged form.

Numukhamedov and Kim cited that Hyland (1998:1) believes that hedging is used to "indicate either (a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or (b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically."

As a whole hedging indicates "hesitation", "uncertainty", "politeness" and "indirectness" (Hinkel, 2004).

All in all, the present research was an attempt to recognize which groups of learners, the ones who received hedged form feedback or the ones who received the uncoded feedback, would improve more in writing. In hedged form the students will receive comments and feedback which were provided by the researcher in written form, but in control group the researcher just underlines the errors.

Methodology

Participants

The present study was carried out in an institute, called Ayandegan in Sari. While carrying out the study, 70 English learners were learning English at intermediate level of proficiency. In other words, the intermediate learners had studied a year and six months of English. The participants were all Iranian students. As the researcher needed almost 50 participants, the researcher gave a pretest (Nelson Test) to all the students to homogenize the groups and chose 50 students who were one standard deviation above or below the mean score. The students were categorized into two groups, 25 students for control group and 25 students for experimental group.

Instrumentation

The experimental group received hedged written corrective feedback and the control group received just uncoded feedback. The errors which were corrected were in structural level. Both groups were given five minutes to take a look at the given feedback and contemplate on it. Since in experimental group the students might face some comments that were ambiguous for them, they were allowed to ask questions but not the control group (in control group the teacher did not leave any comments to the students errors). The students had to write at least 150 words in a limited time. The writing topics were 8 different pictures and the students were allowed to ask questions, if they did not know what some parts of the pictures were called in English.

Procedure

As mentioned before, participants who studied in the lower intermediate classes were divided into two groups of one control group and one experimental group. Each group contained thirty learners. In the first session of the term, the participants were given (Nelson Test) to homogenize the learners. The ones who got one SD higher and lower than the mean score were

selected, but they were not separated from the others to avoid Hawthorne effect. Their first writing was regarded as their pretest. Each week, they received a topic to write. The eight chosen topics were the same for both groups. The students were given 30 minutes time to write and then the researcher collected the papers. The papers were graded after the research was completed from 1-20 by three raters.

As it was mentioned earlier, the experimental group received comments on their errors and based on comments they must correct them. In contrast the control group was given uncoded feedback. In control group the teacher just underlines the error without adding any comments to them. At the 8th session the students were given the last topic as their posttest. The selected topics were eight pictures selected from English Time books, written by Melanie Graham and Stanton Procter. The students were graded by three raters, after seven sessions, the students were given the 8th picture as the posttest. In order to understand whether providing corrective feedback had been effective in the accuracy of writing, the posttest results of the two groups were compared to figure out the differences between the two types of feedback.

Results and Discussion

Initially to make sure participants were homogenized, the Nelson proficiency test was given to all of the participants of two classes which were selected for the purpose of this study. The mean score of first group was 33.25 and the mean score of second group was 29.93. Then the pretest and posttest were given to both groups. Since three raters rated the pretest and posttest, the researcher used the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for both groups in order to check the inter-rater reliability.

Table 1. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient

	rater 1 in exp group in pre test	rater 2 in exp group in pre test	rater 3 in exp group in pre test
rater 1 in exp group in pre test	1	.849**	.856**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
N	22	22	22
rater 2 in exp group in pre test	.849**	1	.792**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
N	22	22	22
rater 3 in exp group in pre test	.856**	.792**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
N	22	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient

	rater 1 in control group in pre test	rater 2 in control group in pre test	rater 3 in control group in pre test
rater 1 in control group in pre test	1	.826**	.727**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.001
N	25	25	25

rater 2 in control group in pre test	Pearson Correlation	.826**	1	.666**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.003
	N	25	25	25
rater 3 in control group in pre test	Pearson Correlation	.727**	.666**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.003	
	N	25	25	25

As tables 1 and 2 show, the scores given by three raters, both in experimental group and control group, were positively correlated with each other.

Descriptive statistics for the two groups in pre-test are displayed in table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistic Pre-test of writing by groups

Groups		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Pretest	Exp	22	14.18	3.59	0.44
	Con	25	14.10	3.53	0.4

The mean score achieved by participants of the experimental group on the pretest was 14.18, while their counterparts in the control group achieved a mean score of 14.10. And in order to see whether the two groups were also homogenous regarding their essay writing ability or not, the means between the pretests obtained from the two groups were compared using the independent-samples t test.

