

Effects of explicit corrective feedback on writing skill:
A private middle school example

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Abstract

This study investigates and discusses the effects of explicit corrective feedback (ECF) on foreign language writing skills. In the process of learning a second language, the ability to write is one of the most important skills for gaining meaningful access to the target language. ECF is an indispensable part of practising writing while learning a second language. Despite the importance of ECF in language learning, many scholars often neglect the idea by accepting it as a behaviourist technique. The article first focuses on the definition of ECF and then reviews various research in the field. Besides, it discusses the research findings of the writing tasks applied to 43 private middle school students (B1 level) taking 5 subcategories into consideration. The study concludes that the research findings reveal a significant correlation between explicit corrective feedback and improving writing skills.

Keywords

explicit corrective feedback, writing, teacher, implicit, peer feedback, qualitative

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Introduction

The place of explicit corrective feedback (ECF) in language classes has been argued by many scholars for a long time. Beuningen, Jong, and Kuiken (2012) state that there are ongoing disagreements about the assumption because in the post-method era ECF has not been viewed as a significant part of the English language teaching and learning process. Within the scope of this practice, relatively little or no attention has been devoted to teaching the English language by using ECF. So as to state the matter

differently, under the influence of communicative language teaching, the valuable relationship between ECF and writing skills has been ignored. In this regard, Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) claim that many scholars think that in second language acquisition, errors or mistakes should be suspended for the later stages or should be handled in implicit manners.

However, many research findings (Ferris, 2010; Beuningen et al., 2012; Suzuki, 2012) show that ECF has a crucial role in the process of learning and teaching writing. From Ferris' point of view (2010), especially, real-time practitioners, in other words, teachers who work with foreign language learners in writing classes state that they potentially tend to use ECF to help their students in a meaningful manner. Furthermore, they have many substantial reasons in order to advocate why they have such a tendency to use ECF as a powerful error treatment technique in language classes such as feasibility, clarity, comprehensibility, and authenticity. At this point, Suzuki (2012) articulates that ECF provides language learners with a range of language knowledge and personal involvement to become more productive when they begin to uptake their mistakes and correct them. Otherwise, implicit feedback may not be elicited by the learner, and it may cause fossilization in the later stages. Additionally, in a long term, learners' lack of linguistic knowledge may end with a decline in their effective filter.

Among so many argumentative propositions, this study also aimed to observe whether the implementation of EFC to middle school students' writing skills. Thus, the question in mind was to see if such implementation would improve students' writing skills and how effective it would be for students' progress. So, the response was searched for the following research question:

- Is there a meaningful relationship between explicit corrective feedback and an increase in accuracy development in the aspects of *auxiliary*, *article*, *spelling*, *regular-irregular* and *preposition*?

Literature Review

The role of feedback in the education field is an important issue and is one of the fundamental steps of progress in language learning (Guanette, 2007). Previous studies

on EFC (Ferris, 2006; 2010) indicate that corrective feedback has a significant role in the process of writing in second language acquisition classes. Li (2010) states that when writing skill is compared to other skills like speaking, listening, and reading, it is a much more complicated and delayed skill because students are expected to produce well-formed meaningful sentences in a foreign language. At the same time, it requires different sub-skills like vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, coherence, and idea organization. In accordance with the aforementioned explanations, Kang and Han's study (2015) suggests that students need systematic, logical, guided, and gradual feedback throughout the writing process. In this process, there are mainly two types of correction applied in writing; explicit and implicit.

Ellis, Loewen, and Erlam (2006) both reviewed previous studies about explicit corrective feedback and implicit corrective feedback on second language acquisition (SLA) and conducted a study comparing two groups; one group was given explicit feedback whereas the other group was given implicit and delayed feedback. At the end of the study, they concluded that explicit feedback is an alternative to the implicit one, but at the same time, they also observed that implicit feedback helps learners build and progress in meta-linguistic terms. Both feedback types can be used in experimental studies because both of them are beneficial for the learners.

Biber, Nekrasova, and Horn (2011) stated that corrective feedback can be given to the children both directly and indirectly throughout the writing process. One of the significant issues about writing as a part of the process of second language acquisition is accuracy. Corrective feedback (CF) is expected to be useful, particularly in long-term accuracy development. At the end of the study, they concluded that both direct (explicit) and indirect (implicit) corrective feedback worked out to improve the accuracy of students' writing products.

In the same article, Biber, Nekrasova, and Horn (2011) also listed student and teacher drawbacks resulting from CF in terms of accuracy. First, the corrections made, may have some value for non-grammatical errors, but they are not valid for grammar errors. Second, because of error correction and feedback, students were reported to tend to avoid or do not prefer using complex or difficult constructions. Third, rather than spending too much time on corrective feedback, the teachers focus on additional writing practices.

