

The Efficacy of Immediate and Delayed Corrective Feedback in the Correct Use of English Definite and Indefinite Articles

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Abstract: The process of giving effective feedback is a central concern for teachers and researchers in both first language and second language writing. Many teachers correct students' written errors in the hope that this will help them improve the students' mastery over the correct use of targeted linguistic forms, while Truscott (1996) considered this approach as a misguided endeavour due to his claim that feedback on grammar errors had no place in writing classrooms and it should be abandoned. Regarding this issue, the current study investigated the results of nine weeks treatment on the efficacy of immediate and delayed corrective feedback in the correct use of definite and indefinite articles. Data were collected from a sample of 51 (34 males and 17 females) first year Iranian EFL medical students. The students were administered three rational cloze tests (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test). The finding of the study revealed that immediate corrective feedback had a significant effect on the correct use of English articles and the students received corrective feedback significantly improved their ability in using English article system correctly and that they retained this ability when they were given a new test four weeks after the treatment session. This study also indicated that there was a change in article scores across the three different time periods. Thus, the main effect for time was significant.

[Afshin Soori, Arshad Abd. Samad. The Efficacy of Immediate and Delayed Corrective Feedback in the Correct Use of English Definite and Indefinite Articles. Journal of American Science 2011;7(4):349-354]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>.

Keywords: Corrective feedback; Error correction; Definite and indefinite articles

1. Introduction

The term corrective feedback (CF) is an umbrella term that covers both explicit and implicit types of feedback in natural and instructional settings. CF is an important task and both teachers and students may benefit it in the writing instruction. CF bridges the concerns of EFL teachers, researchers, and instructional designers. From the last decade onwards, the interest in CF in SLA on both theoretical and pedagogical aspects has been established. There has been a debate on the theoretical side of CF that whether CF is effective and beneficial for language acquisition. Pedagogically, CF has been concentrated in many second and foreign language studies. One of the common findings of these studies is that CF is occurred frequently in the classroom, regardless of pedagogical focus and classroom setting (Fanselow, 1997; Hendrickson 1978), and it is generally agreed that L2 learners expect their teacher to provide them with feedback on their written errors (Enginarlar, 1993; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 1997; Schulz, 1996). Therefore, the main concern of teachers "is not so much to correct or not to correct" (Lee, 1997, p. 466), but rather when and how to provide feedback on the students' errors (Lee, 2003; Yates & Kenkel, 2002). Regarding conflicting and

different views on effectiveness of error correction practice researchers confront the challenge of whether or not they should abandon all forms of corrective feedback because some very well known studies and experts have provided evidence that corrections do not work (e.g. Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007, 2008; Sheppard, 1992) while other studies and experts (e.g. Ferris, 1999, 2001, 2004; Lee, 1997, 2004; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1996) have demonstrated that under certain conditions, with certain student populations, and in some contexts, error correction is effective. Investigating this issue has been the main focus of many recent studies. Corrective feedback has been regarded as a controversial topic among researchers and composition theorists for the last three decades (Carroll and Swain, 1993; Dekeyser, 1993; Lyster, 2001; Lyster and Ranta, 1997). It is also assumed as an essential key for the learners in successful language learning. The shift from grammar translation and audiolingualism to communicative language teaching led to conducting research that both support and undervalue the effectiveness of corrective feedback. One trend in discussion on error correction is on whether or not corrective feedback is effective and whether teacher correction can help reduce linguistic errors. Regarding the literature

review on corrective feedback, there are studies that indicate the usefulness and efficacy of error feedback (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris 1999, 2003, 2006; Ferris and Roberts 2001). Dana Ferris, was the most proponent of corrective feedback that has argued corrective feedback more extensively. Her main objective seems to provide good evidence for short term learning that results from error correction. To this end, Ferris (1999) referred to Fathman and Whalley's (1990) findings in grammar correction. Ferris (2003) claimed that Fathman and Whalley's (1990) finding was the best evidence available source for the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Ferris (2006) revealed the type of error corrected apparently influence language learning.

Other researchers that found immediate CF was effective in improving the accuracy were Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch 2008; Ellis et al. 2008; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; and Sheen, 2006. Russell and Spada (2006) investigated the impacts of corrective feedback on second language grammar learning. The outcome of this study revealed that corrective feedback was helpful for L2 learning. However, there is also research that casts doubt on the benefits of CF (Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2004, 2007). Truscott (2007) claims that research evidence strongly indicates the ineffectiveness of correction. Truscott (2007) believes that error correction has a small effect on learners' ability to write accurately, and he is 95% confident that error correction has very little positive effect, and its effects are very small and uninteresting. Truscott's view on error correction is shared by other researchers in the literature review. Xu (2009) was in agreement with Truscott who was the most potent critic of error correction. Xu (2009) claimed that correction does not contribute the development of accuracy, may even harm the learning process. Repeatedly, Truscott (2008) argued that all the previous works on error correction revealed the short-term effects of treatment. Moreover, some studies do not find error feedback by the teacher to be significantly more effective for developing accuracy in L2 student writing (e.g., Polio, Fleck, and Leder, 1998; Sheppard, 1992). Since EFL students have great diversities of error correction and feedback strategies, a fit for all approach cannot be prescribed for any student. Hence, as Hyland and Hyland address a more constructive approach and a more interactive environment are required for the students. Moreover, "to be effective, feedback should be conveyed in a number of modes and should allow for response and interaction (Hyland and Hyland, 2006, p. 5) .

