

Title of Project:

The Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on ESL and EFL Learners' Acquisition of Grammatical Forms

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Background

The project focused on one aspect of grammar teaching – the role of written corrective feedback. Corrective feedback is viewed as one option for the teaching of grammar. One advantage of selecting this option is that it allows for the teaching of grammar to be integrated naturally into the methodology of writing instruction. Another advantage is that there is increasing evidence that corrective feedback facilitates acquisition. However, whereas this is clearly the case for oral corrective feedback, the beneficial effects of written corrective feedback have been less certainly demonstrated.

The project addressed two of the issues suggested in the TIRF Call for Research Proposals:

- Classroom research demonstrating the successful integration of grammar instruction in various kinds of English language curricula for adults.
- Effective approaches to the instruction and correction of grammar embedded in its discourse context that lead to students' acquisition of appropriate language forms in speech or in writing

The project addressed these issues experimentally by investigating the effects of focused written corrective feedback (CF) on adult ESL and EFL learners' acquisition of grammar. Focused corrective feedback constitutes an ideal means of integrating

grammar instruction into a writing curriculum. It also ensures that grammar is addressed in relation to discourse context.

The effectiveness of corrective feedback on learners' writing is a matter of controversy (cf. Truscott, 1996, 1999 and Ferris, 2002). One position is that CF only leads to L2 explicit knowledge (not implicit knowledge) and thus has only a very limited effect on learners' writing, which draws primarily on implicit knowledge. An alternative position is that CF does contribute to the development of implicit knowledge (either directly or indirectly) and thus will have a demonstrable effect on the accuracy of learners' writing.

There are now a substantial number of studies that have investigated the effects of oral CF on L2 acquisition. Ellis and Sheen (2006) reviewed some of the research on one type of CF -- recasts. In general, the recast studies have shown that this type of feedback can have a beneficial effect on acquisition, especially when the recasts are more explicit in nature. A number of other studies demonstrated that explicit feedback is of value. Other studies compared the effects of different types of feedback (especially implicit and explicit types). Overall, the results point to an advantage for explicit over implicit CF, especially in studies in which the treatment involved free production.

There are some obvious differences between written and oral CF. The former is delayed whereas the latter occurs immediately after an error has been committed. Written CF imposes less cognitive load on memory than oral CF, which typically demands a cognitive comparison on-line, thus requiring learners to rely heavily on their short-term memory. Written CF is also different pedagogically. Writing teachers are often involved in trying to improve content and organization while focusing on the overall quality of students' writing, in which case accuracy is often a secondary issue. On the other hand, a teacher's provision of oral CF typically draws learners' attention to their linguistic errors.

These differences however do not obviate the need for writing researchers to address the same question as SLA researchers have addressed in studies of oral CF. That is, they need to know whether written CF assists L2 acquisition – for example by investigating whether it helps students to improve written accuracy over time. This issue is of importance both to SLA and writing researchers but, at present, there is still only limited research that has addressed this issue.

The studies conducted as part of this project use a similar methodology to that employed in Sheen (2007). They were predicated on the assumption that L2 writing researchers can benefit from borrowing from the methodology of oral CF research in SLA. They sought to investigate whether the distinction between focused written CF and unfocused written CF (i.e., feedback directed at a range of different errors) can account for the effect that CF has on acquisition.

Method

Research questions

1. What effect do (a) unfocused correction and (b) focused correction have on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?
2. Is there any difference in the effect of unfocused correction and focused correction on learners' acquisition of English grammatical forms?

Definition of terms

'unfocused correction' – correction that is directed at a wide range of errors that learners make in their writing;

'focused correction' – correction that is directed at specific, predetermined errors that learners make in their writing;

Choice of target structure

Articles were selected as the target structure for three principal reasons; (1) all learners (even advanced ones), irrespective of their L1, make errors in the use of articles in their written work, (2) errors in articles can be reliably identified from the written context, and (3) it is relatively easy to design writing tasks that will make the use of these structures 'essential' or at least 'natural' (Loschky and Bley Vroman 1993).

Articles constituted the target for both the unfocused and focused groups. However, the unfocused groups received corrective feedback on a range of errors that included the target structures whereas the focused groups received corrective feedback exclusively on the target structure.

