Corrective Feedback Controversies in Language Learning: With a Focus on Direct Written Corrective Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Corrective feedback (CF) has been the focus of different ESL/EFL educators and researchers. It has been a source of debate among them for about four decades. Many controversies are associated with different variables of corrective feedback. This paper discusses some of these controversial issues in light of what experts and recent research have found. Given the need for more studies in written CF, this paper investigates the effect of direct focused written corrective feedback on EFL students' writings. Tag questions, conjunctions, quantifiers, and articles were the focus of the direct written CF. The writings of 49 EFL students in pre feedback phase, post feedback phase and delayed test were collected and analyzed. The results revealed a significant difference between the pre and post feedback phases indicating the short-term effect of direct focused written corrective feedback. However, no significant difference was found between the pre feedback phase and the delayed test. The paper, then, concludes with some general guidelines drawn from the present researcher's review of literature, and her reflection on corrective feedback based on her experience as a learner and a teacher.

1. Introduction

Corrective feedback (CF) has attracted the attention of both second language researchers and educators since the seventies. Its research begins with observing the kind of discourse associated with error correction through classroom-centered research (Allwright, 1975; Chaudron, 1977). Then, research on form-focused instruction begins to explore whether corrective feedback is effective in learning a second language or not. Subsequently, studies focus on the effectiveness of other variables like the type, timing, and source of corrective feedback on learning a second or foreign language. Actually, the effectiveness of corrective feedback and the variables associated with it (including type of CF, source of CF, timing of CF, etc.) raise many controversial issues. These controversies constitute the key questions identified by Hendrickson (1978) regarding the practice of corrective feedback in language classrooms:

1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, how should learner's errors be corrected?
3. Who should correct learner's errors?
4. When should learner's errors be corrected?
5. Which learner's errors should be corrected? (p.389)

In a seminal article, Ellis (2009) also discusses these questions elaborating on the controversies associated with them. More specifically, he considers five main issues that include:"(1) whether CF contributes to L2 acquisition, (2) which errors to correct, (3) who should do the correcting, (4) which type of CF is the most effective, and (5) what is the best timing for CF (immediate or delayed)" (p. 4).

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to review the literature of CF controversies classified and discussed by Hendrickson (1978) and Ellis (2009) with more elaboration in light of theoretical background and recent CF research. Second, it investigates the effectiveness of direct focused written CF as one of the controversies that receives little attention, especially when considering the effect of written CF on complex grammatical structures. Emphasizing the need for research evidence of the effect of written CF on more grammatical features in different contexts, Ellis et al. (2008) maintain "the

case for written CF requires evidence showing that it can affect a wide range of grammatical features, not just one or two. So we need more studies looking at different grammatical features" (p. 368).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Corrective feedback is complex as it needs to be considered within a range of different factors. It becomes more complicated in the case of written CF as there is a need for further research. Van Beuningen (2010) maintains that "even though a number of theoretical SLA insights would predict that written CF can foster L2 development, and despite the fact that the efficacy of oral CF is well documented, the usefulness of written error correction has been and remains a topic of considerable debate" (p.2). Further, when considering the studies of written CF, one can quickly notice that they focus on only limited linguistic features (articles, simple past, etc.). Santos et al. (2011) comment that given the few linguistic features that have been explored so far in written CF, a "question remains whether or not the observed benefits of CF apply to the acquisition of more complex target features and structures" (p. 134). More importantly, it is necessary to ask whether the effect of written CF of these structures is durable or not. Ellis (2013) stresses that there is a need for more research investigating the effectiveness of delayed CF and the kind of knowledge it fosters. Thus, the aim of the study is to examine whether direct written CF is effective when considering more complex and confusing structures with two dichotomies such as, articles (definite and indefinite), tag questions (affirmative and negative), conjunctions (affirmative and negative), and quantity expressions (general and specific).

