

## The Effects of Teacher, Guided, and Self Error Correction on Iranian EFL Learners' L2 Writing Accuracy

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### Abstract

This study tried to answer some questions regarding the most effective ways to give feedback to students' errors in writing by comparing the effect of three different types of error correction (i.e. teacher error-correction, guided error-correction, and self error-correction) on students' writing accuracy. In order to achieve this goal, 90 pre-intermediate English learners were chosen based on an Oxford Placement Test. A pretest was used to check the initial knowledge of the learners in writing accuracy. All the participants wrote descriptive paragraphs on different topics during the treatment procedure. Student's writings were checked based on different treatment type. After revising the students' writing on each session the teacher asked the participants to write on a new topic in the same genre. After three weeks, the teacher gave the participants a posttest to check the learners' improvement. A t-test was used to compare each group's performance before and after the treatment and then one way between groups ANOVA was conducted to compare the scores of three groups' performance in their pretest and posttest. The results suggested that guided error-correction led to significant improvement in the learners' writing accuracy. This study can be significant in the sense that errors are a part of learning a new language and teachers should help the students to overcome their mistakes to some extent, not give the students the exact correct answer. Not giving the exact answer will force students to think about their errors, correct them, and better remember them in their future writing.

**Keywords:** teacher error-correction, guided error-correction, self error-correction, writing accuracy

## INTRODUCTION

Providing feedback to students' writing errors has always been one of the teachers' difficult tasks. Bearing this fact in mind, a lot has been written on the issue surrounding error feedback to students' writings most of which are controversial and even inconclusive.

Trusscott (1999) argued that error correction is of little benefit and even harmful and therefore, it should be kept aside in EFL writing classrooms. On the other hand, Ferris (2002) claimed that error correction is widely seen by teachers and students as an important factor in improvement of the writing accuracy. Some other studies (Cohen, 1987; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) also pointed to the importance of accuracy and therefore error correction in students' writings and the students' willingness to receive feedback on their errors.

Fathman and Wally (1990) in a study investigated the effect of error feedback on students' improvement in writing. They compared groups who received error feedback to those receiving little - if any- feedback. They found out that the groups obtaining error feedback did much better in grammatical writing than those receiving little- if any feedback on their writings.

According to Richards and Renandya (2008) the difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into a readable text. They state that the skills involved in writing are highly complex; L2 writers have to pay attention to higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on. The difficulty becomes even more pronounced if their language proficiency is weak. Therefore, writing should play a more prominent role in classroom-based studies of second language acquisition.

There have been so many conflicting approaches surrounding writing instruction two of which that mainly have affected writing strands are process vs. product writing. Even as late as 1970, teachers were mostly concerned with the final product of writing: the essay, the report, the story and what that product should look like. Compositions were supposed to (a) meet certain standards of prescribed English rhetorical style, (b) reflect accurate grammar, and (c) be organized in conformity with what the audience would consider to be conventional (Brown, 2001). Later, teachers shifted their focus on content and message i.e., process approach to writing when they discovered the advantage of looking at learners as creators of language.

Seow (1995) holds that the process approach to writing comprises four basic stages- planning, drafting, revising and editing. For each stage, suggestions are provided as to the kinds of classroom activities that support the learning of specific writing skills. For example, at the planning stage, teachers can help students generate ideas through such activities as brainstorming, clustering and rapid free writing. At revising stage, feedback has been considered as a key element contributing to skill development. In revision stage the role of feedback by teacher would gain prominence.

Although there have been controversies regarding the efficiency of providing error feedback on students' writings (Ferris, 1999a; Truscott, 1999), there are some pieces of evidence supporting the idea of providing feedback and its efficiency in overall quality of students' writings.

A lot of studies have investigated and compared the effect of direct versus indirect strategies in helping learners in accuracy and overall writing quality (Ferris, 1995a; Ferris, 1995b; Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Direct or explicit feedback occurs when the teacher identifies an error and provides the correct form, while indirect strategies refer to situations when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but does not provide a correction, thereby leaving the student to diagnose and correct it.

