

# **The Effect of Different Types of Teacher Written Corrective Feedback on Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Accuracy**

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## **Abstract**

This research is a quasi-experimental study investigating the effect of different types of teacher Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy in using two functions of English articles (the first mention and anaphoric reference) and simple past tense (regular and irregular). Ninety-four Iranian learners of English were assigned into three experimental groups of direct feedback group (n=24), indirect feedback group (n=24), direct plus indirect feedback group (n=24), and one pilot group (n=22). The participating groups' homogeneity was checked by their performance in the proficiency test and the pre-test. During six treatment sessions, each of the three groups received feedback type. The papers with attached comments were returned to the participants. On two occasions (pre-test and post-test), the participants completed a picture description task. The results of one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in the performance of the three groups. Furthermore, Scheffe post-hoc analysis indicated that the direct group outperformed direct plus indirect group, and direct plus indirect group outperformed the indirect group.

**Keywords:** Written Corrective Feedback (WCF), Direct Feedback, Indirect Feedback, Picture Description Task

### **Introduction**

Despite much research conducted on feedback in relation to student writing and the strong belief that feedback is important and influential in student writing, the interpretations of the research findings on the effectiveness of feedback are not decisive. There have been several ongoing debates among writing researchers in the last 15 years on whether or not students benefit from written corrective feedback in their writings (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008).

One view (e.g., Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) holds that correction makes little or no contribution to the development of accuracy in writing, and even harms the learning process. Truscott (1996) argues that teachers correcting students' errors ignore the instructional sequence of grammatical learning that they must pass before acquiring a second language; thus, he suggests that grammar correction should be avoided or abandoned in classes. Truscott (2007) reaffirmed that although several studies showed that error feedback can improve writing accuracy, the perceived gains made by students could possibly be attributed to other factors such as external exposures. Truscott also suggested that the fewer errors made by the students may be due to students avoiding correction by writing less or not writing certain constructions. Truscott and Hsu (2008), in support of Truscott's previous claims, noted that the effect of error correction is substantial, and it helps students reduce their errors only in the writings they have received feedback, and accordingly, improvements in text revisions is not a predictor of improvements in new text writing.

There are some other researchers (e.g., Fazio, 2001; Kepner, 1991; Robb et al., 1986) who side with Truscott in downplaying the role of error correction in improving students' writing accuracy. The Kepner (1991) studied the effects of feedback on form and content on students' writing accuracy. Findings indicated that the accuracy of the students who had received feedback on form did not enhance more than that of the students who had been corrected on content. Fazio (2001) also reached similar results; no significant difference in accuracy due to feedback conditions (corrections, commentaries, and a combination of the two) was observed for either of the groups (minority- and majority-language students).

As the debate on the effectiveness of feedback on errors in writing continues, a conclusive agreement on the interpretations of the research findings is yet to be reached. In the meantime, several more recent studies have been conducted with evidence in support of written corrective feedback (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, 2008, 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2007). In other words, this view attributes more positive effects to error correction in terms of improving students' accuracy in writing. Ferris and Roberts (2001) investigated the effects of three different treatments (giving coded feedback, underlining the errors, giving no error feedback) and found that the two experimental groups significantly outperformed the control group, who received no feedback, on the self-editing task. Ashwell (2000) obtained similar results; the groups receiving feedback made more gains in formal accuracy in comparison with the group receiving no feedback. In contrast to Truscott's claim, Chandler (2003) pointed out that Truscott (1999) at times drew conclusions without considering statistical evidence in the original studies that are in favor of the effectiveness of feedback. Chandler (2003) also suggested that the harmful effect of feedback alleged by Truscott (1996) are aspects of writing fluency which can actually be measured by different approaches (e.g., by the number of words written or the amount of time it takes to complete an assignment). In Chandler's (2003) study, the students who were required to revise each draft improved their accuracy significantly more than the students who were not required to do error correction. In light of the above disputes regarding feedback on student writing, Gu enette (2007) reviewed previous studies that became the basis of arguments in the grammar error correction debate among Chandler, Ferris, and Truscott. Gu enette (2007) proposed a different perspective on the findings of the research rather than getting involved in the debate. She suggested that different findings which led to conflicting interpretations of former studies can be attributed to several different factors such as research design and methodology flaws and external variables uncontrolled by the researchers. Until these factors are well covered in studies on feedback in relation to student writing, a decisive conclusion will remain undetermined and need further researching.