Design

Two separate studies were carried out with the same design. One study took place in an EFL context (general English classes in Japanese universities). The other study took place with intermediate level classes in a community college in Washington DC, USA. Both studies were quasi-experimental in design using intact classes with a pre-test, treatment, immediate post-test and delayed post-test.

The studies investigated the role of two approaches to corrective feedback in ESL and EFL learners written compositions:

1. Unfocused corrective feedback (i.e., a range of errors are identified and corrected). This approach corresponds to the traditional approach to correcting students' written work.
2. Focused corrective feedback (i.e., errors in a specific grammatical structure are targeted for identification and correction). This approach corresponds to that found in most studies of oral CF.

The basic design of the two studies involved two types of CF:

1. Focussed CF (i.e. errors only in articles were indicated in the text and corrections provided).
2. Unfocussed CF (i.e. errors in the use of a variety of grammatical errors were indicated and corrections provided).

	Unfocused CF	Focused CF	Control (writing practice only)	Control (testing)
Study 1 (Ellis et al, 2008)	Group 1 (N = 18)	Group 2 (N = 18)	Group 3 (N = 18)	
Study 2 (Sheen et al, 2009)	Group 1 (N = 22)	Group 2 (N = 22)	Group 3 (= 16)	Group 4 (n = 19)

The two studies differed in the control groups. In Study 1 the control group completed the pre-test and post-tests and also completed the writing tasks but did not receive any feedback. In Study 2 there were two control groups, one a writing practice only group (as in Study 1) and the other a group that simply completed the pre- and post narrative writing tasks.

Care was taken in both studies to ensure that none of the groups received any explicit instruction or practice relating to the target structures during the data collection period.

Participants

The two studies were carried out in two different research sites. The first site was a university in Japan. Learners in this site were first-year Japanese university college students taking general English classes. These learners were EFL learners from a single language background (Japanese). The second site was a community college in the Washington, DC area. Learners in this site were adult intermediate level ESL learners from a variety of language backgrounds.

Instruments

1. Writing Tasks

Reconstruction tasks were chosen because they enable the researcher to create contexts for the use of the target structure. The tasks elicited written narratives from the learners that commonly figure in composition courses. The students listened to their teacher read a story and were allowed to take notes. They then worked in groups to reconstruct the story from their notes. Finally, each student wrote out the story individually.

2. Tests

The following tests were used:

An error correction test: This consisted of a number of sentences containing typical errors. Students were asked to identify the errors and write out the sentences correctly.

A picture narrative test: Students were given a picture composition and asked to write out the story.

Study 1 made use of both types of tests. Study 2 used only the picture narrative test.

Procedures

1. Corrective feedback

The students' completed texts were collected in and errors corrected in accordance with the corrective feedback treatment for each group as described above.

The corrected compositions were given back to the students as soon after the original lesson as possible and time allocated for them to examine the corrections. They were not asked to write revised versions of their texts.

2. Testing

Different versions of the tests were developed and counterbalanced at each time of administration (i.e., split halves of each group completed version A and version B for the pre-test, the reverse for the immediate post-test; the same sequence that was used in the pre-test was used in the delayed post-test).

Results

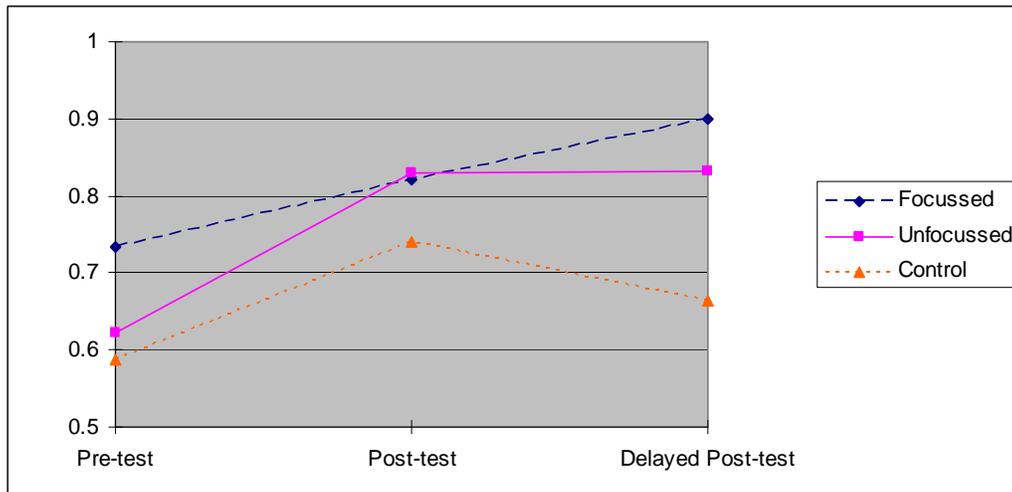
The main results for the two studies are presented separately below.

