

Directness Types and the Possible Effect on EFL Learners' Perception of Written Teacher Feedback

Mavadat Saidi

Kharazmi University of Tehran
msttut@gmail.com

Mohadese Khosravi

Kharazmi University of Tehran
Mohadese.khosravi@gmail.com

Abstract

Written Teacher Feedback (WTF) aims at improving the students' writing. Hence, the way in which it is provided for the learners should be taken into account as it makes an impact on the learners' comprehension of the presented comments (Ferris, 2003; Thonus, 2002). The current study was conducted to examine the possible effect of WTF directness types on Iranian EFL learners' ability to perceive the teachers' comments as praise or criticism and the required correction implied in them. To this end, three versions of the same essay, with direct, indirect and hedged comments indexed within them were distributed to 120 EFL learners. The results of ANOVA revealed that the directness type of the WTF would make no significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' ability to perceive the positive and negative comments and their required correction accurately. We might speculate from the findings that writing instructors should focus more on the quality of the WTF rather than its directness type in Iranian context. This would hopefully empower the learners to apply the teachers' comments to enhance the quality of their written products.

Key terms: Direct speech act, directness types, hedged comment, indirect speech act, written teacher feedback (WTF)

Introduction

Written teacher feedback (WTF) aims at improving the students' writing in terms of both accuracy and fluency (Guenette, 2007). However, its effectiveness is grounded in the way it is provided (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Among the myriad of factors which differentiate WTF, recognition is increasing of the degree of speech

directness for its possible influence on the learners' ability to understand the comments and thereby to make the required corrections.

Both direct and indirect speech can be used in order to comment on the learners' compositions. Direct speech encompasses a single meaning or illocutionary force (Clark, 1979). Conversely, indirect speech entails more than one illocutionary force (Clark, 1979). Also, hedging, the third type of directness makes meanings blurred (Schroder & Zimmer, 1997). Mackiewicz and Riley (2002) pointed to hedging as a modifier for the other two types. Generally, extensive research on WTF suggests that indirect speech acts and hedging both decrease the directness of the comments (Ferris, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

Some researchers have attempted to delineate the influence of directness types on the learners' ability to comprehend and make the requested corrections based on WTF. Ferris, Chaney, Komura, Roberts, and McKee (2000) investigated short-term and long-term effects of WTF. It was shown that direct feedback would help students to revise their essays more than indirect one. Nevertheless, indirect feedback seemed to be more beneficial with the pass of time. Moreover, a large body of research showed that indirect feedback would enhance the learners' control of their writing (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Thonus, 1999, 2002).

Besides, indirect speech is employed in order to make the comments more polite (Clark, 1979; Mackiewicz & Riley, 2002; Riley & Mackiewicz, 2003; Thonus, 1999). In this way, teachers soften face-threatening acts when they comment on the students' written products (Ferris, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Lee & Schallert, 2008). However, commenting on the learners' compositions by indirect speech act in the form of questions may face them with problems (Ferris, 2007) and might lead to their uncertainty to incorporate the required changes into the text (Ferris, 2002, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Moreover, making use of indirect speech act might disadvantage non-native speakers in comparison to their native counterparts (Thonus, 2004).

Research has also pointed to the fact that applying less direct speech in commenting on the learners' compositions would make it more difficult and time-consuming for the learners to perceive them accurately (Champagne, 2001; Baker & Bricker, 2010). The condition might be worse when WTF is provided in the students' L2 (Ferris, 2002). Hence,

this question might arise that whether EFL learners' understanding of WTF would differ in terms of the degree of its directness including direct, indirect and hedged ones. Bearing these in mind, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. Does directness influence EFL learners' perception of both positive and negative WTF?
2. Does directness influence EFL learners' identification of the required correction implied in the comments?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 120 university students majoring in English Translation and English Literature participated in the research. Of these participants, 45 were male and 75 were female and their age ranged from 19 to 27. They were all at their BA level.

Instrumentation

One sample essay of 150-word length was used in the study. The essay was a reading passage manipulated by the researchers and three writing instructors to include errors of seemingly the same level of difficulty. It was an expository essay which contained teacher comments indexed in the text. The comments were modified so that the researchers came up with three versions of the same essay including direct, indirect and hedged comments. Each version contained six comments, three positive ones and three negative ones. Negative comments required correction while positive comments did not.

