

# The Long-Term Effect of Implicit and Explicit Corrective Feedback on Accuracy of EFL Learners' Descriptive Writing Skill

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## Abstract

Since the emergence of the process-oriented approach to second language writing instruction two main questions have been what and how error feedback should be given to the students. The question of whether teachers should provide feedback on grammar in the writing assignments of English as a foreign language students, and if so how, has been a matter of considerable debate in the field of second language writing. The present study investigated the possible effect of implicit and explicit corrective feedback on descriptive writing accuracy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners (N=39) in Hamedan Islamic Azad University. Two groups were selected: explicit corrective feedback group (N=22) and implicit corrective feedback group (N=17). They received corrective feedback on three grammatical structures. The results showed that written corrective feedback can lead to writing accuracy improvement in the short-term, but it may be unhelpful in the long-run.

**Keywords:** Implicit/Explicit Corrective Feedback, Written Corrective Feedback, Accuracy, Second/Foreign Language Acquisition, Implicit/Explicit Learning

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## **1. Introduction**

Although the absolute efficacy of written corrective feedback remains controversial, a body of written corrective feedback research has compared different types of written feedback to investigate whether certain types of corrective feedback produce more positive effects than others. Most often, these studies have categorized written feedback as either explicit or implicit. The main factor distinguishing these two types of corrective feedback is the learner's involvement in the correction process. Whereas explicit corrective feedback consists of an indication of the error and the corresponding correct linguistic form, implicit corrective feedback only indicates that an error has occurred. Instead of providing the target form by the teacher, it is left to the learner to correct his/her own errors (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009).

### **1.2. Significance and Justification of the Study**

It may be surprising to learn that treatment of learners' errors is one of the most controversial areas in language pedagogy. There is no doubt that every teacher, for every level of EFL courses, has his or her own ways of providing corrective feedback as they encounter the students' errors in their writing. It seems that in Iran, error correction is a relatively unexplored area. Since the way teachers handle students' errors may directly affect the students' writing, the aim of this study is to see if explicit and implicit corrective feedback are effective in helping EFL writers improve the accuracy of their descriptive writing of new texts over time. Several decades of research on grammar feedback have barely yielded any satisfactory evidence regarding the long-term efficacy of providing foreign language writers with corrective feedback. The

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pedagogical contribution of this study is related to the effect of explicit/implicit corrective feedback on the development of learners' interlanguage.

#### **1.3. Research Questions**

1. Does providing explicit corrective feedback have any impact on the accuracy of descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?
2. Does providing implicit corrective feedback have any impact on the accuracy of descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

#### **1.4. Research Null Hypotheses**

- H01: Providing explicit written corrective feedback has no significant impact on the accuracy of descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.
- H02: Providing implicit written corrective feedback has no significant impact on the accuracy of descriptive writing skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

## **2. Review of the Related Literature**

There are various terms used in identifying errors and providing corrective feedback in the second language acquisition literature which are sometimes used interchangeably. The most common terms are error correction, evidence, and corrective feedback. Error correction can be defined as strategies used by a teacher or more advanced learner to correct errors in learners' language production (Schmidt & Richards, 2002).

According to Dabaghi Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009), teachers use the explicit feedback to direct the attention of the learners to the erroneous points. Providing feedback is often seen as one of the most important tasks of EFL writing teachers. Many teachers feel that they have done justice to students' efforts if they have written substantial comments on their papers to justify the grade they have given and to convey that they have considered the effort. Similarly, many students see their teacher's feedback as crucial to their improvement as writers (Richards, 2004).

After the Second World War, foreign language teaching gained unprecedented momentum and contrastive analysis became the basis of teaching foreign language. Materials were designed in a way to ensure that, as far as possible, learners' speaking and writing performances were error-free. The occurrence of errors was considered as an evil sign of teachers' inadequacy teaching techniques and deficiency in learning (Corder, 1982).

Error analysis emerged as a reaction to the view of second language learning proposed by contrastive analysis theory which saw language transfer as the central process of language learning. Error analysis aims to account for learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes that learners go through in reorganizing the input they receive from the target language. Thus, a more positive attitude was developed towards learners' errors. Learners use their errors to get feedback from the environment and in turn, they use that feedback to test and modify their hypotheses about the target language; therefore, learners profit from their errors (Keshavarz, 1994).

In the 1960s and 1970s, researches gave rise to the hypothesis that language learning should start first with comprehension and later proceed to production. This is the way an infant acquires its first language (Freeman, 2000). Krashen (1982) proposed the input hypothesis. Based on this hypothesis, he claims "a

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necessary condition to move from stage I to stage I + 1 is that the acquirer understands input that contains I + 1, where ‘understand’ means that the acquirer focuses on the meaning and not the form of the message” (p. 21).

