Differential Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback Techniques on the Development of Advanced Iranian EFL Learners’ Grammar Ability

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ABSTRACT

This study was an attempt to give answer to some questions concerning finding the most effective ways to present feedback to advance level EFL learners’ grammatical errors in writing by comparing the impact of self-correction based written corrective feedback techniques and teacher-correction based ones on the development of learners’ grammar ability. To this end, a group of 62 female learners from a private English Institute and 41 both female and male learners from South Tehran Branch of Islamic Azad University were randomly assigned into two experimental groups: the first one received feedback on their writings through self-correction based written corrective feedback techniques but the second group was given teacher-correction based written corrective feedback through some techniques for their grammar errors. The learners given self-correction based written corrective feedback were supposed to self-correct their errors in the class after receiving their writing papers and in the case of not understanding the correct forms, with the help of their instructor, teacher or the researcher. The results indicated that self-correction based written corrective feedback and teacher-correction based written corrective feedback did not significantly affect the advanced EFL learners’ grammar ability development differently. However, the learners themselves perceived the self-correction based written corrective feedback techniques more effective and helpful in improving grammar ability.

Keywords: corrective feedback (CF), self-correction based written corrective feedback techniques, teacher-correction based written corrective feedback techniques

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1. Introduction

Making errors of different types is very natural and conventional in the process of language learning. It can also be said that it is necessary for language learning. As English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, when we consider our experiences and listen to students, we feel that they need to be corrected, particularly grammatically, but the related literature does not ensure us whether written corrective feedback (WCF) on linguistic errors is helpful in increasing target language learning, since some studies (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) are in support of corrective feedback (CF) on grammar errors in writing and some (Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 1996, 1999) are against it.

In addition, we do not know in what ways we can respond more effectively to students' grammar errors and make WCF valuable. As Ferris (1999) states, the type of WCF by which we can provide correction or indication of errors can be one variable affecting the effectiveness of written corrective feedback. Moreover, since weighing students' needs up should be done by each teacher before everything, reflection of students' views about teacher’s feedback strategies on teachers' practice is another factor of great importance which can make feedback given more efficient (Schulz, 1996). Accordingly, there is an apparent necessity for carefully designed studies in which the design shortcomings of the prior studies in the field of CF are eliminated to fulfil the requirements of further examining the effects of various techniques of WCF with regard to learners' preferences for different types of feedback on target language development.

In this study, the effects of WCF strategies used for providing corrections and those used for indicating errors which lead to learners' self-correction on advanced EFL learners' grammar ability are compared. Furthermore, their perceptions of WCF and preferences for a particular group of strategies (self-correction based or teacher-correction based) are explored.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1 Definitions of corrective feedback

From among the definitions set forth by CF researchers, some of them have been chosen to clarify the subtle nuances and intricacies of this concept. Lightbown and Spada (2006) defined CF as "An indication to a learner that his or her use of the target language is incorrect" (p.197). A similar definition has been given by Ellis (2009) who regards CF as a response to learner’s use of the target language containing an error.

It is also worth mentioning that WCF which is the main concern of this thesis can be focused on the writing’s content and organization or on its form and linguistic structures. Many researchers (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 1999; Ferris & Roberts, 2000; Sheen, 2010a) that have worked in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have examined the role of WCF in improving learners’ grammar accuracy. Sheen (2010b) believes that WCF can help learners develop the acquisition of L2, since she regarded it as a way to "draw L2 learner’s attention to linguistic forms in their writing products” (p.208). The impact of WCF on learners’ linguistics accuracy development has been addresses by many researchers which will be presented below.
2.2 Theoretical views of corrective feedback


2.2.1 Cognitive theory and noticing hypothesis.

According to Herrera (2001), many researches which have been done in the field of WCF are based on cognitive theories. On the basis of cognitive theories, “CF promotes learning because it induces noticing and noticing-the-gap” (Sheen, 2010, p.170) and it leads to the improvement of interlanguage (IL).

According to Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, CF which is given to L2 learners who make errors during the learning process draws their attention to the errors. Learners have to pay close attention to the feedback provided and notice input and make intake out of the input for L2 learning because “noticing on its own does not result in acquisition” (Herrera, 2011, p.5). In other words, CF helps learners notice the gaps between the target language standards and their own IL; therefore, this makes them able to reform the ill-formed structures.

2.2.2 Interaction hypothesis.

According to Long (1983), CF given during negotiated interaction may facilitate L2 development. Learners may modify the vocabulary and syntax that they are using and may learn certain L1-L2 contrasts. This mechanism, modified interaction, is necessary for making language comprehensible. Sometimes speakers need to negotiate for meaning through different techniques such as confirmation and checking comprehension, requests for clarification, elaboration, and simplification. These interactional adjustments facilitate learning because it connects input and output (Long, 1983).