Study 1

A report of this study was published in Ellis, Sheen, Murakami & Takashima (2008). The study was conducted with Japanese University students in a university in Japan as part of their normal classroom instruction.

On the writing tasks the three groups (i.e., focused group, unfocused group and writing practice control group) improved from pre-test to post-test 1 with the result that no group differences were evident on post-test 1. However, there were significant group differences on the delayed post-test ($F(2, 35) = 8.17, p < .001$). Post-hoc tests showed that both experimental groups proved to be more accurate in the long term than the control group, a difference that was statistically significant. The unfocused group improved more than the focused group initially, but whereas the focused group continued to improve, the unfocused group did not. However, the differences between the two experimental groups were not statistically significant. The results are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Three groups' scores on the narrative writing



On the error correction test there were significant group differences in the post-test scores ($F(2, 38) = 4.02, p < .03$). Post hoc tests showed that both experimental groups outperformed the control group on this test but did not in themselves differ. Also both the focused group ($t(13) = 4.71, p < .001$) and the unfocused group ($t(14) = 2.90, p < .02$) increased their scores significantly from pre-test to post-test, while in the control group there was no significant improvement ($t(11) = 1.08, p = .31$).

Study 2

A report of this study was published in Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa (2009). The study was conducted with intermediate ESL learners in a community college in the Washington DC area of the US.

In the narrative writing test immediately following the corrective feedback, there were significant group differences for accurate use of articles on the immediate post-test ($F(3, 76) = 3.78, p < .05$) and the delayed post-test ($F(3, 76) = 5.28, p < .01$). Post-hoc tests revealed the following significant group differences in the immediate post-test:

- the focused group outperformed the control (i.e., a group that completed the tests but did not have any writing practice);
- the focused group outperformed the unfocused group; and
- the focused group outperformed a group that just did the writing tasks without any correction (i.e.; a writing practice group).
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There were also the following significant group differences in the delayed post-test:

- the focused group outperformed the control; and
- the writing practice group outperformed the control.

Conclusion

Taken together these studies suggest that written corrective feedback does lead to improved accuracy in subsequent pieces of writing. They also point to an advantage for focused correction (i.e., correction directed at a single grammatical structure). However, the effects of written correction are not always immediately apparent. In some cases they may only emerge some time after the correction has taken place. Study 2 produced clearer results in favour of focused CF than Study 1. This can be explained by the way in which the focused and unfocused CF was operationalized in the two studies. In Study 1 the distinction was not clear, as article corrections tended to dominate even in the unfocused CF for many students. In student 2, the difference between the two approaches to CF was much clearer, with students receiving corrections directed at several non-article errors in the unfocused CF.

Truscott (1999), who has argued against the provision of written corrective feedback, wrote the following:

Teachers must constantly make decisions about what to do – and what not to do – in their classes. These decisions are necessarily made under conditions of uncertainty: Research never puts an end to doubt. But the choices still must be made, and made constantly. So given the world as it is, the best we can hope for is that teachers will look seriously at the case against grammar correction, compare it to the case for correction, decide which is the stronger, and then incorporate that decision in their teaching (p. 121).

Truscott felt that the case against written corrective feedback was stronger than the case for it. However, the two studies undertaken with the support of TIRF funding provide clear evidence that written CF is effective. While two studies cannot in themselves ‘put an end to doubt’ they do suggest that teachers should ‘look seriously at the case for correction’ – especially focused feedback.

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