This study was designed to investigate the following research questions: Q1. Is immediate

corrective feedback effective in increasing the correct use of definite and indefinite articles? Q2. Is the effect of the corrective feedback on increasing the correct use of definite and indefinite articles observable after a period of time?

2. Material and Methods

The study used a quasi-experimental design involving two intact classes serving as experimental group (N = 28), and a control group (N = 23). Prior to the experiment, a pre-test was administered to two groups to catch the initial difference between experimental and control groups. The results of the pretest revealed that the experimental and control groups were not significantly different in pre-test. Then, two groups completed, an immediate post-test and a delayed post-test, where all the tests involved a rational cloze test with forty deletions. In addition, two groups wrote three picture stories and completed three error correction tasks during the treatment. The experimental group received corrective feedback on article errors and the control group did not receive direct corrective feedback. Instead, the location of errors made by participants were indicated and underlined and they were asked to do self-correction. In this study, there was a sample of 51 (34 males and 17 females) medical students in two General English I classes. All students were studying medicine in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences and were enrolled in general English classes. The students were all in the first year of study and were taking their second English class at university at the time of this study.

There were six treatment sessions in the current study. The students in experimental and control groups took the same three rational cloze tests (Pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test). Each of these three cloze tests required students to fill in the blanks with "a", "an", "the" and zero article. The students also did six tasks (three picture stories and three error correction tasks) all in medical contexts, and received feedback on each piece of writing from the researcher as the teacher of the course. Each of the picture stories required the students to describe what was happening in the set of pictures given to the students. Each picture included a setting where different people were doing various activities. Picture one was "Get blood taken", picture two was "Visiting a doctor" and picture three was "Mr. Thin at a dentist's". Moreover, the students in both experimental and control groups completed three error correction tasks that contained sentences with twenty underlined articles. The students were asked to read the whole passages and correct the article errors or tick the correct articles in the parentheses were provided for each article. The researcher made

clear for the students that the tasks would not be assessed and they would not be considered in determining their grades for the course. The students in experimental group received immediate, explicit corrections above the article errors committed by the students, and the students in control group did not receive corrective feedback. The post-test was administered four weeks after pre test. Four weeks after administering post-test, the delayed post-test was given to the students to assess the retention of corrective feedback over time. The schedule for the study is shown briefly in Table.1.

Table1. Schedule for the study

Week	Activity
1	Pre-test: 1 st Rational Cloze Test
2	Task 1 (A & B)
3	Feedback on Task 1: Task 2 (A & B)
4	Feedback on Task 2: Task 3 (A & B)
5	Feedback on Task 3: Post-test (2 nd Rational Cloze Test)
9	Delayed post-test: 3 rd Rational Cloze Test

The entire study was continued for a period of 9 weeks. There was a gap of 4 weeks between post-test and delayed post-test when the students in both groups followed their regular classes and the researcher continued teaching the text book for both groups. During these 4 weeks the students did not receive any corrective feedback. To calculate the performance of the students on three rational cloze tests, the students asked to fill in the blanks with appropriate articles. Each blank that was answered correctly was given a credit. Therefore the maximum score was 40 for forty items. The scores for the three rational cloze tests were analyzed by means of repeated measures ANOVA to measure the same subjects under different conditions (or measured at different points in time) (pallant, 2007). To this end, the interaction effect between two variables (time and group), the main effect for each of the independent variable (e.g. time), and the main effect of between-subjects variable were assessed..

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics Results

To answer the Research Questions the mean scores and standard deviations of both experimental and control groups in three rational cloze tests were calculated. The descriptive statistics for both experimental and control groups in pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test are shown in Table 2, 3, and 4. Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores. As depicted in Table 2, the means and standard deviations of

different groups were very close together. The comparison between the mean scores among different groups showed that there were no considerable differences among mean scores.

Table2. Descriptive statistics for experimental and control groups in pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Experimental	28	16.60	2.55	12	21
Control	23	16.26	3.79	9	23

Table3. Descriptive statistics for experimental and control groups in post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Experimental	28	18.03	2.92	12	23
Control	23	17.26	4.94	8	26

The minimum and maximum scores obtained in the pre-test were 9 and 23 that were belong to control. As shown in Table 3 the means and standard deviations represented difference between experimental and control groups. The comparison between the mean scores between these two groups revealed that there was considerable difference between the mean scores.