As Herrera (2011) states, in writing, negotiation for meaning happens when teacher provides corrections for form and vocabulary or requests corrections. In this way, learners face comprehensible input and they can notice the gap between their own output and the correct form, and this triggers the learners to produce correct output.

2.2.3 Social Constructivist theory.

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Herrera, 2011) believed that a child learns new things through interactions with adults and other children who are more competent. The learnings then become internalized and part of the child’s psychological world. Therefore, Social Constructivist theory states that social context is a part of learning process and social interactions lead to cognitive development.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) approach of Vygotsky is central to social constructivist theory (Pichard & Woolward, 2010, cited in Herrera, 2011). Vygotsky’s ZPD approach describes the difference between what a person is capable of doing based on his or her own mental abilities and what that person can achieve first by the support of a knowledgeable adult guide or in collaboration with more competent peers and later on his or her own.

Vygotsky (1978, cited in Herrera, 2011) believed that an adult or a more competent peer plays a role in a child’s learning and helps him or her accomplish higher levels of development.

On the basis of Social Constructivist theory, CF is useful and it works when it is based on learner’s level of development. CF acts as a supporter when learners cannot perform newly learned linguistic features correctly on their own. Therefore, teacher or peer’s feedback help the learners produce target language that they are not able to do independently (Sheen, 2010).
2.3 Written corrective feedback and teaching writing skill

There is no question that successful communication in the form of writing is the aim of many L2 classes. It is also a necessity for making progress in academic grounds, but mastering writing skill is not easy at all for EFL and ESL learners. Therefore, writing instruction should be done through an effective way.

There have been a lot of approaches on how to teach writing and for each one many strategies and techniques. Among those approaches, product writing and process writing have been mainly discussed and researched by the researchers. In earlier times, teachers paid more attention to the final script. Students’ essays had to enjoy specific standards, be organized and grammatically correct (Brown, 2001). Later, the focus shifted from form to content characterizing process approach.

Seow (1995, cited in Abedi, Latifi, & Moinzadeh, 2010) identified four stages for process approach to writing: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The role of feedback provided by teacher as a major factor playing a part in writing ability improvement has been considered at revision stage. By giving feedback, teachers draw learners’ attention to some features that they should have applied in their writings and show them the mismatches between the target language and their own writings.

Providing learners with effective WCF to help them improve their writing is a very demanding and exacting task for teachers and needs a lot of skill. Therefore, finding the best strategies with which feedback can be given to help learners in their writing improvement is beneficial. In fact, teachers should learn how they can incorporate WCF techniques in their practice.

2.4 Statement of the Problem

From the teachers’ perspective, EFL students' grammar errors are worrisome and problematic in language classes due to the students' themselves excessive concentration on grammatical problems and their concern about accuracy of the performance particularly in advance classes.

Although providing written feedback to students' grammar errors has always been a difficult and time-consuming task for teachers, the opinion poll of a number of teachers in Iran’s institutes on the necessity of WCF that the researcher carried out indicates that teachers believe the lack of CF on advanced learners’ grammar errors can demotivate them since they feel that their teacher is not concerned about their accuracy, especially when they fail to obtain the expected result, they think it's their teacher's fault for not making them aware of their grammatical problems and s/he is the cause of failure. Therefore, teachers have seen students' willingness to get feedback on the errors which threatens accuracy.

2.5 Research Question

In order to investigate the problem experimentally, the following research question has been proposed:

Do the self-correction based WCF techniques more significantly affect advanced EFL learners' grammar ability than the teacher-correction based ones?

2.6 Research Null Hypothesis

In order to investigate the research question mentioned above, the following null hypothesis has been formulated:
There is no significant difference between the effect of self-correction based WCF techniques and teacher-correction based ones on advanced EFL learners' grammar ability improvement.

3. Methodology
This study was an attempt to compare the effect of self-correction based WCF techniques with that of teacher-correction based WCF techniques on the grammar accuracy and improvement of advance level Iranian EFL learners.

3.1. Participants
The participants of this research were 62 female advanced EFL learners from a private language institute in Tehran in the winter of 2012 and 41 female and male B.A. students taking the required writing course in Islamic Azad University, South Tehran Branch. Their age ranged from 18 to 26. Out of this number, after administering the proficiency test, 46 learners in the private institute and 32 learners in the university whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean were chosen to be the participants of this study.

3.2. Instrumentations
General proficiency test.
A copy of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was used to select a homogenous sample.

Pre-test
The participants’ scores on the grammar section of the Michigan Test administered to ensure the homogeneity of the sample were used as the pre-test scores before the treatment and they indicated the learners’ grammar performance before the treatment began.