Procedures

Participants were randomly given one of the three versions of the essay. The first version contained all direct comments such as "*Change the verb (doing) to 'past participle' in this passive sentence*" which were all written in imperative. The second version contained all indirect comments such as "*I think spelling should be checked*" in the form of a question or a comment. The third version contained all hedged comments such as "*Imagery is used nearly great*". They completed different sections while being given directions by the instructors. The participants

were asked if the comment was positive or negative and whether it required a correction.

Results

The descriptive statistics of EFL learners according to their score of identifying positive and negative comments and the required correction implied in them are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of EFL learners' scores of identifying positive and negative comments and the required correction implied in the WTF

Score	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Positive/negative	120	0	6	12.27	4.53
Required correction	120	0	6	11.99	4.40

To investigate the possible effect of WTF directness types on EFL learners' ability to identify positive and negative comments, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run. The results reveal that both positive and negative comments are equally identified by the participants regardless of their directness types (Sig = 0.21, $p < .05$) (see Table 2).

Table 2

ANOVA analysis- Identification of positive and negative WTF and the directness types

Directness types	N	M	SD	F	Df.	P
Direct WTF	40	4.42	1.63	1.54	B= 12	NS*
Indirect WTF	40	3.85	1.42		W= 117	
Hedged WTF	40	4.00	1.48		T= 119	

* Non-significant

In addition, to find out whether there were any significant differences among EFL learners regarding their ability to identify the required correction implied in the WTF considering the directness types, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was again applied. The results show that WTF

directness types have no significant influence on the participants' ability to identify the required correction (Sig = 0.64, $p < .05$) (see Table 3).

Table 3

ANOVA analysis- Identification of the required correction and the WTF directness types

Directness types	N	M	SD	F	Df.	P
Direct WTF	40	4.17	1.29	0.44	B= 12	NS*
Indirect WTF	40	3.87	1.60		W= 117	
Hedged WTF	40	3.95	1.51		T= 119	

* Non-significant

Discussion

The main interest of this study was to investigate whether WTF directness types would influence EFL learners' ability to identify the positive or negative comments and the required correction implied in them. The results revealed that making use of three directness types including direct, indirect and hedged comments would make no impact on the learners' ability to identify the comments as praise (positive comment) or criticism (negative comment).

Although the literature is imbued with advocates of indirect speech difficulty for the learners to understand (Baker & Bricker, 2010; Ferris, 2007; Mackiewicz & Riley, 2002; Riley & Mackiewicz, 2003) and research points to more difficult comprehension of less direct comments (Champagne, 2001), the results of this study seems to cast some doubt on the issue as EFL learners turned out to behave seemingly the same while being confronted with the WTF of different directness types.. Hence, the results are at odd with those from previous studies considering the impact of the directness types on the learners' ability to have accurate perceptions of WTF.

On the other hand, findings of this study are not in line with those of other studies in which providing WTF in the learners' L2 proved to make the comments and their required action hard to grasp (Ferris, 2002). The means for identifying the WTF of different directness types as praise or criticism and the requested correction for the EFL learners were

reasonable (EFL: 12.27, 11.99, respectively). It might suggest that providing the comments in L2 would not necessarily make them elusive. Nevertheless, what Ferris (2002) implied might stem from the learners' level of proficiency which would influence their perception of WTF. Moreover, it might also depend on the teachers' professionalism, i.e., when to ask the learners to start writing seriously and how to provide instruction regarding the WTF (Lee, 2008). Notwithstanding the limitation of this statement that commenting on the learners' compositions in their L2 might face them with more difficulty, as WTF aims at improving the learners' writing skill (Ferris, 2007; Guenette, 2007; Lee & Schallert, 2008), the writing instructors should take heed of the way they provide the comments (Conrad & Goldstein, 1991; Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Thonus, 2002) to make their feedback as impressive as possible.

