The Effect of Focused Corrective Feedback and Attitude on Grammatical Accuracy: A Study of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract
The study aimed at investigating the efficacy of written corrective feedback (CF) in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy. It compared the effects of focused and unfocused written CF on the learners' grammatical accuracy. 75 EFL students formed a one control and two experimental groups. The focused feedback group was provided with error correction in tenses. The unfocused feedback group was provided with error correction in tense, articles, spelling, pronouns, vocabulary, and prepositions. The results indicated a significant improvement in accuracy for the two experimental groups from pretest to posttest. The outcomes demonstrated that giving written CF was effective, which enhanced learners' grammatical accuracy, and that focused and unfocused written CF were not of differential significant effect in such manner. The results on the construct of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated learners' preference in two experimental groups for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the focused group scored higher than the other groups in their attitudes toward the errors to be corrected.

Keywords: Grammatical Accuracy, Written Corrective Feedback (WCF), Focused Feedback, Unfocused Feedback, Attitude

Introduction

The role of written corrective feedback has been viewed as an important part of second language (L2) writing teachers' instruction because it allows an individualized teacher-to-student communication, which is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of an L2 writing class (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997). Although the effectiveness of providing written error correction has been questioned by many researchers (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996; Truscott & Hsu, 2008), many L2 researchers feel that responding through written corrective feedback will help the improvement of their students' L2 writing accuracy (Brown, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In addition, L2 writing students want, expect, and value teacher feedback on their written errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 2004) and prefer to receive written corrective feedback over alternative forms such as peer and oral feedback (Ferris 1995; Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994). Without corrective feedback, it is difficult for students to ascertain that a learning task has been completed correctly (Chastain, 1988). Despite the differing perspectives on the impact of providing written corrective feedback on the development and improvement of L2 writing accuracy, it is clear that both teachers and students feel the need for its employment. While it is possible that the difference in the results of previous studies can be attributed to the variety of research designs and methodology employed (Guénette, 2007), it is clear that many

studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of written error correction in improving L2 writing accuracy (e.g Li, 2010; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Russell & Spada, 2006). However, it is apparent that very few studies have attempted to explore written grammar error correction in Iran. In addition, investigating language learners' attitude toward focused grammatical feedback can be of paramount importance concerning many difficulties language learners have in writing correct grammatical sentences.

Literature Review

Types of Written Corrective Feedback

The expressions for different WCF strategies have not generally been utilized reliably as a part of the literature, but rather they can be extensively classified as *direct* and *indirect* (Bitchener, 2008).

Direct Written Corrective Feedback

In the immediate strategy, WCF includes supplying learners with the target language structure at or close to the error: "It may include the crossing out of an unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, the insertion of a missing word/phrase/morpheme, or the provision of the correct form or structure" (Bitchener, 2008, p. 105). Reformulation of the entire sentence, composed by L2 learners with errors corrected to fit with the target language standards is eluded as written recast (Ayoun, 2001). Bitchener (2008) additionally included metalinguistic clarification of grammar rules and examples in the category of direct WCF.

Indirect Written Corrective Feedback

With indirect feedback, an error is called to the student's consideration utilizing different techniques, for example, underlining or circumnavigating errors, recording the errors in a given line, affirmation checks, and demands for clarification (Bitchener, 2008). An alternative for the aforementioned roundabout WCF strategy is metalinguistic feedback, which recognizes the way of an error. This strategy for WCF consolidates components of both direct and indirect CF with the reason for saving students' time and frustration while as yet pushing them to take activity to ponder and to draw their own particular resources, which may prompt student created repair. One basic technique for giving metalinguistic feedback is using altering codes or altering symbols. Another kind of metalinguistic WCF is to give student writers an arrangement of criteria as a sheet (e.g., the so-called error awareness sheet in Lalande, 1980).

Scope of Written Corrective Feedback

Another zone of WCF research concerns the extent of WCF. It means that researchers investigate whether WCF is more viable when it is custom-made to specific errors. The scope of WCF can be classified as *focused/selective* or *unfocused/comprehensive*.