1.2 Research Questions

The study is set out to answer the following questions:
a) Is there any significant difference between per and post feedback phases of EFL students' writings after receiving direct written CF on complex structures?
b) Is there any significant difference between post feedback phase and the delayed test of EFL students' writings after receiving direct written CF on complex structures?

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Effectiveness of Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback can be defined as a response provided to a learner that includes evidence of an error in language form" (Russell & Spada, 2006). The effectiveness of such correction has been an issue of controversy among many educators. On the one hand, some believe that it is useless and potentially harmful to learners (Krashen, 1982; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 1999). Schwartz (1993) for example, proposes that CF has only a short-term effect that doesn't really develop learners' underlying competence. Krashen (1982) also suggests that it is harmful because L2 learners endeavors to avoid committing mistakes by avoiding the use of complex structures. However, it can be argued that even when learners try to avoid errors, they still cannot avoid all the complex constructions and, therefore, they commit errors in one way or another. On the other hand, other educators consider corrective feedback helpful in language acquisition (Long, 2007; Schmidt, 2001). Grounded on the Noticing Hypothesis, Schmidt (2001) ascertains the benefits of corrective feedback in helping learners to notice and identify the gap between their erroneous utterance and the second language target form. Lyster, Lightbown, and Spada (1999) also assert that learners need to receive corrective feedback because they are not always able to discover by themselves how their interlanguage differs from the target language.

In fact, research generally shows that CF can support learning. Most of the meta-analyses on corrective feedback produce large effect sizes (Kang & Han, 2015; Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Mackey & Goo, 2007; Russell & Spada, 2006). In these meta-analyses, the effectiveness of corrective feedback has been measured by different ways such as intake (what learners notice in input becomes intake for learning), uptake (learners' immediate reaction to teacher's different types of CF) and repair (learners' modification for a problematic form in a target language) (Hall, 2007).

Actually, given the increasing research evidence supporting CF, the focus of current research has changed from exploring whether CF is effective or not to considering which type is the most effective.

2.2 Types of Corrective Feedback

There are two major types of corrective feedback: explicit and implicit feedback. Under these major types, there are different kinds of strategies. Basically, explicit and implicit feedback can be represented in a kind of a scale because the

difference between them is not clear-cut. Thus, the strategies can be seen as falling along a continuum between explicit and implicit oral feedback (Ellis, 2012). The following figure shows how these strategies are presented:
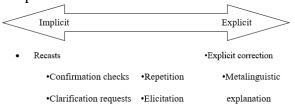

Figure 1: Types and Strategies of Corrective Feedback (adapted from Lyster & Saito 2010; Sheen & Ellis 2011)

As can be seen from figure (1), recasts (reformulations of all or part of the learner's performance containing the error) are placed towards the more implicit end. Slightly more explicit are confirmation checks and clarification requests which are used to elicit a more accurate utterance from the learner. Towards the explicit end of the continuum are explicit correction (when it is clearly expressed that an error has been made and the correct form is given), and meta-linguistic feedback (when a meta-linguistic explanation of the underlying grammatical rule is given (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Russell, & Spada, 2006).

Again, there are different views and controversies with regard to which type of corrective feedback is the most effective. Long (2007), for example, considers recast as an efficient corrective feedback strategy since it doesn't hinder the flow of communication. Lyster (2004), however, stresses that prompts are superior to recasts and further argued that prompts work better for acquisition because they push learners to self-repair. When it comes to research, Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) find that meta-linguistic explanation proved more effective. Also, the meta-analysis of Russell and Spada (2006) shows that explicit corrective is more effective than implicit feedback.

However, looking for the "best" or the "most effective" strategy of corrective feedback is actually a waste of time. For a thing to be "effective", there must be a consideration of the context and learners' cognitive, affective and cultural needs. In this regard Ellis (2012) argues convincingly that searching for the most effective CF strategy is useless since the choice of an effective strategy needs to be based on learners' proficiency level, individual differences and needs. In the same vein, Hyland and Hyland (2006) point out that corrective feedback is a social action that

should be adapted considering the context and the learners. Further, Nassaji (2016) emphasizes that teachers need to consider the objectives, and learners' needs and characteristics, besides the mediating variables that can affect the effectiveness of CF strategies. Thus, teachers need to reflect on their corrective feedback practices so that they become responsive to learners' cognitive, affective and cultural needs in CF.