Additionally, studies examining the effect of indirect feedback strategies have tended to make a further distinction between those that do or do not use a code. Coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of error involved is indicated with a code. (For example PS means an error in the use of the past simple tense). Not coded feedback refers to instances when the teacher underlines an error, circles an error or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves students to diagnose and correct the error.

As Swain (1995) argues, it is important for teachers to draw on second language learners' productive skills since producing output not only promotes noticing of linguistic features but combined feedback also pushes learners' awareness towards the gaps and problems in their interlanguage. Moreover, writing provides learners with more time and opportunity to compare the IL output to the target language feedback, than online oral production does; when speaking learners might not be able to make an online IL-TL comparison because of a cognitive overload. In writing on the other hand, learners do have time to compare their output with the provided feedback, and as a result are more likely to notice a gap in their IL. Adams (2003) therefore claims that written production and feedback are of special importance for second language acquisition. A crucial question is what this feedback should look like. A feedback type commonly used in classrooms is corrective feedback: the marking of a student's error by the teacher. Recently, there has been some disagreement in the academic field on the benefits of this kind of feedback on learners' written output.

Truscott, the main opponent of error correction, argues that corrective feedback on second language learners' written output is not only unnecessary and ineffective, but even counterproductive (Truscott, 1996; 1999; 2004; 2007). Ferris (1999; 2002; 2004) on the other hand, makes a stand for the use of error correction in writing instruction. In her opinion Truscott's conclusions are premature. She reasons that results from prior research have shown to be inconclusive because of its inadequate methodology, with the main problem that most studies did not include a proper control group. She therefore argues that more, well designed research is necessary before any conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of error correction in improving students' future writing (Ferris, 2002).

The present study aims to make a contribution to the ongoing error correction debate. In an experimental set up with three groups we investigate the effect of teacher error-correction, guided self error-correction, and unguided self correction on the improvement of students' writing accuracy.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of studies on error correction in L2 writing classes have shown that students receiving error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time (Hyland, 2003; Chandler, 2003). Hyland (2003) observed six ESL writers on a full-time 14-week English proficiency program course at a university. It was found that feedback focusing on form was used by most of the students in their immediate revisions to their drafts and was highly valued by them. The case studies suggest that some language errors may be "treatable" through feedback. With experimental and control group data, Chandler (2003) showed that teachers' feedback on students' grammatical and lexical errors resulted in a significant improvement in both accuracy and fluency in subsequent writing of the same type over the same semester. This finding disproves Truscott's (1999) claim on the negative effect of error correction on fluency.

To further explore the issue of error correction in second language writing, recent research has focused on which types of error correction are effective in treating which types of errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener et al 2005; Bitchener, 2008). A distinction has been made between direct and indirect feedback. Ferris (2002) defined direct feedback as one "when an instructor provides the correct linguistic form for students (word, morpheme, phrase, rewritten sentence, deleted word[s] or morpheme[s]" (p.19). Indirect feedback, on the other hand, "occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error" (Ferris, 2002, p.19). Indirect feedback takes the form of underlining and coding (or description) of the errors. Ferris and Roberts (2001) compared these two types of indirect feedback. They found that the group receiving feedback of both underlining and coding did slightly better in revising their grammatical errors than the one receiving only underlining as the feedback. Both groups were significantly more successful in revising errors than the control group receiving no feedback. The results were challenged by Chandler (2003), who compared four types of feedback: direct correction, underlining with description, description only, and underlining only. In her study, Chandler found both direct correction and simple underlining to be more effective than describing the type of error in reducing long-term error. She also noted that direct correction worked best for producing accurate revision. There was no significant difference between direct correction and underlining of errors. The survey results indicated that students prefer direct correction because it is the fastest and easiest way to revise their grammatical errors. But students felt that they learned more from self-correction when the errors were only underlined. Although both studies made distinctions on different types of errors, neither addressed the effect of feedback on the specific types of errors.