Additionally, direct correction appeared to be superior to other types of indirect correction in producing more accurate writing. A number of studies that have found positive effects for error correction have adopted a focused approach to error correction (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007). Bitchener (2008), who examined the effects of corrective feedback on two functions of English articles, i.e., *a* for the first mention and *the* for the anaphoric reference over three writing tasks, reached to the conclusion that corrective feedback was effective in improving students' accuracy in new writings. In their study, Bitchener and Knoch (2009) investigated how different options of corrective feedback affected the students' improvement in their accuracy in the use of two functions of English articles, and found corrective feedback beneficial to students' writing improvement over time and in a new piece of writing. Furthermore, they did not find any significant difference between migrant and international students' improvements in terms of using articles as a result of written corrective feedback. Similar results were obtained in the studies conducted by Bitchener and Knoch (2010) and Sheen (2007).

Indirect feedback is a strategy of providing feedback commonly used by teachers to help students correct their errors by indicating an error without providing the correct form (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Indirect feedback takes place when teachers only provide indications which in some way make students aware that an error exists but they do not provide the students with the correction. In doing so, teachers can provide general clues regarding the location and nature or type of an error by providing an underline, a circle, a code, a mark, or a highlight on the error, and ask the students to correct the error themselves (Lee, 2008; O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006). Through indirect feedback, students are cognitively challenged to reflect upon the clues given by the teacher, who acts as a 'reflective agent' (Pollard, 1990) providing meaningful and appropriate guidance to students' cognitive structuring skills arising from students' prior experience. Students can then relate these clues to the context where an error exists, determine the area of the error, and correct the error based on their informed knowledge. Indeed, facilitating students with indirect feedback to discover the correct form can be very instructive to students (Lalande, 1982). It increases students' engagement and attention to forms and allow them to problem-solve which

many researchers agree to be beneficial to long term learning improvement (Ferris, 2003; Lalande, 1982).

Research on second language acquisition shows that indirect feedback is viewed as more preferable to direct feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) because it engages students in the correction activity and helps them reflect upon it (Ferris & Roberts, 2001), which may help students foster their long-term acquisition of the target language (O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006) and make them engaged in guided learning and problem-solving (Lalande, 1982) in correcting their errors. In addition, many experts agree that indirect feedback has the most potential for helping students in developing their second language proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005) and has more benefits than direct feedback on students' long-term development (Ferris, 2003), especially for more advanced students (O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006). When asked about their preference for corrective feedback, students also admitted that they realize that they may learn more from indirect feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

Lalande's (1982) study, which involved 60 German foreign language learners, compared two different treatments of error correction: direct correction in a traditional manner by providing correct forms to be incorporated by students into their written text, and indirect correction in the form of "guided learning strategies" by providing students with systematic marking using an error correction code. Students were asked to interpret these codes, correct their mistakes, and rewrite the entire essay upon corrective feedback. The Results of his study showed that students receiving indirect corrective feedback made significantly greater gains as compared to students who received direct corrective feedback from the teacher. Chandler's (2003) study involving 31 ESL university undergraduate students shows that indirect feedback with underlining on students' errors is a preferred alternative to direct correction in a multiple-draft setting as indirect feedback engages the students in the correction process and engages them more cognitively during the process. It is important to note that, in her study where students were required to make corrections, both direct feedback and indirect feedback with underlining of errors resulted in

significant increase in accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing over the semester. An additional finding of Chandler's study is that if students did not revise their writing based on teacher feedback about their errors, getting their errors marked was comparable to receiving no feedback as their correctness did not increase. Similarly, the study conducted by Ferris (2006), involving 92 ESL students in the United States receiving several types of direct feedback and indirect feedback, shows that there was a strong relationship between teacher's indirect feedback and successful student revisions on the subsequent drafts of their essays.