Focused Written Corrective Feedback

Focused or selective WCF focuses on particular sorts of errors and disregards alternate sorts. Highly engaged WCF will concentrate on a single error type. To some degree, less engaged CF will target more than one error type yet at the same time limit corrections to just a couple pre-selected types (Ellis et al., 2008).

Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback

In the unfocused or comprehensive WCF strategy, WCF is directed at all or an extensive variety of errors in learners' written work (Ellis et al., 2008).

Effect of Written Corrective Feedback on a Specific Grammar Category

Bitchener and Knoch (2010) pointed to the need to continue research on focused error categories: "While there is growing empirical evidence that written CF can successfully target some types of linguistic error, it is unclear whether some linguistic error domains and categories are more treatable than others" (p. 207). Therefore, more research with respect to what types of errors are amenable to WCF is needed. Ellis et al. (2008) called for evidence that written CF can affect other grammatical features in different contexts: "we need more studies looking at different grammatical features" (p. 368). Santos et al. (2010) wrote: "As noted by Xu (2009) and Ferris (2010), only a limited number of errors related to a restricted range of linguistic forms have been investigated so far. Therefore, the question remains whether or not the observed benefits of CF apply to the acquisition of more complex target features and structures" (p. 134). Muñoz (2011) found positive longitudinal effect of WCF on the acquisition of Spanish verb forms. She prescribes further research to see if the positive discoveries of this study additionally apply to other linguistic error classifications.

In summary, as Hartshorn (2008) remarked, "greater understanding of trends in L2 writing accuracy for specific linguistic errors would be very useful for guiding pedagogy" (p. 150).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study is intended to address the following questions:

Q1. Does focused WCF have any significant effect on the writing of Iranian EFL learners?

Q2. Is there any significant difference between young Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward focused WCF?

In order to gain access to more or less convincing findings to remove the pertinent ambiguities, the following null hypotheses were formulated.

H1. Focused WCF does not have any significant effect on the writing of Iranian EFL learners.

H2. There is not any significant difference between young Iranian EFL learners' attitude toward focused WCF.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 75 Iranian EFL learners, including 35 males and 40 females with an age range of 15 to 19. A Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered in order to be sure of their homogeneity and having three groups at upper-intermediate level. The test consisted of four parts: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The subjects' scores were out of 100. Then, 75 learners formed two experimental groups and one control group (25 learners in each group). The two experimental groups consisted of a focused written CF group, and an unfocused written CF group. The sampling was purposive because only the participants at the upper-intermediate level were selected. The reason for choosing upper-intermediate participants was that the main skill, which was going to be tested in this study, was writing, so the participants should have been at a proper level in order to be able to write effectively.

Instruments

The test in this study was deployed over two testing sessions of pretests and post-tests, and in each session, an error correction test was performed. It consisted of 15 statements, and each contained one error, which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. The test items were selected from the New Headway Upper-Intermediate book. The total time for answering each of the tests was 15 minutes. What students needed to do in each test was circling the errors and then giving correct forms. Each step was awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test was 30 marks. To estimate the reliability indexes of pretest and pretest, KR-21 formula was used. The reliability indexes for pretest and posttest were 0.82 and 0.89 successively. In order to assess the content validity of the scale, the items were also analyzed by three experts.

To answer the second research question, students' attitudes toward WCF were examined. For that purpose, an attitude questionnaire, developed by Carroll (2001), was administered. It consisted of ten questions, which shows learners' attitude toward written corrective feedback, provided by the teacher. Learners were asked to fill in the option that best showed their attitude about written corrective feedback, provided by teacher in two groups of focused and unfocused. The questionnaire included a five-point Likert type scale with five options in five ranking, namely 'strongly disagree' (-2), 'disagree' (-1), 'undecided' (0), 'agree' (+1) and 'strongly agree' (+2). Following Loewen et al. (2009) and Vyatkina (2011), the responses were analyzed, and emerging patterns were identified and categorized. The attitude questionnaire responses were organized in the tables displaying the numbers of responses and percentages of the possible responses per group to each question.