2.3 Source of Corrective Feedback

Another controversial issue in corrective feedback is who should do the correction; the learner himself, a peer, or the teacher. In fact, this relates to the strategy of corrective feedback used. For example, in the case of elicitation, clarification requests and repetition, the learner has to try to correct the error by himself. Conversely, in recasts, explicit correction and meta-linguistic analysis, the teacher is the one who corrects the error. Thus, the controversies related to the type of CF are somewhat reflected in the controversies of the source of CF.

Generally, self-correction seems to be preferred to correction provided by others because it is face-saving and allows the learner to play an active role in the correction. It also plays a central role in the promotion of autonomous learners (Méndez & Cruz, 2012). In addition, there is an increasing number of research that suggests the effectiveness of self-correction in prompting acquisition (Fahimi, & Rahimi, 2015; Junyi, 2005; Lyster, 2004). Yet, Ellis (2009) maintains that there are two problems to consider with learner self-correction. First, learners usually favor teacher correction. Second, correction is unlikely if the learner does not have basic knowledge about the linguistic form in question.

In order to come to a compromise with regard to the effectiveness of self-correction, it is suggested that self-correction is attempted first. If the learner fails to correct, then peer and teacher correction can be attempted (Hedge, 2000). In this way, it is guaranteed that the learner will have the chance to correct himself which would help in developing learner autonomy. If the learner doesn't have the necessary knowledge, then the teacher or peers would offer a helpful hand.

2.4 Timing of Corrective Feedback

Another issue is whether corrective feedback should be provided at the time an error is committed (immediate/ online CF) or it can be delayed (offline CF). Different views have been expressed regarding

immediate and delayed CF. Long (2007), for example, considers online or immediate feedback as an ideal form-focusing device which helps learners to notice and uptake the correction. On the other hand, Willis and Willis (2007) argue that offline corrective feedback is more helpful since it is non-intrusive. Accordingly, it does not affect the flow of the activity or the confidence of learners. When it comes to research, Fu and Li (2020) find that immediate CF is more facilitative for developing second language learning than delayed CF. A similar result is also reported in the study of Brosvic, et al. (2006).

Actually, considering immediate CF, as generally more effective than delayed CF or vice versa, is inadequate without considering the focus. That is, when the focus is on accuracy, correction should be provided immediately. However, in fluency-oriented activities, delayed or offline CF is preferred in order not to damage the flow of communication and to promote focus on meaning. Ellis (2009) points out that "there is general agreement that in accuracy-oriented activities correction should be provided immediately" (p.11).

2.5 Type of Error

Which type of errors that needs to be corrected is another topic considered by researchers. In fact, different views have been expressed with regard to what type of errors should be corrected. Corder (1967) suggests that it is useful to correct learners' "errors" but not their "mistakes". Errors, in his view, reveal gaps in learners' interlanguage system, and will therefore be systematic. Mistakes, on the other hand, are unsystematic inaccuracies which arise due to performance failures such as memory limitations and slips of the tongue. Additionally, Hendrickson (1978) maintains that corrective feedback should target what Burt (1975) calls "global errors" rather than "local errors". Global errors are errors that could lead to communication breakdown by interfering with the comprehensibility of the utterance (e.g. word order errors, lexical errors), whereas local errors are minor linguistic violations that do not affect the intended meaning of a message (e.g. morphological errors). Hendrickson recommends that local errors usually need not be corrected since the message is clear and correction might interrupt a learner in the flow of productive communication.

Yet, there are several arguments against considering the type of error in CF.