Another feedback strategy commonly used by teachers is direct feedback. Direct feedback is a strategy of providing feedback to students to help them correct their errors by providing the correct linguistic form (Ferris, 2006) or linguistic structure of the target language. Direct feedback is usually given by teachers, upon noticing a grammatical mistake, by providing the correct answer or the expected response above or near the linguistic or grammatical error (Bitchener et al., 2005). Direct feedback may be done in various ways such as by striking out an incorrect or unnecessary word, phrase, or morpheme; inserting a missing or expected word, phrase, or morpheme; and by providing the correct linguistic form above or near the erroneous form (Ellis, 2008; Ferris, 2006), usually above it or in the margin. Direct feedback has the advantage that it provides explicit information about the correct form (Ellis, 2008). Lee (2008) adds that direct feedback may be appropriate for beginner students, or in a situation when errors are 'untreatable' and are not susceptible to self-correction such as sentence structure and word choice, and when teachers want to direct student attention to error patterns that require student correction.

Several studies, employing the use of direct feedback on student errors have been conducted to determine its effect on student writing accuracy with variable results. Rob, Ross and Shortreed (1986) conducted a study involving 134 Japanese EFL students using direct feedback and three types of indirect feedback strategies. The results of their study showed no significant differences across different types of feedback but the results suggested that direct feedback was less time-consuming on directing students' attention to surface errors.

On the other hand, Chandler (2003) reported the results of her study involving 31 ESL students on the effects of direct and indirect feedback strategies on students' revisions. She found that direct feedback was best for producing accurate revisions and was preferred by the students as it was the fastest and easiest way for them to make revisions. A recent study on the effects of direct corrective feedback involving 52 ESL students in New Zealand was conducted by Bitchener and Knoch (2010) where they compared three different types of direct feedback (direct corrective feedback, written and oral metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback and written metalinguistic explanation; direct corrective feedback only) with a control group. They found that each treatment group outperformed the control group and there was no significant difference in effectiveness among the variations of direct feedback in the treatment groups.

The present research is intending to add some more contribution to the studies elaborated above by regarding the combination of indirect and direct written corrective feedback, beside investigating the effects of direct and indirect written corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy, which covers two areas of errors most frequently made by ESL/EFL learners, namely *English articles* and the *simple past tense*. More specifically the present research tried to provide answer to the following questions:

1. Does type of teacher written corrective feedback (direct, indirect, and direct plus indirect) have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy?
2. Which type of feedback leads to more improvement in learners' writing accuracy?

## Method

### Participants

The original pool of the participants comprised 148 voluntary female and male students, aged 15-29, studying at Alborz Language Institute in Tehran. They took the Oxford proficiency test to make sure they were qualified as intermediate level of proficiency. After administering the proficiency test, 94 learners (41 males and 53 females) were chosen. The participants were assigned to one pilot and three experimental groups. Each

of the experimental groups was assigned to a treatment condition (feedback). The four groups were labeled as group A (direct feedback), group B (indirect feedback), group C (direct plus indirect feedback), All groups composed of 24 learners except the pilot group with 22 students. The whole research project was conducted over 9 weeks. The classes met 1 hour and 30 minutes, once a week. Some of the students missed some tests and treatment sessions. As such, though, they were kept in their classes, however, their scores were not considered in the data analysis phase.

### **Instrumentation**

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used for the purpose of homogenizing the English proficiency level of the learners. This test which included vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing sections was used in order to get homogenous groups of participants. It included 50 multiple choice questions of grammar and vocabulary, and a reading text with 10 graded comprehension questions.

Both pre- and post-test, were two parallel sets of picture description tasks. These tasks included sequential pictures with the key words written next to each picture. They were adapted by the teacher and were piloted prior to the main phase of the study in order to estimate the allotted time to complete the task and to alleviate any possible error or misunderstanding.