In addition, the results lend no support for the effect of the directness degree of the provided comments on the learners' comprehension. Although evidence to date suggests that direct WTF is much more favored and much easier for the learners (Ferris et al., 2000), turning the tide toward less direct comments would add to the politeness of the feedback (Clark, 1979; Mackiewicz & Riley, 2002; Riley & Mackiewicz, 2003; Thonus, 1999) which seems to be desired by most of the learners.

On the other hand, the results of this investigation highlight the fact that indirect WTF would not disadvantage non-native speakers (Thonus, 2004). However, according to Ferris et al. (2000), as the learners develop in their L2, less direct comments would be more helpful. This would provide us with profound insight toward shifting from direct to indirect comments at its appropriate stage of writing instruction in spite of the presence of no difference among EFL learners in identifying positive and negative comments and the requested correction.

Conclusions

The findings indicate that WTF directness types would make no significant difference among EFL learners regarding their ability to perceive WTF and the requested correction accurately. This might lead to the conclusion that learners' ability to perceive the comments correctly is largely dependent on the other factors than the directness type. In this regard, Lee (2008) reiterates that teachers' beliefs and values, the culture and the teacher training courses come to the fore as a number of pivotal

issues influencing teachers' feedback practices and consequently, the learners' identification of WTF. These areas might be the potential areas to be further investigated in terms of their possible impact on the learners' ability to perceive the WTF correctly.

Findings from this study might also help the practitioners and teachers as well as the writing instructors to focus more on the quality of WTF rather than its directness type within our context. In this way, the learners' awareness of the WTF would be raised and their ability to apply it to exceed the quality of their written products would enhance.

However, in spite of the results of the current study which deciphered WTF directness types to be of no impact on the learners' ability to perceive the WTF accurately, it seems more favorable to provide the learners with less direct types as they step ahead in their learning process (Ferris et al., 2000). This might hopefully make them less dependent in the writing process. Moreover, as more indirect WTF demonstrated to be perceived as more polite (Clark, 1979; Mackiewicz & Riley, 2002; Riley & Mackiewicz, 2003; Thonus, 1999), the writing instructors and teachers are recommended to present the learners with WTF of optimal extent of directness. If directness types would make no significant difference among Iranian EFL learners and if less direct comments would be perceived as more polite, why not to make the comments more and more polite. This seems to be in accord with humanistic approaches currently used in English language teaching contexts.

The findings of the current study, however, must be approached cautiously. Since the study was conducted only in university, further research might address EFL learners at language institutes who have a variety of academic backgrounds. In addition, the learners' gender and age were not taken into account. As the male and female learners of different ages might behave differently while being confronted with the WTF of various directness types, this study should be replicated with sufficient number of participants of each gender and age group.

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Appendix (1)

Essay with direct WTF

Dear respondent,

The following essay is written by a university student in his basic writing course. The writing instructor put some comments on his essay. Please look at the comments carefully and answer the questions in the following page for each comment.

<p>There is a place <u>in</u>¹ our earth where hot water and steam come up from under the ground. It is a large island in the Pacific Ocean, the island in North Island in New Zealand.</p> <p>The planet on which we live is a ball of very hot rock. It is a good thing for us that the outside shell is cold. <u>If it were not, no one could live here</u>². What if our earth was only as big as an egg? Then the outside part would be as deep as the egg's shell. The earth's shell has cracks in it in some places. In New Zealand this shell seems to have more cracks than in other places on the earth. <u>There are spots where the ground is so hot that it burns the bottom of your shoes</u>³. In some places, hot water shoots into the air from time to time. At other points, you can see steam coming up from pools of hot water. The people who live in these places make use of the heat that comes from inside the earth. Some of them cook in the hot pools. They put food into the basket and place it in the water. Washing clothes <u>is doing</u>⁴ in much the same way.</p> <p>Many people bring the hot water from below the earth into their homes. They do this by <u>puting</u>⁵ a pipe a hundred feet or more into the ground. In this way they get hot water and steam for cooking and washing, and for heating their homes.</p> <p><u>For most of us, the heat under our feet is too far away to use. We must make our heat by burning coal, oil, or gas. The people who get heat from inside the earth are lucky. It takes money to pay for coal, oil, or gas</u>⁶.</p>	<p>1. Change the preposition (in) to 'on'.</p> <p>2. This is good use of conditional type 2.</p> <p>3. Great imagery!</p> <p>4. Change the verb (doing) to 'past participle' in this passive sentence.</p> <p>5. Use double 't' when you have 'put+ing'.</p> <p>6. Nice conclusion!</p>
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Comment 1:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 2:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 3:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 4:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 5:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 6:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Appendix (2)

Essay with indirect WTF

Dear respondent,

The following essay is written by a university student in his basic writing course. The writing instructor put some comments on his essay. Please look at the comments carefully and answer the questions in the following page for each comment.