Table4. Descriptive statistics for experimental and control groups in delayed post-test

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Experimental	28	18	3.43	10	24
Control	23	17.95	3.30	10	25

This table also indicated the experimental group had the higher mean score (mean = 18.03) than the control group (mean = 17.26). The minimum and the maximum scores obtained in the post-test were 8 and 26 in control group. As illustrated in Table 4 the comparison between the mean scores between the experimental and control group revealed that there were no considerable differences between mean scores. This table indicated the mean score for experimental group was (mean = 18) and (mean = 17.95) for control group. The minimum score obtained in the delayed post-test revealed that the minimum score was 10 in two groups while the maximum score was 25 in control group.

3.2 Repeated Measures ANOVA Results

To assess the efficacy of corrective feedback, on the correct use of definite and indefinite articles across three time periods (pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test) repeated measures ANOVA was run. The results are shown in Table 5. As depicted in

Table 5 the time-group interaction was not statistically significant, Wilk's Lambda = .99, $F(2,48) = .26$, $p = .77$ partial eta squared = .011. There was a considerable main effect for time, Wilk's Lambda = .83, $F(2,48) = 4.81$, $P = .012$, partial eta squared = .167 with both groups showing increase in their scores from pre-test to post-test.

As shown in Table 6 the main effect comparing the two types of intervention was not significant, $F(1, 49) = .24$, $P = .62$, partial eta squared = .005, suggesting no significant difference in the effectiveness of corrective feedback.

Table 5. Test of within-subjects contrasts

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta squared
Time Wilk's Lambda	.833	4.81	2	48	.012	.167
Time*Group Wilk's Lambda	.989	.260	2	48	.772	.011

Table 6. Tests of between-subjects effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	456.32	1	45632.271	1.94	.000	.975
Group	5.709	1	5.709	.244	.624	.005
Error	1148.723	49	23.443			

4. Discussions

Despite Truscott's (1996, 1999, 2004) claims on the ineffectiveness of corrective feedback, it is suggested that researchers and teachers consider corrective feedback as a facilitative factor for improving the students' mastery over linguistic errors and worthwhile spending time and energy. Having said this, it is timely to remind that the finding of this study is not the result of unfocused and random treatment of diverse linguistic errors because different linguistic categories represent separate domains of knowledge and that they are acquired through different stages and processes (Ferris, 1999, 2002; Truscott, 1996). However, it is the result of targeted focus on functional uses of one problematic linguistic error for EFL students. The finding of the study showed that corrective feedback provided had significant effects on the correct use of articles. Hence, it can be concluded that Truscott (1996) was not right when he claimed that giving corrective feedback on linguistic errors is ineffective. However, the findings in this study were the results of focusing on different functions of definite and indefinite

articles that were problematic issues for Iranian EFL students. It should also be admitted that the participants of the study are Iranian medical students that learn English in a place where English is a foreign language and with a few exceptions, the common characteristics of Iranian students is their ability to learn grammar well in formal instructional settings where the focus is usually on form and structure. However, Iranian students also have some problems when they want to use articles correctly. Therefore, further research should be conducted to determine how corrective feedback will be effective in developing the students' mastery over some linguistic structures and how they help them to use them correctly in sentences. The findings of the present study reinforced those of earlier studies (Ashwell, 2000; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis et al, 2008; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Sheen, 2006) of the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Like this study, the findings of earlier studies revealed that corrective feedback provided had a significant effect on the correct use of articles and the students who received

corrective feedback outperformed those who did not receive CF and the students significantly improved their ability in using the targeted functions of the English article system accurately.

The second Research Question investigated the effects of corrective feedback on increasing the correct use of articles after a period of time. To this end, ANOVA revealed that the time was an effective factor and the participants had different performance in different time from pre-test to post-test and delayed post-test. In fact, this study revealed that the students' ability varied significantly across the three times (pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test). However, it was a linear and upward pattern of improvement from one time to another. While the experimental group faded away on the delayed post-test, it was not significant and the students maintained the same level of ability in the correct use of articles. However, the control group's ability continued to improve from pre-test to post-test, and from post-test to delayed post-test. Even though the performance of the control group improved in the delayed post-test, it was significantly different from that of experimental group. One explanation for this improvement might be that some members of the group received additional input on the targeted feature during the weeks between the post-test and delayed post-test. It is always possible that students in experimental group may have passed on information about what they were receiving feedback on or those students in the control group sought instruction from out of class sources. In this case, the findings of this study not only indicated the immediate effect of different types of corrective feedback but also the extent to which the ability for the correct use of articles was retained after a four-week period without additional corrective feedback and classroom instruction.

Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Zahedi (the chancellor of Islamic Azad University, Larestan branch), Dr. Yamini, and Dr. Mehrdad Jalalian (Universiti Putra Malaysia) and Mr. Vahed pour (Vice Chancellor of education of Islamic Azad University, Larestan branch, for their support and contribution to this study.

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2/18/2011