### **Measures**

Learners' developing knowledge of articles and simple past tense form were tested immediately before the treatment sessions (pre-test) and after it (post-test). All learners' writings were analyzed and the total number of obligatory uses of the targeted structures in the sheets was determined. The percentage of error-free sentences (Foster & Skehan, 1996) was used for each picture description sheet. Each student's test score was calculated by dividing the number of correct uses of the target forms (articles & simple past-tense form) by the total number of target structures' obligatory uses multiplied by 100.

**Procedure**

Prior to taking any step in doing the present research, the participants were required to take OPT. Based on the scores obtained and taking OPT table of score interpretation into account, the students whose scores ranged from 29 to 47 (intermediate) participated in the study and were assigned to three groups. In order to make sure that there was no statistically significant difference among three groups' proficiency level, a one-way ANOVA was run on OPT scores, which confirmed that there was no significant difference across the three groups.

Two days prior to the treatment sessions, the three participating groups took the pre-test. One-way ANOVA run on the scores revealed no statistically significant difference among the three groups.

In order to help the learners in constructing or retelling stories, following Muranoi (2000) in picture description task, a series of word cues was provided to the learners. The first word cue of both tasks included adverb of time (e.g., once upon a time) "in order to prompt the use of the past tense" (Salaberry & Ortega, 1998). They have reported that "this type of prompting was successful in generating past-tense narrations" (p. 529).

Once the student writings were produced, the teachers provided direct, indirect or direct plus indirect feedback consistently in response to the students' errors depending on the experimental conditions. The teacher just indicated the errors associated with the use of English articles and simple past tense (regular and irregular) by underlining them for the indirect group. For the direct group, the teacher gave the correct forms of the related errors in the learners' sheets. And for the last group, the teacher gave direct feedback to the students' sheets at the end of first three sessions and indirect feedback at the end of next three sessions. Every session, the teacher corrected the learners' writing and asked them to revise the writing and return back to the teacher. The post-test was administered to all three groups after the treatment sessions. It also included picture description tasks. The pre- and post-test were parallel, i.e., two versions (A & B) of picture description task were administered during the two testing sessions, so the participants could not rely on their memory from the previous test to do the task, hence the practice effect was kept to minimum.

### Design of the Study

This research enjoyed a comparison group design, a subcategory of quasi-experimental design. The participants were randomly assigned into one of the three groups, with treatment (the independent variable with three levels) differing between groups.

### Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0; one-way ANOVA was run to analyze the data of the study. Also, normality of the scores was checked through one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

This section presents the results of data analysis obtained from the study. The means and the standard deviations for the pre-test scores are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1*  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Pre-test Scores of the Three Groups*

Group	N	Mean	SD
Direct Group	24	25.17	8.95
Direct+indirect Group	24	25.68	10.63
Indirect Group	24	23.86	8.07
Total	72	24.90	9.18

Table 1 shows that the direct group (M = 25.17, SD = 8.95), direct plus indirect group (M=25.68, SD =10.63) and indirect group (M =23.86, SD =8.08) have pretty equal means, and that the participants could be considered as identical in terms of articles and simple past tense use.

The normality was checked through One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test; Table 2 below shows the result. The p value is bigger than .05 which means that the scores were normally distributed, and that it would be safe to run one-way ANOVA to gauge any possible difference between the groups at the outset.

Table 2  
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for the Pre-test Scores

N		72
Normal Parameters	Mean	24.9029
	Std. Deviation	9.18426
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.107
	Positive	.068
	Negative	-.107
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.107
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.173

Table 3 below indicates the results of one-way ANOVA for the pre-test scores of three participating groups.

Table 3  
One-way ANOVA Results for the Pre-test Scores

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	42.450	2	21.225	.24	.78
Within Groups	5942.839	69	86.128		
Total	5985.288	71			

As indicated in table 3, that there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-test scores of direct, direct plus indirect and indirect groups,  $F=.24$ ,  $p> 0.05$ .