To check the face validity of the questionnaire, a detailed discussion was undertaken with three experts in the field, and their suggestions were incorporated into the questionnaire. In order to assess the content validity of the scale, its items with regard to the definition of the variable were also analyzed by three experts. This scale was translated into Persian for the sake of clarity. It was received by several English teachers and translators in order to assure the accuracy of the translations. To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaire, an internal reliability (Cronbach α) test was conducted. The reliability index was 0.863, and this shows that the instrument has a good internal consistency of the items in this instrument.

Procedure

The whole study was spread over a time of 8-week block practice. Toward the start of the study, every one of the students in three groups took the pretest to analyze their current capacity to utilize the targeted forms. In each of the treatment sessions from week 2 to 4, students were first allowed 5 to 10 minutes to read the instructors' written corrective feedback and self-correct it, if required. This was done in the class to guarantee that each student read instructor's feedback carefully. The second part of the treatment session was a narrative writing task, in which learners expected to compose a short article of around 150 to 200 words on assigned topics as homework. The post-tests began in week 8 subsequent to auditing the corrective feedback for the last composition task.

All through the entire time frame, no explicit directions in class on the targeted error classifications were given by the instructor. Furthermore, to guarantee the validity and reliability of the testing instruments, all the test papers and composing worksheets were guided among 30 students, who were not from the groups of control and experimental, but rather from the same level of capability at the same school. Reasonable alteration was made to make the written direction more explicit.

The effectiveness of two different types of feedback (the focused feedback and unfocused feedback) was examined. 75 participants were classified into three groups. Each group consisted of males and females. The focused feedback group was provided with error correction in tenses. The unfocused feedback group was provided with error correction in tense, articles, spelling, pronouns, vocabulary, and prepositions. Both the focused and unfocused feedback groups were also given meta-linguistic explanations for the errors they committed. Their errors were underlined, and the correct forms were provided for the learners in the focused and unfocused feedback groups.

An attitude questionnaire, consisting of ten questions, was prepared and given to the learners of two experimental groups at the end of the study. It consisted of the questions that asked for the attitudes of learners toward corrective feedback. Then, the responses were statistically analyzed, and the attitudes of the participants toward focused written feedback were explored. The design of this study was quasi-experimental study as no random sampling procedure was used in selecting the participants forms. The test items were selected from the New Headway Upper-Intermediate book.

Results and Discussion

The Writing Pretest

The writing pretest consisted of 15 statements and contained one error, which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. The test items were selected from the New Headway Upper-Intermediate book. What students needed to do in this test was circling the errors and then giving correct forms. Each step was awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test was 30 marks. Reliability of the pretest was checked which was acceptable.

After administering the writing pretest, the mean scores of the focused WCF and unfocused WCF and of course the control groups were calculated, the result of which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Pretest*

	N	M	SD	SEM
Focused group	25	16.96	6.03	1.20
Unfocused group	25	17.2	5.10	1.02
Control group	25	17.48	5	1

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the pre-test scores of the learners in each of the three groups. According to Table 4.1, the mean score of the focused group was 16.96 with the standard deviation of 6.03, and the mean score of unfocused group was calculated as 17.2 with the standard deviation of 5.1, and for the control group, the mean score is 17.48 with the standard deviation of 5. It shows that all three groups are homogeneous in the pre-test.

The Writing Posttest

The writing posttest like pretest consisted of 15 statements and contained one error, which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. Each step was awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test was 30 marks. Reliability of the posttest was also checked, which was acceptable.

After administering the writing posttest, the mean scores of the focused WCF and unfocused WCF and the control group were calculated, the result of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of the Writing Posttest*

	N	M	SD	SEM
Focused group	25	21.52	4.57	0.91
Unfocused group	25	20.36	4.80	0.96
Control group	25	17.92	4.73	0.94

According to Table 2, the mean score of the focused group was 21.52 with the standard deviation of 4.5, and the mean score of unfocused group was calculated as 20.36 with the standard deviation of 4.80, and for the control group, the mean score is 17.92 with the standard deviation of 4.73.There were no outliers in the study, so the normality of the data was also checked.