According to Cook (2003), the idea was that learning would proceed without explanation or correction of errors, but simply by exposure to meaningful input error correction was seen as unnecessary, counterproductive, and even harmful.

Schmidt (1990: as cited in R. Ellis et al., 2009), in his noticing hypothesis, introduces noticing as the linguistic equivalent of attention. Noticing is a cognitive activity that is employed by language learners when they consciously attend to a linguistic structure in the input. When conscious attention to the linguistic form is considered facilitative to or even a prerequisite for interlanguage development, corrective feedback can be expected to support the second language acquisition process. Corrective feedback can be considered as a cognitive focusing device for learner attention. It enables learners to notice the gaps between their own output and the target language input (i.e., the feedback provided). In written corrective feedback, learners have enough time to compare their output with the corrective feedback they receive, which increases the likelihood of learners’ noticing gaps in their interlanguage (Beuningen, 2010).

Various hypotheses considering the relative effectiveness of explicit and implicit corrective feedback have been put forward, some in favor of explicit error correction, others supporting the implicit approach. Those supporting implicit feedback suggest that this approach is best because learners have to engage in a more profound form of language processing, problem solving, and reflection on existing knowledge that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition and written accuracy (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). On the other

hand, advocates of explicit corrective feedback have claimed that the indirect approach might fail because implicit corrective feedback provides learners with insufficient information to resolve complex errors (Chandler, 2003; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009). Chandler (2003) claims that “direct correction is best for producing accurate revisions, and students prefer it because it is the fastest and easiest way for them as well as the fastest way for teachers over several drafts” (p. 267). She also argues that whereas explicit corrective feedback enables learners to instantly internalize the correct form as provided by their teacher, learners whose errors are corrected indirectly do not know whether their own hypothesized corrections are indeed accurate or not. This delay in access to the target form might level out the potential advantage of the cognitive effort associated with implicit corrective feedback.

Bitchener and Knoch (2009) recount the benefits of the explicit corrective feedback as: (1) explicit corrective feedback reduces the type of confusion that language learners may experience; (2) explicit feedback provides language learners with information to help them resolve more complex errors (for example, syntactic structure and idiomatic usage); (3) explicit feedback provides language learners with more input on hypotheses that may have been made; and (4) it is more immediate.

Lee (2003) asserts the danger of explicit feedback in such a way that the language teachers may misinterpret students' meaning and put words into their mouths. Ferris (2004) suggests that the relative effectiveness of explicit and implicit corrective feedback methodologies might be determined by intervening factors, such as a learner's level of second language proficiency or meta-linguistic awareness.

Erel and Bulut (2007) investigated the possible effects of explicit and implicit coded error feedback in a Turkish university context in terms of writing

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accuracy. Two groups of pre-intermediate level Turkish students participated in their study. While one group of students received explicit feedback meaning that the correct form is written on students' papers, the other group received implicit coded feedback, that is, a symbol representing a specific kind of error is used for the indication of the error. The results of their study revealed that while an overall comparison of the groups for the whole semester did not yield any statistically significant differences, the implicit coded feedback group committed fewer errors than the explicit feedback group for the whole semester. Dividing the semester into three periods showed that while the two groups did not statistically differ from each other by the end of the first period, the deviation gradually increased for the second and third periods, and for both periods the difference between the groups was found to be statistically significant in the sense that the explicit coded feedback group performed better than the implicit feedback group.

Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) investigated the effectiveness of explicit and implicit correction of developmental early vs. developmental late features. Fifty-six intermediate level Iranian learners of English were asked to read and retell a written text during an interview. The participants were corrected on their grammatical errors indirectly (using recasts) or directly during or following the interview. Based on the corrected errors made by the learners, individualised tests were constructed and administered. The scores the learners received on these tests were statistically analysed. Results revealed higher scores for explicitly corrected learners than implicitly corrected ones. The findings lend support to the argument concerning the role of metalinguistic awareness in language learning. Further analysis of the scores showed that developmental early features are learned better with explicit correction and developmental late features with implicit correction.

### **3. Research Method and Design**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of the study were 39 Iranian senior English literature students including both males and females. Turkish was the first language of most of the participants and others had Persian and Kurdish as their first language. None of them had lived in an English speaking country. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 28, with the mean age of 23.