Table 4. Independent-Samples t Test

		Paired Differences		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
control group in pre test	-.4697	4.69769	.57825	-1.6245	.6851	.812	6	.420
experimental group in pre test	0						5	

The results of the t test shown in Table 4 demonstrate that homogeneity of the scores between the two groups. The column labeled *Sig. (2-tailed)* is our probability value. If this value is less than .05 (e.g. .04, .01, .001), then it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the two sets of scores (Pallant, 2002). In this table, the probability value is .42. This means that the probability value was more than .05 ($p = .42 > .05$) indicating that the control and experimental groups' scores were not significantly different from each other. Therefore, it was made certain that the groups were actually homogeneous.

The descriptive statistics for the two groups in posttest are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive statistic for posttest

Groups		N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Posttest	Exp	22	17.54	3.24	.39
	Con	25	14.88	3.54	.40

Then the means between the posttest obtained from the two groups were compared using the independent-samples t test in order to see which of the two groups had made more progress in writing skill.

Table 6. Independent-Samples t Test

	Paired Differences						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	upper				
CONTROL GROUP- EXPRIMENTAL GROUP	3.5888	1.34470	.32614	2.8974	4.280	11.0	1	.000	
				4	2	0	6		

The result of comparing the mean performance of the two groups in posttest has been reported. In this table, the probability value is .000. This means that the probability value was less than .05 ($p = .000 < .05$) indicating that the mean performance of the two sets of scores in post test is significantly different and the hedged form feedback group has outperformed the one who received uncoded feedback. It must be mentioned that, the control group did improve their written grammatical accuracy, but this improvement was not very significant.

Then the researcher compared the means between the posttest obtained from the two groups using independent samples t test. The mean score for the post-test for the experimental group was 17.54 where as the mean score for the post-test for the control group was 14.88.

The outcome of the current research is in line with the findings of Sheppard (1992), Frantzen (1995), Fazio (2001), and Chandler (2003) who proved CF to be a way of improving the accuracy of L2 students' writing. Since hedged form feedback and uncoded feedback are types of indirect feedback, the result of this study is in harmony with several other studies (Ferris & Helt, 2000; Frantzen, 1995; Lalande, 1982; Lee, 1997; Robb et al., 1986). The results show that indirect corrective feedback leads to either more or equal levels of accuracy in the long run, which may imply the superiority of the indirect techniques of error correction over the course of time, due to the fact that, indirect feedback makes the students think of their errors and revise the errors based on the feedback given to them rather than just see the correct form of the errors on their writing paper. Indirect feedback is so challenging for the students and raises the students awareness. The result of this study is also in line with the study conducted by Bankier(2012). Bankier examined the effect of post-text feedback and uncoded feedback. He mentioned that, one noticeable difference was that post-text feedback led to revisions that were either correct or were not revised. Contrastively, uncoded feedback led to several incorrect revisions, but no errors were

left unchanged. So, highlighting or underlying text may be insufficient since the problem is unclear to the learner.

The result of this study contradicts the Nurmukhamedov and Kim's viewpoints (2009). Nurmukhamedov and Kim (2009) believed that in indirect type of feedback results in misunderstanding and the learners cannot understand what the teachers mean. Considering Skehan's findings (1998), learners may be motivated to correct themselves when they exactly know what types of error they made.

Conclusion

The present study was carried out by the researcher basically to find out whether there was any significant difference between the type of feedback to which L2 writing students are exposed in terms of improving their ability to correct certain error and write more grammatically accurate essays. The findings revealed that the subjects' exposure to hedged form error corrective feedback did have a significant effect on their performance in correcting certain error categories. Since the subjects in the uncoded error corrective feedback group, that were also required to further self-edit the errors underlined by the teacher, did improve their writing ability but this improvement was not very significant.

In short, the researcher believes that the ESL writing teachers need to regard the first draft of their students' written texts as "a dream that needs to be re-dreamed" [and further revised by the students themselves] (Handeland, 2008) through "fresh eyes" (Al_Azzeh, 2008) of the teachers providing their students with indirect error corrective feedback.

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