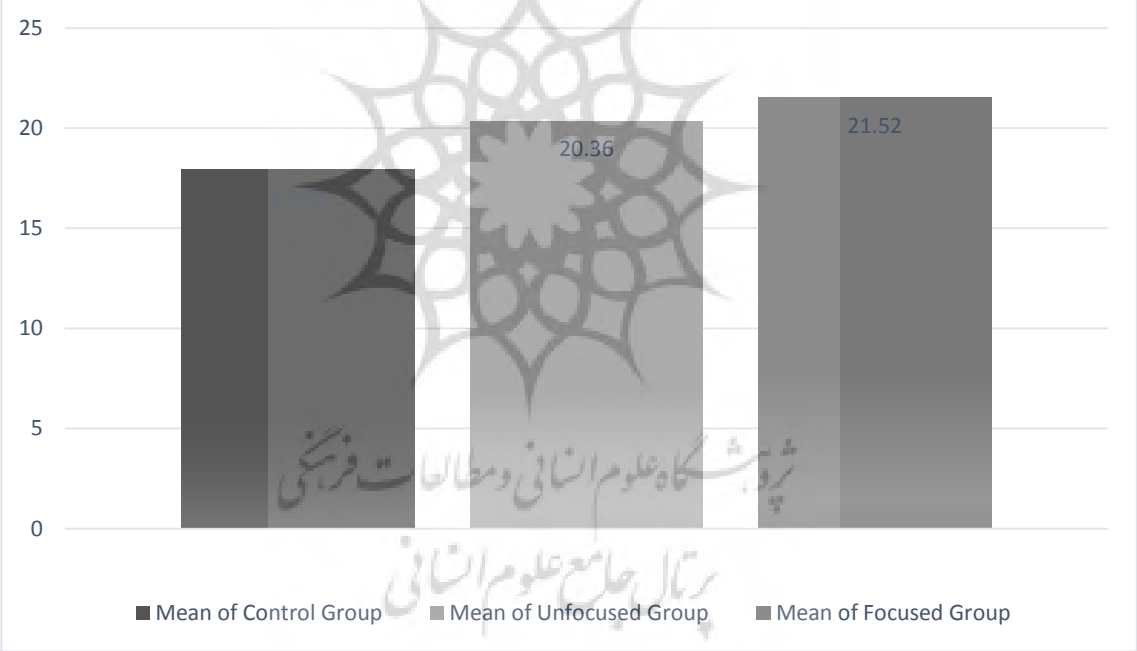

Figure 1. *Comparative Mean of Focused, Unfocused and Control Groups for Posttest*

There were no outliers in the study, so the normality of the data was checked. In order to check the normality of the data, two measures were used. One was the measure of skewness that needs to be smaller than one to guarantee the normality of the data. The second one was the standard error of skewness. In order to assure normality, the standard error of skewness should be smaller than two. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Normality of Writing Posttest*

	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Focused group	0.196	0.464

Unfocused group	0.084	0.464
Control group	0.232	0.464

According to Table 3, the measure of Skewness for focused group was 0.196, for unfocused group was 0.084 and for the control group was 0.232, which are all smaller than 1 (Skewness= 0.196, 0.084, 0.232<1). And the standard error of Skewness for focused group, unfocused group and control group was 0.464, which are all smaller than 2 (Std. error of Skewness= 0.464<2).

Since the scores were distributed normally, which met the assumption of normality, an ANOVA test was used to check whether there was any significant difference among the means of the three groups. As Table 4 shows, the result of the ANOVA is F (2, 72) = 3.813, p = 0.27. Therefore, providing the two different types of feedback had significantly different effects on the written performance of learners on the accurate use of English in the post-test.

Table 4. *Analysis of the Variance for the Post-test Means of the Three Groups*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	168.827	2	84.413	3.813	.027
Within Groups	1593.840	72	22.137		
Total	1762.667	74			

Having applied the One-way ANOVA, the researcher found out that the means are significantly different from each other. In order to determine the exact location of mean differences, a Dunnett analysis was applied.