#### **3.2. Instrumentation**

Prior to starting the treatment, the 39 participants attending in control and experimental groups were required to take a TOEFL proficiency test and a writing-oriented pre-test to make sure that they were homogeneous EFL learners and writers. Students were assigned with three writing tasks during the course. Two descriptive writing tests were used as an immediate post-test and a delayed post-test to check the potential differences in writing performance of the subjects over time at the end of the treatment.

#### **3.3. Procedure**

The study was conducted in Hamedan Islamic Azad University at two English writing classes in the winter and spring of 2012. The semester lasted 12 sessions and classes met once a week for two hours. The participants had three writing tasks. In explicit corrective feedback, the errors, their location, and description of the violated rules were provided. In implicit corrective feedback, raters just indicated the location of errors. At the end of the treatment, two post-tests were administrated. There was a gap of 3 weeks between the writing immediate



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post-test and the writing delayed post-test when students in two groups followed their regular study. During this period, none of the groups received any corrective feedback of any kind. In order to reduce the possible subjectivity and increase the reliability in scoring, two raters scored the papers based on IELTS criteria. The 95% agreement rate was calculated for scoring by two raters.

#### **3.4. Scoring and Data Analysis**

Obligatory uses of the targeted features (accurate use of the subject, verb, and definite/indefinite articles) were first identified and corrected for each text on each of the writing occasions. Statistical procedures used to analyze all of the data included mean scores and paired samples t-tests. SPSS version 20 for windows was used for the purpose of statistical analysis.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1. Total Writing Accuracy Gain in Immediate Post-test and Delayed Post-test**

The explicit group increased its mean score from 49.91 in the pre-test to 71.58 in the immediate post-test (see Table 1). A look at Table 2 reveals that the mean difference of the explicit group's writing accuracy (MD=-21.67) was statistically significant,  $p=0.001 < 0.05$ .

According to Table 2, the mean difference of the implicit group's writing accuracy (MD=-15.93) was statistically significant,  $p=0.001 < 0.05$ . The implicit group increased its mean score from 40.56 in pre-test to 56.62 in immediate post-test (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Mean Scores of Groups In Pre-test and Immediate Post-test**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Explicit Group	Pre-test	49.9118	17	18.21764	4.41843
	Immediate Post-test	71.5882	17	11.18067	2.71171
	Post-test				
Implicit Group	Pre-test	40.6875	16	8.63110	2.15777
	Immediate Post-test	56.6250	16	13.76045	3.44011
	Post-test				

**Table 2. Paired Samples T-test on Pre-test and Immediate Post-test Scores**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Explicit Group Pre-test- Immediate Post-test	-21.67647	20.62230	5.00164	-32.27948	-11.07346	-4.334	16	.001
Implicit Group Pre-test- Immediate Post-test	-15.93750	15.68532	3.92133	-24.29562	-7.57938	-4.064	15	.001

Delayed post-test was administrated to investigate the effect of explicit and implicit corrective feedback on writing accuracy over time. In order to eliminate the effects of practice, students were not told when they would be required to write another description. After a three-week interval, the second post-test was administrated.

Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that the writing accuracy mean score of the explicit group increased form 50.30 in the pre-test to 51.13 in the delayed post-

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test, but this writing accuracy gain was not statistically significant,  $p=0.90$   $p>0.05$ . The implicit group increased its writing accuracy mean score from 40.68 in pre-test to 51.43 in delayed post-test and this writing accuracy gain was not statistically significant,  $p=0.06$   $p>0.05$

**Table 3. Mean Scores of Groups in Pre-test and Delayed Post-test**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Explicit Group	Pre-test	50.3056	18	17.75250	4.18430
	Delayed Post-test	51.1389	18	19.58076	4.61523
Implicit Group	Pre-test	40.6875	16	8.63110	2.15777
	Delayed Post-test	51.4375	16	22.48323	5.62081

**Table 4. Paired Samples T-test on Pre-test and Delayed Post-test Scores**

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Explicit Group	Pre-test- Delayed Post-test	-.83333	29.24038	6.89202	-15.37423	13.70757	-.121	17	.905
Implicit Group	Pre-test- Delayed Post-test	-10.75000	21.81819	5.45455	-22.37609	.87609	-1.971	15	.067

## 4.2. Discussion

In 1996 Truscott wrote a review article in Language Learning contending that all forms of error correction of L2 student writing are not only ineffective but potentially harmful and should be abandoned. His reasons were:

(a) Research evidence shows that grammar correction is ineffective; (b) this lack of effectiveness is exactly what should be expected, given the nature of the correction process and the nature of language learning; (c) grammar correction has significant harmful effects; and (d) the various arguments offered for continuing it all lack merit. (1996, p. 328)