For example, Ellis (2009) maintains that it is not easy to implement these proposals practically. He argues that the distinction between an "error" and a "mistake" is not clear-cut and it is easier said than done. More specifically, it is difficult for teachers to distinguish errors from mistakes in spontaneous classroom discourse. Furthermore, Li (2013) maintains that the suggestion of correcting only global errors gives priority to the conversational function of CF and appears to neglect its main function of providing exposure to negative evidence.

2.6 A Focus on Written CF

Besides the arguments raised against CF generally, there are other controversies related to written corrective feedback, in particular. For the effectiveness of written CF, for example, it is claimed that it is ineffective because it simply leads to explicit knowledge rather than the deep implicit knowledge. Further, it can be detrimental for the learning process due to its negative effect on increasing anxiety and high affective filter (Krashen,1982; Tuscott,1996). Yet, similar to CF, the effectiveness of written CF has also been supported by theories and research (Bitchener, & Knoch, 2010; Kang & Han, 2015; Karim & Nassaji, 2020; Sheen, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). Nevertheless, even among written CF supporters, there are still other debatable issues regarding the effectiveness of the method of correction between direct vs. indirect written CF, and focused vs. unfocused written CF.

2.7 Direct vs. Indirect Written CF

The difference between direct and indirect written CF revolves around the leaner's role in the correction itself. In direct written CF, the error is clearly indicated by a teacher or a peer, and the correction of the error is directly provided. On the other hand, indirect written CF indicates that there is an error (through underlining, symbols or codes, etc.), and the learner needs to provide the correct form. Thus, indirect written CF allows greater cognitive engagement which is useful for the learning process and long-term acquisition (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). However, due to its implicit nature, indirect written CF doesn't offer learners the sufficient information needed, especially when considering complex structures (Chandler, 2003). The direct approach, on the other hand, offers learners more explicit information to tackle complex errors and test hypotheses, and reduces learner's confusion

in understanding errors (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Shintani & Ellis, 2013).

Comparing between direct and indirect written CF, studies show some conflicting results. Earlier studies indicate that there is no difference between them as both are effective (Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984) while others show the superiority of indirect feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Recent studies, however, indicate that the direct approach is more effective, especially when it involves metalinguistic feedback (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Chandler, 2003; Karim & Nassaji, 2020; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Van Beuningen et al., 2008).

In fact, the choice between direct or indirect written CF should be determined based on a range of factors, including learner's proficiency level, the type of error, the nature of the writing task, etc. (Ferris, 2004; Van Beuningen, 2010). For example, it is suggested that indirect written CF can be provided to treatable errors (rule-governed like subject-verb agreement, articles, etc.), while direct feedback to untreatable errors (nonrule- governed or idiosyncratic errors like word choice) (Ferris et al., 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001).

2.8 Focused and Unfocused Written CF

In unfocused written CF, all types of errors in learners' texts are corrected without focusing on specific errors. In contrast, focused written CF addresses one or few specific linguistic errors (e.g. articles errors). Grounded on the noticing hypothesis, focused written CF is more helpful as it helps learners to notice and understand the corrections (Ellis et al., 2008). It also allows the learner to restructure the interlanguage system given the repeated evidence he/she receives in correcting the same error (Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). From a practical perspective, however, targeting specific error types might not be enough, and might be confusing for students (Ferris, 2010).

Research studies comparing focused and unfocused written CF sometimes produced conflicting results. Yet, they generally show the superiority of the former in developing learners' accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008). More specifically, written CF research indicates that focused CF is helpful to students of lower language proficiency, and unfocused CF is beneficial for advanced learners (Bitchener, 2012).