Table 5 illustrates the significant differences between the groups. This table reveals that the experimental groups, which received focused and unfocused corrective feedback, significantly outperformed the control group at the 0.05 level of significance.

Table 5. *Multiple Comparisons (*Dunnett Test*)*

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Focused	Control	3.60000*	1.33076	.016	.5975	6.6025
Unfocused	Control	2.44000	1.33076	.126	-.5625	5.4425

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Results of Attitude Questionnaire

To answer the second research question, concerned with the participants' attitudes toward WCF, the attitude questionnaire, developed by Carroll (2001), were administered. It consisted of ten questions, which explore the learners' attitudes toward written corrective feedback, provided by the teacher.

Reliability of the Attitude Questionnaire

To ensure the reliability of the attitude questionnaire, an internal reliability (Cronbachs α) test was conducted, and the results showed that the internal consistency of the instrument was 0.869, which was a good internal consistency of the items in this instrument.

Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Focused Group

As stated before, a questionnaire that consisted of ten questions was given to the learners of focused group. Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for focused group are shown in Table 6, and its histogram distribution is shown in Figure 2.

Table 6. *Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Focused Group*

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	121	48.4	48.4	48.4
Agree	87	34.8	34.8	83.2
Disagree	30	12	12	95.2
Strongly Disagree	12	4.8	4.8	100
TOTAL	250	100	100	

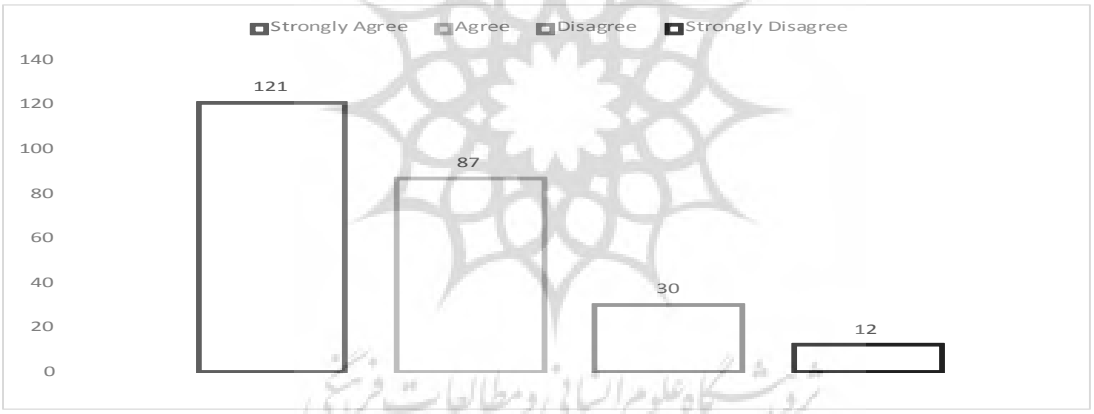

Figure 2. *The Histogram Distribution of Attitude Questionnaire for focused Group*

The questionnaire was also given to the learners of unfocused group. Descriptive statistics of attitude questionnaire for unfocused group are shown in table 7, and its histogram distribution is shown in Figure 3.

Table 7. *Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Questionnaire for Unfocused Group*

Items	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	105	42	42	42
Agree	82	32.8	32.8	74.8
Disagree	37	14.8	14.8	89.6
Strongly Disagree	26	10.4	10.4	100
TOTAL	250	100	100	

According to the Table 8, about 48.4 percent of students in focused group, and 42 percent in unfocused group checked the "strongly agree" choice. For the "agree" choice, it's about 34.8 percent in focused group and 32.8 percent in unfocused group. It shows that 83.2 percent of students in focused group have positive attitude toward focused corrective feedback and also 74.8 percent of students in unfocused group have positive attitude toward unfocused corrective feedback. And of course 12 percent of students in focused group disagreed with this method while about 4.8 percent strongly disagreed. This statistics for unfocused group is 14.8 percent "disagree" and 10.4 percent "strongly disagree".