Beuningen, Jong, and Kuiken (2012) found a slightly different result in their study while investigating the effectiveness of direct (explicit) and indirect (implicit) feedback on written accuracy. Briefly, their findings indicated that written corrective feedback was a useful tool in the process of accuracy development. However, non-grammatical errors of students should be corrected mostly by indirect corrective feedback. Schön (1983) touched upon two types of feedback as in action and on action, and then, highlights the requirements of researchers to apply studies to learners such as positivism, technical rationality, and the evolution of the modern professional school.

When the issue is looked from a different angle, it can be considered that teachers can use many different types of corrective feedback like recast, reformulation, echo-correction, clarification request, and so on. However, which of them is more applicable is uncertain. In this sense, Heift (2004) states that there are three types of corrective feedback that can be preferred for the sake of learner uptake, these are meta-linguistic, meta-linguistic and highlighting, and repetition and highlighting. In addition to that, Lyddon (2011) underlines the four types of corrective feedback; meaning-focused, implicit form-focused, metalinguistic explicit form-focused, non-metalinguistic explicit form-focused. He concentrates on pronunciation of four sounds /a/au/en/aux/. During the application process, improvement is observed in all four groups in terms of accuracy. Surprisingly, no benefit is observed at the end of the conditions that highlighting and repeated corrective feedback applied to the students. Lyddon (2011) suggests researchers focus on maximizing their opportunities to exceed these pronunciation mistakes with the help of meaningful communication. It is better than focusing on forms themselves.

Studies of some scholars' approaches to effective corrective feedback in various strategies and qualities are outlined subsequently. For instance, Abuseileek (2013) investigated the role of computer-mediated corrective feedback in English classes. There were 11 error types and two groups of students; one of the groups was the control group to which computer-mediated corrective feedback is applied. After the errors of the learners were analyzed with immediate and delayed post-tests, the

researcher realized that there was a considerable decrease in the amount of given feedback.

According to some scholars, some problems take place at the point of what explicit correction is and is not. Until today, error correction and grammar correction are considered interchangeable, even the same things. To make it clearer, Ferris (2010) outlined that error correction and grammar correction are mixed up with each other for several years. The disagreement among the practitioners who perform in L2 writing classes takes place also in the areas of research, theory and real-life practices. When it is considered from the theoretical and research perspectives, the conflict can also be seen in terms of methodology, terminology and interpretations of errors and mistakes.

Kang and Han's study (2015) can be considered as a concrete example of the statement which belongs to Ferris (2010). They built their study around two questions: "Does written corrective feedback help to improve the grammatical accuracy of second language writing?" and "What factors might mitigate its efficacy?" (p.1). They analyzed 22 studies that searched the effects of corrective feedback for the learners who were selected according to some criteria. For instance, they have to be written after 1980, errors should be corrected by teachers, not peers or computers and studies should be designed as experimental or quasi-experimental. The findings indicate that giving corrective feedback to the students leads to accuracy in grammatical writing. However, this result is a kind of an umbrella term, and it has some sub-groups that the variables are categorized according to some qualities like students' proficiency level, the genre of the written task and the setting.

Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Krause, and Anderson (2010) claimed that there are some problems at the stage of application of the corrective feedback in real classroom settings by the teachers. They focus on the proficiency of the teachers. The teachers have confusion about the steps to be taken during practice. In general, they support the idea that corrective feedback has considerable benefits in the name of increasing the accuracy level in writing in L2 classes. The researchers developed an instructional strategy called dynamic written corrective feedback (DWCF) and they tested the efficiency of the methodology in two groups. One of them got conventional feedback and the other got DWCF. According to the results, DWCF did not affect

rhetorical competence very much. However, writing fluency, complexity and the improvement in the name of accuracy was found to be significant.

Lee (2013) is another researcher who focused on the feedback process, its qualities and the problems during the process. The effect of corrective feedback increasingly attracts the attention of researchers in the L2 acquisition of students. However, under the name of the practice, apparently, there is a problem with feedback that is applied to the learners. Feedback should be applied in real classroom contexts, especially during the writing process. It is claimed that there is not sufficient information about how it works in a real context and how the teacher gives corrective feedback to the learners. Kim (2004) advocates that if teachers do not give immediate corrective feedback, it may lead to fossilization in the production of learners in the later stages because they may not be able to elicit/uptake their errors and correct them by themselves.

Bitchener and Ferris (2012) searched for another aspect of corrective feedback. They explained that the teachers use feedback every day but they do not know whether it works or not. Bitchener is an SLA researcher and stated that the written modality had been marginalized. As an expert in corrective feedback, Ferris suggests that L2 writing and composing should be paid more attention by researchers.

Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) questioned the cons and pros of corrective feedback type in terms of effectiveness; direct feedback or indirect feedback and why one is more beneficial than the other. They investigated the effect of direct and indirect feedback to find out why some feedback is internalized and the other is not. The students in this study have three sessions: In the first session, they are paired up and compose a text together. They have been exposed to both direct and indirect feedback. Five days later, they see their mistakes and rewrite the texts. These texts are the evidence of uptake for feedback. 28 days later, the students write the text with the same prompt individually. Also, the third text is the evidence of retention. According to the results obtained from the study, the researchers realized that the type of feedback, the students' attitudes and beliefs towards feedback, and affective factors had a significant role during uptake and retention of feedback.

In another comprehensive study, Li (2010) reached 6 results at the end of his updating study with 33 previous meta-analysis studies which focused on the effectiveness of corrective feedback:

(a) There is a medium overall effect for corrective feedback and the effect was maintained over time, (b) the effect of implicit feedback is better maintained than that of explicit feedback, (c) published studies do not show larger effects than dissertations, (d) lab-based studies show a larger effect than classroom-based studies, (e) shorter treatments generate a larger effect size than longer treatments, and (f) studies conducted in foreign language contexts produce larger effect sizes than those in second language contexts. (p.309)

Lyster and Ranta (1997) also underline diverse concerns of various language experts' reactions to the errors of the learner. Every expert handles it from their point of view; linguists examine it as negative evidence, discourse analysts as repair, psychologists as negative feedback, second language teachers as corrective feedback etc. To put it in a nutshell, correcting or responding to the errors of a learner is directly related to the communicative competence of the teacher/researcher.

Révész and Stefanou (2015) took a different side of corrective feedback into consideration. In their study, they searched the role of learner differences on knowledge of meta-language and grammatical sensitivity. They explored that metalinguistic comments have no significant impact on learners. The students who had both grammatical sensitivity and metalinguistic competence benefitted only from direct feedback supplementation.

Öztürk (2016) investigated Turkish EFL classroom in a state university to observe the effectiveness of oral corrective feedback. The results of the study indicated recast and explicit correction as the most used corrective feedback type. It was also observed that teachers sometimes ignored some of the oral errors to prevent affecting students negatively.

Atmaca (2016) in her study, aimed to examine teacher and student perception about written corrective feedback. It was observed that students' awareness increased when they knew what kind of written feedback they were going to get and this helped them assume their role as learners.

Methodology

Design and Implementation Process

In this study, a quantitative research method was used to conduct a statistical analysis, as the quantitative research method offers reliable measurement possibilities (Queirós et al., 2017). A quasi-experimental research design was adopted to test the relationship between variables. A convenience sampling design was chosen to conduct the study.

The study comprised two phases, beginning with a pre-test and continuing with a post-test. Before the pre-test, students watched a short story video for 10 minutes. The video was carefully selected for its suitability for the classroom. Students were then asked to neatly retell the events that took place in the video. Four days after the task, they received feedback (both written and oral) on spelling, articles, regular-irregular, prepositions and auxiliary verbs, and they saw their mistakes and corrected versions. These categories were formed according to the percentage of mistakes made by the students. The teacher gave another short lecture on the topics in front of the whole class because he noticed that there were significant deficits in some topics such as articles and prepositions. In the post-test, one week later, the same steps were repeated. At the end, the research results were analysed according to the frequency of errors committed by the students within the framework of the five categories mentioned above.

Study Group

The participants were comprised 43 Turkish-speaking students aged 13-15 enrolled in a private middle school in Sakarya province during the autumn semester of 2017, and they had the same task as "Please narrate the events that take place in the video by making sentences in the past tense". The number of female participants was 26 (60.4%) and the number of male participants was 17 (39.6%). The main reason for choosing this class was their language background. The language level of the participants was B1, which showed the homogeneity of the class. This homogeneity was clearly seen in their similar errors on the task sheet

The learners stated that they have been learning English for 8 years. Their English language competence was tested with the Cambridge Language Assessment Test. The school's approach to language teaching was based on the four skills of English as reading, writing, speaking and listening. The learners received 8 hours of English class per week.

Data analysis

To clarify the role of the ECF in the action, each participant's writing tasks, both pre- and post-test, were analysed to determine the number of errors made. The total number of errors made in the pre-test and post-test was compared to find out if any improvement occurred as a result of the ECF process. The numerical comparison is also presented in a bar chart.

Findings

The research aims to indicate whether there is a significant relationship between ECF and writing skills. The students are expected to respond the question throughout the process. “*Please narrate the events that take place in the video by constructing sentences in the past tense*”. The results of the research question are given in the table and figure below.