Two studies comparing different strategies on specific types of errors have provided more evidence in support of written corrective feedback. Bitchener et al (2005) compared two types of feedback groups (a combination of direct written feedback and oral conference feedback and direct written feedback only) with the control group (no corrective feedback) on three types of errors (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article). The study found a significant effect of the combination of written and oral feedback in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing. However, no effect was found in the use of prepositions. The findings were confirmed by a recent study by Bitchener (2008) who compared three types of direct corrective feedback: a combination of direct feedback, written and oral meta-linguistic explanation; direct feedback and written meta-linguistic explanation; and direct feedback only. It was found that the accuracy of students who received feedback in the immediate post-test outperformed those in the control group who received no corrective feedback in the use of the referential indefinite "a" and referential definite "the". More importantly, this level of performance was retained 2 months later. Results of the two studies indicate positive effects of written corrective feedback on particular linguistic features in student writing. These two studies set good examples for investigating the effects of different feedback types on particular types of errors.

## **THIS STUDY**

The present study follows this line of research by examining in second language writing, with an emphasis on how errors can be treated. Four questions are addressed in this study:

- Does teacher error correction affect students' writing accuracy?
- Does guided self error correction affect students' writing accuracy?
- Does self error correction affect students' writing accuracy?
- Which type of error correction significantly improves the accuracy of writing performance?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were chosen from a total of 150 students aged between 20 to 25 studying in different fields of medicine at Shahrekord University of Medical Sciences in Iran. Three groups of 30 pre-intermediate students were chosen based on an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to participate in this study.

### **Instruments**

An OPT was used to check the students level and to make sure all the participants in this study are at the same level. After the OPT the pre-intermediate students were chosen to participate in this study. Both pretest and posttest were used in this study, respectively. A pre-test was utilized to witness the initial general writing accuracy of the learners in each group. In order to measure and identify the subject's improvement after three

sessions of providing different kinds of feedback to each group a post-test was applied. It needs to be mentioned that the pre-test and post-test were checked and scored by experienced teachers.

## Procedures

In the course of three weeks after going through several topics of writing and the teachers correcting those writings by one of the different methods (teacher error-correction, guided error-correction, self error-correction), the teacher gave the students a post test in writing accuracy on one of the topics that the students had been working on. With the first group (teacher-error correction) the students wrote a descriptive paragraph then the teacher corrected their writing and provided the explicit correct answers on the paper. The students in this group received their writing papers and had to go through the mistakes they had.

In the other group (guided error- correction) the teacher just indicated the errors by underlining and using codes which showed the type of error and asked the students to write the correct form themselves. For example if the student had written a sentence like:

*\* He like ice cream.*

The teacher would underline the verb like and write 3rd person singular under it.

*\*He like ice cream.*

*3<sup>rd</sup> person singular*

The participants had to provide the correct form themselves, and like the first group go through their problems and contemplate on what they had wrote for deeper learning.

In the third group the teacher only underlined the errors and the participants had to find the correct forms themselves (self-correction). No code or correct form was provided by the teacher.

In all three groups assistance was provided by the teacher if needed. For example if they had problem understanding the codes or when they didn't know why the teacher had underlined something.

In order to measure and identify the subject's improvement after several sessions of providing different kinds of feedback a post-test was applied. The scoring of writing tests were basically subjective, because there is more than one correct way of writing each paragraph, so inter-rater scoring procedure was used to increase the reliability of the test scores. After the tests were administered and the relevant data was collected they were entered into SPSS software. The results of the tests were analyzed in terms of their significance.