Table 8. *Results of Attitude Questionnaire*

	S. agree	Agree	Disagree	S. disagree
Focused group	48.4%	34.8%	12%	4.8%
Unfocused group	42%	32.8%	14.8%	10.4%

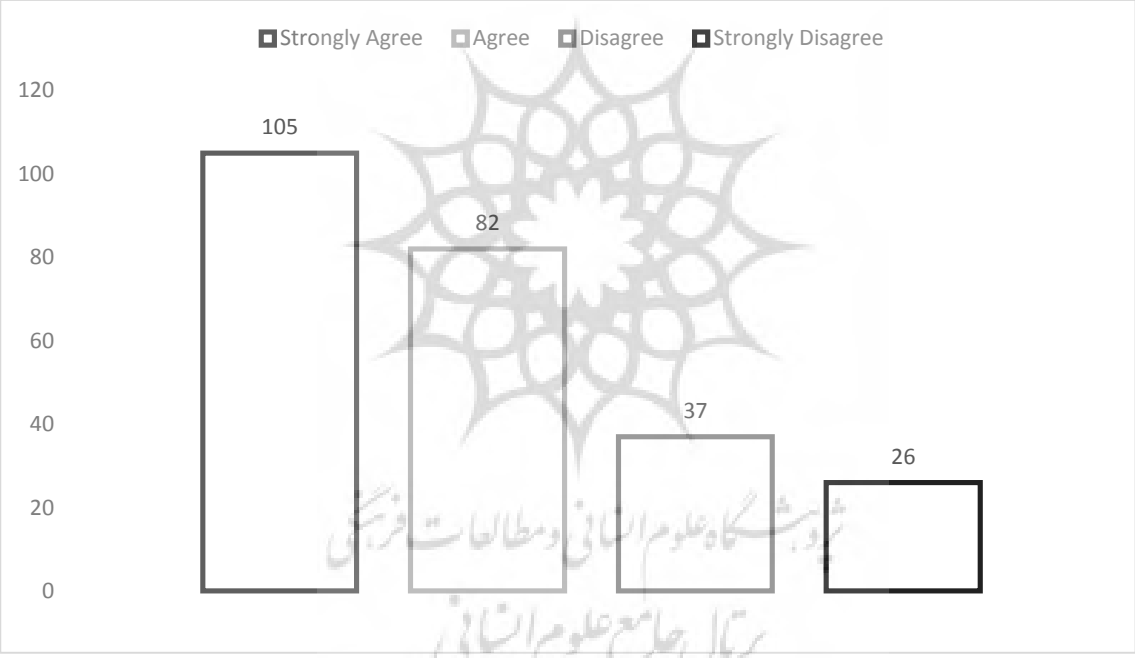

Figure 3. *The Histogram Distribution of Attitude Questionnaire for Unfocused Group*

The results of this study reveal that receiving written corrective feedback helped learners to improve their grammatical accuracy. Overall, in line with the results of some recent CF studies (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009), this result is contrary to Truscott's (1996, 2007) claim that grammar correction is ineffective and the practice for error correction is a failure.

The first research question asked whether focused WCF versus unfocused WCF have significant effects on the writing of Iranian EFL learners. An examination of the two experimental groups' scores on the posttest indicated that there was not such an effect. The focused group's mean on the posttest was slightly higher than the unfocused group's mean, but the very same superiority was also present in the pretest. Thus, the difference between the

focused and unfocused groups on the posttest did not reach statistical significance. This implies that both types of CF were equally effective in improving learners' grammatical accuracy. This result is in agreement with the findings of Ellis et al. (2008), who also found no significant difference between focused and unfocused CF in improving learners' accuracy in using the indefinite and definite articles. However, it is inconsistent with the results of Sheen et al. (2009), who found the focused CF most effective for improving the accurate use of grammatical forms by ESL learners. As obvious, the question of the relative effectiveness of focused and unfocused written CF is still far from conclusive. Further studies would be needed to settle the issue.