Table 1. The total numeric results of mistakes pre and post-test according to the categories

Categories	Pre-Test Results	Post-Test Results
Auxiliary	43	28
Article	114	18
Spelling	13	7
Regular-Irregular	36	8
Preposition	23	9
Total	229	70

Looking at the results in Table 1, a significant correlation between explicit corrective feedback and an increase in accuracy development can be observed.

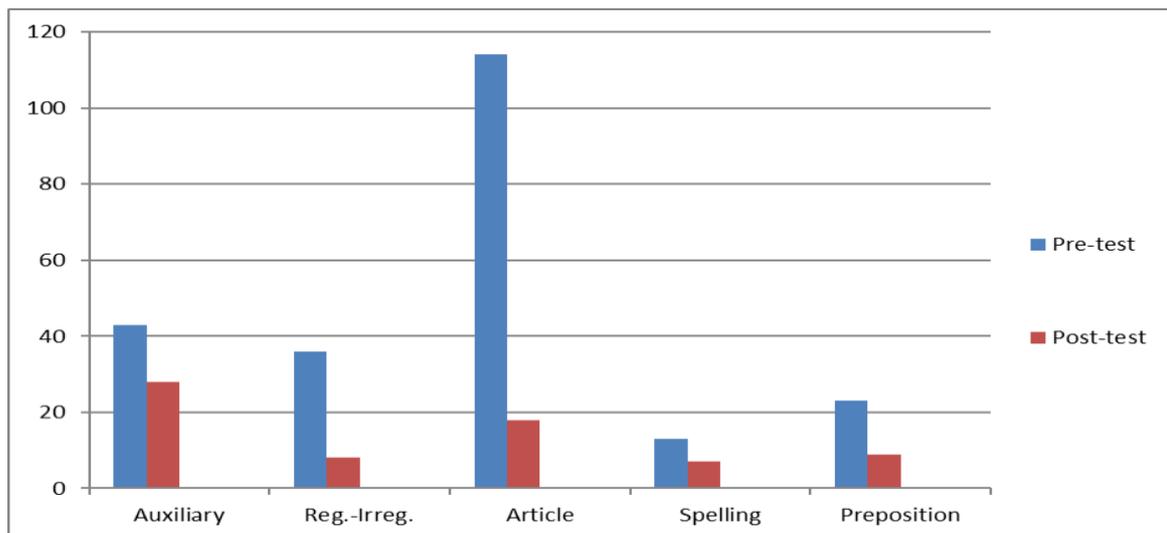


Figure 1. The number of mistakes according to categories before and after explicit corrective feedback

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of errors has decreased significantly, especially in the article and regular-irregular categories. The decrease in errors in the use of the article is 84.2% (from 114 to 18), regular-irregular 77.8% (from 36 to 8), preposition 60.8% (from 23 to 9), spelling 46.2% (from 13 to 7) and auxiliary 34.9% (from 43 to 28).

During the process of explicit corrective feedback, students were exposed to written and oral feedback. The feedback given covered all categories and was presented to the whole class orally and in written form on their task sheet individually. As a result, there was a significant decrease in errors made by the students after the second phase of implementation. The feedback given increased accuracy in written development by 69.4% (from 229 to 70).

Discussion and Conclusion

As previously mentioned, Ferris (2010) states that grammar correction and corrective feedback are mixed up together and these are not the same concepts. When the determined categories of mistakes were analysed in this study, it was seen that most of them were related to grammatical issues such as article, regular-irregular, auxiliary, and preposition.

A similar study on written corrective feedback of prepositions was conducted by Beşkardeşler and Kocaman (2019) and they found that written corrective feedback proved helpful in improving students' correct use of prepositions

Another issue discussed by Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Krause, and Anderson (2010) is about the teachers' capabilities to give feedback. It is not known whether the teacher who has corrected the mistakes has sufficient knowledge/experience in the area of giving feedback or not. However, it can be assumed that the decrease rate in the amount of mistakes made by the students after the implementation of explicit corrective feedback can be regarded as a proof of the teacher's capabilities. Furthermore, contrary to the ideas of Lyddon (2011), who defends implicit correction, the decrease of mistakes in the current study proves the effectiveness of ECF.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study attempts to show a meaningful relationship between explicit corrective feedback and second language development. It also examines how a learner receives the feedback and develops a sense of his or her further language production. To arrive at more meaningful research findings, future studies could replicate similar studies with a larger number of learners of different ages. It might be logical to ask learners what types of feedback they are generally exposed to and which of them are most useful. Also, it might be more beneficial and encouraging for writing skill improvement if learners receive feedback from peers rather than from the teacher.

Notes on the Contributor

Orhan Kocaman works as Assoc. Prof. and Head of the English Language Teaching Programme at İstanbul 29 Mayıs University. His areas of expertise include computer-assisted foreign language teaching, language learning approaches, language acquisition and vocabulary learning strategies.

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