Table 4 depicts the descriptive statistics for the scores of the three participating groups on the post-test scores. It can be inferred from the table that the direct group ( $M = 78.00$ ,  $SD = 12.37$ ), direct plus indirect group ( $M = 53.39$ ,  $SD = 12.93$ ), and indirect group ( $M = 50.37$ ,  $SD = 13.95$ ) did not have equal means, and that the participants could not be considered as identical in terms of accuracy.

Table 4  
Descriptive Statistics for the Post-test Scores of the Three Groups

Group	N	M	SD
Direct Group	21	78.00	12.37
Direct+indirect Group	21	53.39	12.93
Indirect Group	20	50.37	13.95
Total	62	60.75	17.94

To check if one-way ANOVA could be run on the post-test scores, the normality of the scores was checked; the result is shown in Table 5 below. Similar to the proficiency test and pre-test, the scores here were normally distributed (sig= .171).

Table 5  
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for the Post-test Scores

N		62
Normal Parameters	Mean	60.7521
	Std. Deviation	17.94306
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.107
	Positive	.107
	Negative	-.085
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.107
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.171

To make sure this difference reaches statistical significance, another analysis of variance was run. Table 6 indicates the results of one-way ANOVA for the differences among three participating groups in terms of the post-test scores.

Table 6  
One-way ANOVA for the Scores on Post-test

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.	$\eta^2$
Between Groups	9538.303	2	4769.151	27.83	.000	.556
Within Groups	10108.509	59	171.331			
Total	19646.811	61				

As shown in Table 6 there was statistically significant difference with a large effect size among groups,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .556$ . To pinpoint exactly where the differences existed, Scheffe post-hoc analysis was run on the post-test results (Table 7).

Table 7  
Scheffe Post-hoc Analysis for the Scores on Post-test

Group 1	Group 2	Mean Differences	Std. Error	Sig.
Direct vs. Indirect		24.60	4.03	.000**
Direct vs. Direct+indirect		27.62	4.08	.022*
Indirect vs. Direct+indirect		3.01	4.08	.431

As Table 7 shows, participants assigned to the direct group outperformed the other groups ( $p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

Two research questions were posed in the current study that will be discussed here. With regard to the first research question, which asked whether the type of teacher feedback has any effect on Iranian EFL students' writing accuracy, comparing the results obtained from the pre-test and post-test, it was revealed that the treatment had an effect on the students' writing accuracy, and that these effects were positive. Moreover, the difference between the performances of the participants in the posttest phase of the study reached statistical significance. Therefore, the first null hypothesis was rejected. The second research question asked which type of feedback leads to more improvement in learners' writing accuracy. According to the results obtained from the post-hoc analysis, it can be claimed that the students who received direct feedback of the teacher outperformed the students who received direct plus indirect feedback. Moreover, the students who received direct+indirect feedback outperformed the students who received indirect feedback.

From these results, it can be inferred that providing any type of teacher feedback was effective in improving students' writing accuracy. These

findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies by Bitchener and Knock (2010), Chandler (2003), Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), Ferris and Roberts (2001), and Lalande (1982).

A glance at the difference between the indirect feedback and direct feedback groups' performance reveals that the direct group had a higher accuracy gain than the indirect group. This is understandable as the direct group received not only indications of errors but also the correct forms from the teacher to replace those errors whereas the indirect group only received indications of errors with no provision of the correct forms. As suggested by Chandler (2003), providing direct feedback is best for producing accurate revisions and is easier for students to make revisions.

The results of this study can be used to inform ESL/EFL teachers and researchers interested in applying or investigating various types of teacher written corrective feedback as used in this study. The finding that the participants in the treatment groups in this study improved in grammatical accuracy, may encourage teachers and researchers in the ESL/EFL field to provide corrective feedback with confidence that students can benefit from feedback. Additionally, teachers should feel confident that providing direct feedback is more effective and helps learners to improve more in accurate use of target forms than indirect feedback.

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