It is clear that corrective feedback is a thorny topic. It is not easy to determine its effectiveness without considering a specific context. Different factors need to be considered as each can play a major role on CF effectiveness. Given the need for more studies on written CF, in particular, this study focuses on the effectiveness of direct focused written CF on complex structures, namely, articles, tag questions, conjunctions, and quantity expressions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 49 EFL female students whose ages range between 19 to 21 years old. They were first-year students studying English at Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. During this first year at the university, the students take courses in different language skills and subskills (reading, writing, listening and speaking, and grammar). The participants were all native speakers of Arabic and have never studied abroad.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

3.2.1. Explicit Instruction

The participants first received explicit form-focused instruction on eight grammatical structures. They are:

- Affirmative and negative tag questions (E.g., you like shopping, don't you?; you won't be late, will you?)
- Affirmative and negative conjunctions, (E.g., I am going to the mall to buy new shoes, and so is my sister; I can't speak French, and you can't either.)
- General and specific quantity expressions, (E.g., a little time; a cup of coffee)
- Definite and indefinite articles (E.g., the sun is shining today; a wonderful story).

These structures were particularly chosen because of their complexity as they involve two different types for each structure. They also constitute a source of confusion for students (Ellis, 2006; Hinkel, 2001; Spada, & Tomita, 2010).

The instruction of theses grammatical structures took a total of 12 teaching hours; including 3 teaching hours for each structure. During instruction, the students did activities and answered some form-focused exercises such as fill-in the blanks, choose the correct answer, complete the sentence, etc. After that, the students were asked to write a conversation that included the specified grammatical structures.

3.2.2. Students' Writings

Students' writings were used as the main data for the study. A Corpus of 14252 words were collected from the forty-nine students in three phases: pre feedback phase, post feedback phase, and delayed test. In each phase, the students were asked to write a conversation that includes examples of the eight grammatical structures. First, the students were asked to write conversations as assignments (pre feedback phase). The researcher, corrected students' writings with the provision of direct written corrective feedback on the eight grammatical structures. Direct written CF was particularly chosen because of the proficiency level of freshmen students and the complexity of the structures. In the post feedback phase, the students were asked to correct the errors and resubmit their writings. In the delayed test, the students were asked to write a conversation with the eight structures as a timed writing test. The timed writing task is important to tap into students' procedural knowledge. Thus, it helps to investigate the effectiveness and durability of direct focused written CF.

3.3. Analysis

Student's writings were corrected and coded for analysis. Each correct answer was given a score of one for each of the eight required grammatical structures. To check the reliability, the researcher corrected the writings again after three weeks. The Intra-rater reliability was r = 0.93 (p < .000) that indicates a good level of intra-rater reliability. The coefficient is based on the correlation between the writing corrections. The data were then entered into SPSS for analysis.

4   Results

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in students' writings in the pre feedback phase, post feedback phase, and delayed test. First, descriptive statistics were run to show the means and standard deviations of students' writings in the three phases (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the three phases

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre feedback	6.45	1.243
Post feedback	7.76	.596
Delayed test	6.80	1.190

The assumption of sphericity was met, as assessed by Mauchly's Test of Sphericity, χ^2 (2) = 5.280, p = .071 (Table 2). The general test of within subjects showed a significant difference in students'

writings between the three phases $F(2,96) = 22.429, p = .000$, ηp 2=40 (Table 3).

Table 2: Mauchly's Test of Sphericity

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
CF	.894	5.280	2	.071

Table 3: Difference in students' writings between the three phases

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
factor1	Sphericity Assumed	44.857	2	22.429	32.390	.000	.403
	Greenhouse-Geisser	44.857	1.808	24.812	32.390	.000	.403
Error (factor1)	Sphericity Assumed	66.476	96	.692			

Post hoc tests were also run to in order to identify whether there was a significant difference between each phase and the other or not. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the pre feedback phase ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 1.24$) and the post feedback phase ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 0.60$), and between the post feedback phase and the delayed test ($M = 6.80$, $SD = 1.19$). However, no significant difference was found between the pre feedback phase and the delayed test (p=07) (Table 4).