Post-test
The grammar section of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency was administered as the post-test to reveal the participants’ grammar ability after the treatment.

3.3. Procedures
Grammatical improvement of 78 participants out of 103 students following the results of the general proficiency test as a result of written grammar oriented WCF through two different approaches was measured over a semester.
Self-correction based WCF techniques employed in this study were those with which the researcher indicated the errors but withheld the correct forms from the participants which led to participants’ self-correction. As Ellis (2009) states “students may succeed in noticing corrections even if they are not required to revise their writing” (p. 106), the participants were not required to revise their writings and hand in them again in this study. They were only asked to study the feedback and try to self-correct their errors in the class through self-correction based techniques when received corrected writing papers and in the case of not understanding the correct forms, they tried to find the correct forms with the help of their classmates, instructor, teacher, or researcher.
Teacher-correction based WCF techniques in this study were those with which the researcher provided corrections, strategies such as crossing out needless words, phrases, or morphemes, inserting missing words or morphemes, writing the correct forms above or near the incorrect forms, direct underlining or circling errors with providing correct forms, metalinguistic feedback, i.e., the provision of brief grammar rules and examples at the bottom of the participants’ text for the numbered errors in their texts for very frequent and common errors
The participants exposed to teacher-correction based WCF similar to the previous group just were asked to study the feedback.

After offering one-semester treatment in the last session of each class before the formal final exam session, the participants received the post-test. The grammar section of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency was administered as the post-test to measure the participants’ grammar ability.

4. Results

The research question of this study was: Do the self-correction based WCF techniques more significantly affect advanced EFL learners’ grammar ability than the teacher-correction based ones?

In a bid to address this question, an independent \( t \) test was run to compare the mean scores of the two experimental groups on the post-test of grammar in order to probe whether the participants benefiting from self-correction based WCF techniques outperformed the participants receiving teacher-correction based WCF techniques in their post-test of grammar or not. As displayed in Table 4.1 below, the mean scores of the self and teacher-correction groups on the post-test of grammar are 27.24 and 26.45, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SELF-CORRECTION</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27.24</td>
<td>3.412</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACHER-CORRECTION</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.45</td>
<td>4.517</td>
<td>.714</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the independent \( t \) test in Table 4.2 do not display any significant difference between the mean scores of the self and teacher-correction groups on the post-test of grammar (\( t (76) = .865, P = .390 > .05; R = .09 \) it represents a weak effect size). Hence, the second null hypothesis stating that “the self-correction based WCF techniques do not significantly affect advanced EFL learners grammar ability than the teacher-correction based ones” is supported.
Table 4.2 *Independent t test Post-test of Grammar by Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROFICIENCY</th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>1.700</td>
<td>.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>.871</td>
<td>72.392</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, it should be noted that the assumption of the homogeneity of variances was met. As displayed in Table 4.2, the Levene’s F-value of 1.70 is not significant (P = .196 > .05). That is why the first row of Table 4.2, *Equal variances assumed* was reported.

Figure 4.1 below displays visually the mean scores of the two experimental groups.

*Figure 4.1 Post-test of Grammar by the two Groups*

5. Conclusions and Implications
The present study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, it attempted to compare the effect of self-correction based WCF techniques with the effect of teacher-correction based ones on the grammar ability development of advanced Iranian EFL learners via conducting an experimental research.
H (2): There is no significant difference between the effect of self-correction based WCF techniques and teacher-correction based ones on advanced EFL learners’ grammar ability improvement.

The null hypothesis of the study was supported since there was not any significant difference between the mean scores of the self and teacher-correction groups on the post-test of grammar ($t (76) = .865, P = .390 > .05; R = .09$, it represents a weak effect size). This outcome revealed that the participants benefiting from self-correction based WCF techniques did not outperform the participants receiving teacher-correction based WCF techniques in their post grammar test. Consequently, teachers cannot give priority to one group of the techniques on the basis of research results on the grounds that there is no significant difference between the effect of self-correction based WCF techniques and teacher-correction based ones on advanced EFL learners’ grammar ability improvement.

Therefore, the techniques of both approaches could be considered as effective tools for informing learners of the existence of some errors.

The present study demonstrated that self-correction based WCF and teacher-correction based WCF do not affect the advanced EFL learners’ grammar ability development differently. However, they tend to get self-correction based WCF for their grammar errors to self-correct the errors. In fact, self-correction based WCF techniques are highly regarded by the majority of the advanced EFL learners. Therefore, self-correction based WCF techniques deserve a place in language teaching and learning. According to the results of the present study, some implications of WCF, particularly self-correction based WCF in teaching and learning a second or a foreign language can be set forth.

References