First t-test was used to compare the participant's achievement after treatment, and then one way between groups ANOVA is conducted to compare the scores of three groups' performance in their pretest and posttest.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Each group in the study took a pretest and posttest on writing accuracy. The post-test was taken after each group went through different types of error correction. Two different raters did the scoring and the mean score for each essay was calculated to see how each learner performed on his/her pretests and after the error correction on the posttest. The result of the students' pre-test and posttest was compared through paired sample t-test. Paired sample t-test is used when you want to have one group and you collect data on them on two different conditions. You assess each person on some continuous measure at time one and then again at time 2 after exposing them to some experimental manipulation or intervention.

In the table labeled paired samples test you need to look in the final column labeled sig. (2tailed) this is probability value. If this value is less than .05 then you can conclude that there is a significant difference between your two scores.

For the first three research questions, we used t-test to compare the scores of each group before and after feedback. In the last research question we want to see which type of error correction significantly improves the accuracy of writing performance?

In this situation we have three groups and we want to see which type of feedback made a more significant difference in the participants' performance.

**Table 1.** Paired sample t-test for teacher error correction group (TEC)

	Paired Differences				T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
pretest-posttest	-.2500	.25427	.04642	-.34495	-.15505	-5.385	29	.000

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of teacher's error correction (TEC) on students' writing accuracy. . In table 1 the mean difference, confidence interval of the difference, t statistics and are in view. The second column offers the two tests (pretest and posttest) mean difference. The third column shows the standard deviation, confidence interval of difference is available under the fourth column, and the t statistics is provided in the fifth column. At last the most central one to tell us about significance of the difference, significance value of the test, is given under the final column of the table.

We can set out to interpret the resulting table above. As was mentioned before, this test was performed to discover the possible relationship between teacher error correction and students' writing accuracy. However, the mean difference between the two tests (-.2500) is not adequate to show a high significance of difference. To get information on the significance of difference i.e. to see if teacher error correction had a considerable relationship with writing accuracy of the learners, confidence interval of difference and significance value of the test have been provided. Generally, provided that confidence interval of difference does not contain zero and significance value is less than the alpha level of test, it can be concluded that the different between two tests is significant. Accepting that and taking a second look at paired samples t-test table, one can undoubtedly observe that the above mentioned conditions are both met in this test, that is, confidence interval of difference does not contain zero (upper= -.15505, lower= -.34495) and significance value of the test is much less than the alpha level of the test ( $0.00 < 0.05$ ).

**Table 2.** Paired sample t-test for Guided error-correction group (GEC)

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest-posttest	-2.133	1.46177	.26688	-2.67917	-1.58750	-7.994	29	.000

A second paired sample t-test was conducted for the second group who received guided error correction feedback. This test was performed to discover the possible relationship between guided error correction (GEC) and writing accuracy of the learners. The mean difference between the two tests for the second group was equal to -2.1333 (Table 2 above). To see if guided error correction had a considerable relationship with writing accuracy for GEC group, confidence interval of difference and significance value of the test have been provided. Confidence interval of difference does not contain zero (upper= -1.58750, lower= -2.67917) and significance value of the test is much less than the alpha level of the test ( $0.00 < 0.05$ ).

**Table 3.** Paired sample t-test for self error-correction group (SEC)

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pretest-posttest	-.2500	.28618	.05225	-.3568	-.14314	-4.785	29	.000

In table 3 the effect of self error-correction on the writing accuracy of the learners is shown. In SEC group the sig column shows that there is a significance difference between the learners' pretest and posttest (.000<0.05).

One way between groups analysis of variance is used when there is one independent (grouping) variable and three or more levels (groups) and one dependent continuous variable. One way indicates there is only one independent variable and between groups means that you have different subjects in each of the groups.

**Table 4.** One-Way ANOVA between Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	72.217	2	36.108	7.647	.001
Within Groups	410.808	87	4.722		
Total	483.025	89			

Table 4 gives both between-groups and within groups sum of squares, degrees of freedom etc. The main thing we are interested in is the column marked Sig. If the Sig value is less than or equal to .05 then there is a significant difference somewhere among the mean scores on your dependent variable for the three groups. This does not tell you which group is different from which other group. In our table in the last column, you can see the significant value, this value being less than .05; we can conclude that there is a significant difference somewhere among the mean scores on the dependent variable for the three groups. The statistical significance of the differences between each pair of group is provided in the next table, which gives you the result of the post-hoc tests.