Generally speaking, to answer the second research question, the results on the construct of the attitudinal questionnaire indicated learners' preference in two experimental groups, for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the focused group scored higher than the other group in their attitudes toward the errors to be corrected, though it seems close to the other group. This could be true as 83% of the participants preferred having their errors corrected and think that error correction is absolutely the best way to learn English.

This result is, in one hand, in line with (Loewen et al, 2009), who found learners of Chinese and Arabic with more positive attitude about grammar instruction and error correction than were learners of other languages. It also lends support to (Schulz's, 1996), who found 90% of the participants had a positive attitude towards error correction.

Concluding remarks

The results of this study may raise teachers' confidence in providing feedback for Iranian EFL learners. All in all, the results from this research study do not support Truscott's claim (1996) that corrective feedback is ineffective and is unnecessary for L2 learners. The results obtained show that written corrective feedback is indeed effective in L2 acquisition. Besides, the findings of this study show that there is no significant difference between the focused feedback and unfocused feedback.

The results of analyzing the participants' responses in the attitude toward WCF questionnaire indicated participants' great preference for the interactional activities, error correction, and the different type of CF techniques. The mean scores on each content area of the questionnaire suggested that learners in the focused group scored higher than the other group in their attitudes toward the errors to be corrected though it seems close to the other group. Learners' responses to the attitude questionnaire revealed that they highly appreciate teachers' feedback in both groups of focused and unfocused, and they would like to receive more feedback. About their preference of and attitude to feedback type, the majority of them (82%) prefer focused corrective feedback as the most useful technique.

This study can be significant to EFL teachers and curriculum developers as it informs them about the type of WCF, which may be more efficient for intermediate EFL learners. Also, the results of this study can be significant for EFL teachers and learners as it represented an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of previous studies by investigating the effects of WCF on EFL learners' writing performance as a whole, not just focusing on one aspect of it. Repeating this study in other conditions would provide a better understanding of this issue. Teachers can investigate a variety of WCF strategies, which might be appropriate in their own contexts.

The results of this study can be used to inform ESL/EFL teachers and researchers interested in applying or investigating various types of written corrective feedback strategies, including written corrective feedback, as used in this study. The finding that participants in the treatment groups in this study gained in grammatical accuracy, may encourage teachers and

researchers in the EFL field to provide corrective feedback with confidence that students' writings can benefit from corrective feedback. The findings indicate that teachers' feedback may have a long-term impact on students' writing.

This study refers to two types of written corrective feedback, namely focused and unfocused feedbacks and their effect on Iranian EFL learners' writing. The findings of the study will have some implications for material developers and syllabus designers; they can improve learners' writing ability. So teaching beyond use of feedbacks can be a part of some language courses. Language books should enable learners to not only understand those materials and use them as appropriately as possible, but also to learn how to use those feedbacks. Also, it is very useful for teachers; they can use these feedbacks for teaching, and they can enable their students to become better writers and also readers.

Having the findings at hand, one can suggest sound implications as follows:

1. The first implication is for students. The findings of this study are helpful to students in demonstrating the importance of employing feedbacks. Knowledge of one's errors may be beneficial in that the learner will be aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses in terms of learning experiences. Therefore, future learning may be enriched if the learners maintain their strengths and improve their weaknesses.
2. Teachers should keep in mind that students would like to be evaluated on the basis of their progress and their improvement in English. They get satisfaction from their achievement in English if they see they can use the language effectively in real-life communications.
3. Teachers should help students discover their own learning errors via using different kinds of feedbacks and provide constructive feedback about the advantages and disadvantages of various strategies. Also, teachers should encourage learners' development, while at the same time creating opportunities for students to try different ways of learning.
4. The outcomes of the study can contribute to materials and syllabus design, indicating which kind of feedbacks is most likely to be used by students.
5. Moreover, researchers may make use of the results of the present study to conduct some pieces of research as to the effect of variables such as gender, age, and cultural influences on the students when they use different kind of feedbacks.

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