Table 4: results of the difference between each phase and the other

(I) CF	(J) CF	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.ª	95% Confidence Interval for Differenceª	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pre feedback	Post feedback	-1.306*	.146	.000	-1.600	-1.012
	Delayed test	-.347	.192	.078	-.734	.040
Post feedback	Pre feedback	1.306*	.146	.000	1.012	1.600
	Delayed test	.959*	.162	.000	.633	1.285
Delayed test	Pre feedback	.347	.192	.078	-.040	.734
	Post feedback	-.959*	.162	.000	-1.285	-.633

5   Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the study results shows that there is a significant difference in students' writings between the pre and post feedback phases of direct focused written CF. The focus of CF was on eight grammatical structures, namely, definite and indefinite articles, affirmative and negative tag questions, affirmative and negative conjunctions, and general and specific quantity expressions. The result indicates that direct written focused CF is helpful even with such complex structures involving two confusing types. In fact, several studies show that direct written CF is effective with other grammatical structures (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ekanayaka & Ellis, 2020; Ferris, 2006; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Suzuki et al., 2019; Van Beuningen, et al., 2008). For example, Bitchener and Knoch, (2010) investigate whether written CF can help L2

learners increase their accuracy of definite and indefinite articles. Sixty-three participants were divided between three experimental groups and a control group. The three experimental groups receive written CF as follows: direct written CF, direct written CF with oral form-focused instruction, and indirect written CF. The results indicate the effectiveness of corrective feedback in both immediate and delayed post-tests for the groups who received direct written CF. Further, in their study of the effect of direct written CF on indefinite article and past perfect, Ekanayaka and Ellis (2020) find that students' accuracy scores increased significantly from the pretest to revision. Thus, direct written CF helps students notice their errors and increase their accuracy in writing with different grammatical structures, including complex structures.

However, the current study finds that the effectiveness of direct written CF on the eight grammatical structures might not be durable since there is a significant difference between post feedback phase and delayed test, and no significant difference between the pre and delayed phases. It seems that these grammatical structures require more time to become intake and processed as implicit knowledge. This result is also in line with previous studies (Ekanayaka & Ellis, 2020; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Suzuki et al., 2019). Suzuki et al. (2019) comment that "feedback explicitness may have an effect on immediate revision, it may not similarly affect L2 writing development. This is not surprising as the development of writing skill is a process that occurs over time and may not be easily achievable simply through short-term feedback sessions" (p.143).

5.1 Conclusion

It is clear that corrective feedback is a very complicated and important topic in language learning. Its effectiveness cannot be denied in form-focused instruction. Nevertheless, the problem lies on how this effectiveness can be reached. The following is an attempt by the present researcher to highlight some guidelines regarding corrective feedback. These guidelines and recommendations are based on extensive review of different meta-analyses and reviews about corrective feedback. They also reflect the researcher's experience, as a learner and a teacher, of corrective feedback in EFL setting. It is hoped that these guidelines would help teachers in practicing corrective feedback more effectively and efficiently.

1- First and foremost, the effectiveness of corrective feedback should be viewed within a specific context not out of context. In other words, to reach the effectiveness, each variable associated with corrective feedback (the type, the source, the timing, etc.) must be contextualized, because what might be effective in one context might not be in the other.
2- Teachers need to adapt the strategies of corrective feedback, the timing and the source of CF according to the goal of learning, the focus of learning, and according to the learners' cognitive, affective and cultural needs, as well.
3- Overcorrection needs to be avoided and teachers should balance between corrective feedback and what learners need.
4- Teachers should pay attention to whether corrective feedback causes anxiety and use the appropriate strategy of corrective feedback accordingly.
5- In order to develop learner autonomy, self-correction needs to be attempted before teacher or peer correction.
6- After all, teachers need to reflect for, in and on their action of corrective feedback. They should consider the reasons behind their practices, think of other alternatives and strategies of CF, implement them, consider the consequences, and assess the effectiveness.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

Corrective feedback is a complex issue. Its complex nature is reflected in the controversies associated with it and the mediating factors affecting its effectiveness. Further research is needed targeting other grammatical structures and comparing different types of CF. Also, the durability of CF requires more investigation with long CF treatments. More importantly, it is necessary to explore CF within the context of online learning and CMC communication.

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