<p>There is a place <u>in</u>¹ our earth where hot water and steam come up from under the ground. It is a large island in the Pacific Ocean, the island in North Island in New Zealand.</p> <p>The planet on which we live is a ball of very hot rock. It is a good thing for us that the outside shell is cold. <u>If it were not, no one could live here</u>². What if our earth was only as big as an egg? Then the outside part would be as deep as the egg's shell. The earth's shell has cracks in it in some places. In New Zealand this shell seems to have more cracks than in other places on the earth. <u>There are spots where the ground is so hot that it burns the bottom of your shoes</u>³. In some places, hot water shoots into the air from time to time. At other points, you can see steam coming up from pools of hot water. The people who live in these places make use of the heat that comes from inside the earth. Some of them cook in the hot pools. They put food into the basket and place it in the water. Washing clothes <u>is doing</u>⁴ in much the same way.</p> <p>Many people bring the hot water from below the earth into their homes. They do this by <u>puting</u>⁵ a pipe a hundred feet or more into the ground. In this way they get hot water and steam for cooking and washing, and for heating their homes.</p> <p><u>For most of us, the heat under our feet is too far away to use. We must make our heat by burning coal, oil, or gas. The people who get heat from inside the earth are lucky. It takes money to pay for coal, oil, or gas</u>⁶.</p>	<p>1. Could you change the preposition?</p> <p>2. I feel you are quite familiar with conditional type 2.</p> <p>3. I think the imagery here is used well.</p> <p>4. I feel you should change the verb form here.</p> <p>5. I think spelling should be checked.</p> <p>6. It seems an appropriate conclusion.</p>
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Comment 1:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 2:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 3:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 4:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 5:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 6:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Appendix (3)

Essay with hedged WTF

Dear respondent,

The following essay is written by a university student in his basic writing course. The writing instructor put some comments on his essay. Please look at the comments carefully and answer the questions in the following page for each comment.

There is a place in¹ our earth where hot water and steam come up from under the ground. It is a large island in the Pacific Ocean, the island in North Island in New Zealand.

The planet on which we live is a ball of very hot rock. It is a good thing for us that the outside shell is cold. If it were not, no one could live here². What if our earth was only as big as an egg? Then the outside part would be as deep as the egg's shell. The earth's shell has cracks in it in some places. In New Zealand this shell seems to have more cracks than in other places on the earth. There are spots where the ground is so hot that it burns the bottom of your shoes³. In some places, hot water shoots into the air from time to time. At other points, you can see steam coming up from pools of hot water. The people who live in these places make use of the heat that comes from inside the earth. Some of them cook in the hot pools. They put food into the basket and place it in the water. Washing clothes is doing⁴ in much the same way.

Many people bring the hot water from below the earth into their homes. They do this by puting⁵ a pipe a hundred feet or more into the ground. In this way they get hot water and steam for cooking and washing, and for heating their homes.

For most of us, the heat under our feet is too far away to use. We must make our heat by burning coal, oil, or gas. The people who get heat from inside the earth are lucky. It takes money to pay for coal, oil, or gas⁶.

1. You might want to change the preposition (in) to 'on'.

2. You used conditional type 2 very skillfully.

3. Imagery is used nearly great!

4. You might change the verb (doing) to past participle in this passive sentence.

5. You could possibly use double 't' in 'put+ing'.

6. You finished the essay in such an interesting way!

Comment 1:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 2:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 3:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 4:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 5:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

Comment 6:

a) Is the comment positive or negative?

b) Is the correction needed? Yes No