Both Krashen (e.g., 1982) and Truscott (e.g., 1996) suggested that, in making students aware of their errors, corrective feedback leads to learner stress and anxiety of committing the same errors in future writing. In their view, this anxiety could make learners avoid the erroneous constructions when writing a new text, resulting in simplified writing. This was followed by a rejoinder by Ferris (1999), and saw the publication of several books that gave significant attention to the topic. Ferris (1999, 2004) pointed out that most students do want their writing errors to be corrected and that it is the job of L2 writing teachers to attend to their needs. Ferris (1999) wrote: If nothing else, reading Truscott's essay and reviewing the primary sources he cites has highlighted for me the urgent need for new research efforts which utilize a variety of paradigms to examine a range of questions that arise around this important topic (p. 2).

The one implicit point of agreement in the above mentioned articles is that the existing data are insufficient to resolve the question of whether error correction can be an effective way to improve the accuracy of L2 writing.

This study, by comparing the performances of the two experimental groups in pre-test and immediate post-test separately, paired revealed that there were statistically significant differences between pre-test and immediate post-test. Total writing accuracy of the subjects in explicit and implicit group increased in immediate post-test in comparison with writing pre-test. There was a large effect size for feedback on the immediate post-test, which almost

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disappeared on the delayed post-test. It should be noted that this effect size was not enough to support the interpretation that corrective feedback had been effective in the short run. In fact, the control group displayed similar gains. Thus, the gains in accuracy can be attributed to writing practice, maturation and other factors. Moreover, paired samples t-test also revealed that the two experimental groups' total writing accuracy elevations were not statistically significant in delayed post-test compared to the pre-test. Though, the control group's writing accuracy improvement in delayed post-test was statistically significant.

As Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996) argued, these improvements in immediate post-test were caused by EFL writers metalinguistic knowledge and conscious control over their output. Since these superficial changes do not reach EFL writers' competence (implicit knowledge), they tend to disappear over time. The findings of this study lend further credence to Krashen and Truscott's correction-free approach. Truscott (1996) believed that providing corrective feedback is based on a false view of learning. He asserts that the acquisition of a grammatical structure is a gradual process, not a sudden discovery as the intuitive view of correction would imply.

## **5. Conclusion**

The statistical findings of this study implies that written explicit and implicit corrective feedback does not offer EFL writers the opportunities to notice the gaps in their developing foreign language system. It does not engage them in metalinguistic reflection to foster foreign language acquisition and to lead to the writing accuracy development either. Providing feedback on EFL learners' language performance is based on and related to the positive role of

consciousness and noticing hypothesis in language acquisition. The findings of this study are in line with Truscott and Krashen's theories. Truscott (1998) has argued that noticing hypothesis has no theoretical and psychological basis. He believed that providing corrective feedback is based on a false view of learning. Truscott (1996) asserts that the acquisition of a grammatical structure is a gradual process, not a sudden discovery as the intuitive view of correction would imply. EFL teachers easily lose sight of the processes underlying the development of the language system and adopt the simplistic view of learning as essentially the transfer of information from teacher to students.

Krashen (1982), by proposing the acquisition-learning distinction, asserts that corrective feedback helps conscious language learning. Conscious learning is available to the language performer as a monitor, and it is not a sufficient condition for language acquisition to occur. As Krashen (1982) and Truscott (1996) have argued, the improvements in immediate post-test were caused by EFL writers' metalinguistic knowledge and conscious control over their output. Since these superficial changes do not reach EFL writers' competence, they tend to disappear over time (as shown in delayed post-test).

### **Pedagogical Implications of the Study**

The present study has theoretical as well as practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to the debate on the role of negative evidence in promoting second language acquisition. One important implication is that positive intuitions about error correction and corrective feedback should not be trusted, because they are based on a false view of learning (transfer of knowledge from teacher to students) as Truscott (1996) also referred to this fact. From a practical point of view, this study may help dispel the misconceptions regarding the positive effects of corrective feedback, which is a

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time-consuming practice for teachers. Teachers spend a great deal of time giving formal feedback on linguistic accuracy of written products of their students. Abandoning grammar correction will allow EFL teachers to devote more time and effort to the teaching of other aspects of writing. There is also good reason to believe that students do not benefit from corrective feedback: negative affective impacts. Learning will be more successful when it involves as little stress as possible, when language learners are relaxed and confident and enjoy their learning (Truscott, 1996; Krashen, 1982). However, the use of the corrective feedback encourages the opposite condition.

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