**Table 5.** Multiple Comparisons of all Groups

(I)Groups (J)Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
TEC GEC	-1.88333*	.56107	.005	-3.2807	-.4860
SEC	.03333	.56107	.998	-1.3640	1.4307
GEC TEC	1.88333*	.56107	.005	.4860	3.2807
SEC	1.91667*	.56107	.004	.5193	3.3140
SEC TEC	.03333	.56107	.998	-1.4307	1.3640
GEC	-1.91667*	.56107	.004	-3.3140	-.5193

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5 shows exactly where the differences among the groups occur. The asterisks (\*) next to the values listed in column labeled Mean Difference means that the two groups being compared are significantly different from one another at the  $p < .05$  level. The exact significance value is given in the column labeled sig. We can see in Table 5 that the TEC group performed significantly different from the GEC group however, the performance of TEC and SEC was not significantly different from each other.

We can see from the above table that the Sig. value of the GEC group was significantly different from the other two groups (TEC and SEC). It was shown that the group that

went through guided error correction showed the greatest improvement in their writing compared to the two other groups.

## CONCLUSION

According to inter language theory, linguistic mistake of a learner is a normal phenomenon in the learning process. In linguistic communication, expressing meaning is what is important for the learner. Before internalizing linguistic rules, linguistic mistakes are inevitable, and even, some mistakes are a necessary in the process of language learning. Therefore, teachers should increase their tolerance towards mistakes, teachers should learn and acquaint themselves with some theories that relate to error-correction, they should also replace teaching standards of linguistic behavior with adequate and acceptable language, and at the same time, consider linguistic accuracy and fluency.

In classroom teaching, the teacher's emphasize should be on tactics in error-correction, and should be very patient toward students' errors. Impatience could destroy students' self-esteem and their self-confidence will be frustrated, and consequently they will lose interest in learning a foreign language, which will just backfire. Using a lot of correction can be disheartening to the students. In addition, the students corrected their errors were active in class and asked a lot of questions. So the result of the study is very useful for teachers and students. It provides fruitful insights as to what methods of correction teacher should use to empower students to become better writers and to eliminate errors in their writings. Moreover, the teachers know how to involve their students in learning grammar better. As for students, they become autonomous and active in teaching-learning process, a lot of emphasis has been put on learner and many care have been exercised to educate autonomous and independent students this method is seeking to improve these subjects. Likewise, the results of this study can be used in other subject, other than language learning.

According to interlanguage theory, linguistic mistake of a learner is a normal phenomenon in the learning process. In linguistic communication, what a learner considers in the first place is the expressing of meaning. Before the internalization of their linguistic rules, mistakes of linguistic forms are inevitable, and furthermore, some mistakes are a necessary phase for language learning. Therefore, teachers should intensify their tolerance towards mistakes, learn and acquaint themselves with some theories related to error-correction, replace pure teaching standards of linguistic behavior with acceptability of language, and meanwhile, give overall consideration to linguistic accuracy and fluency. In classroom teaching, a teacher should emphasize tactics in error-correction, and should by no means show any impatience. Otherwise, students' self-esteem and self-confidence will be frustrated, and they will lose interest in foreign language learning, which will just backfire. Using a lot of correction can be disheartening to the students. In addition, the students corrected their errors were active in class and asked many questions. So the result of the study is very useful for teachers and students. It provides fruitful insights as to what methods of correction teacher should use to empower students to become better writers and to eliminate

errors in their writings. Moreover, the teachers know how to involve their students in learning grammar better. As for students, they become autonomous and active in teaching-learning process, a lot of emphasis has put on learner and many care have been exercised to educate autonomous and independent students this method is seeking to improve these subjects.

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