The Effect of Scaffolded Corrective Feedback on EFL Learners' Accurate Use of Articles and Past Tenses in Writing

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Abstract. There is still debate on what kind of corrective feedback is more effective in improving L2 student writers' written accuracy. Inspired by the Vygotskian Sociocultural theory, which regards scaffolding as the optimal way of promoting learning, the present study set out to investigate whether 'scaffolded feedback' could work better than the orthodox reformulation of students' errors in enhancing their writing ability. To this end, a quasi- experimental study was conducted to compare the performance of two groups of Iranian EFL students (Scaffolded CF group and Reformulation group) on English articles and past tenses in narrative writing tasks across a pretest, first posttest and second posttest. For the Scaffolded CF group, the teacher provided corrective feedback in a graduated and stepwise fashion from implicit to explicit, trying to push them towards identifying and correcting their errors. The students in the Reformulation group simply received the correct form of their errors. The results revealed that the efficacy of CF is much reliant on the type of error to be corrected. Whereas no significant difference was found between the two groups in using articles, the Scaffolded CF group significantly outperformed the Reformulation group in using past tenses. Implicit in this finding is that, for certain categories, providing extensive feedback may hardly take any effect and simpler feedback types will suffice.

Keywords: Scaffolded feedback, Reformulation, Written accuracy, Pushed output

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1. INTRODUCTION

Accuracy figures high in many L2 writing classes, as it is a major requirement of success   in academic settings (Weigle, 2002). Provision of corrective feedback (CF) is the most common strategy used by L2 writing teachers for enhancing their students' written accuracy. However, whether and how CF could improve L2 learners' writing is still a matter of controversy. Some researchers have argued against error correction in writing (Truscott, 1996, 2007; Zamel, 1985), claiming that momentary correction of students' grammatical errors in writing is not powerful enough to affect their interlanguage, the development of which requires complex learning processes (Truscott, 1996). Other researchers, on the other hand, argue that CF could be fruitful if it is applied appropriately and skillfully (Ferris, 1999, 2004). Despite the debate, there is an ample body of evidence which support the benefits of CF in L2 learning (Nassaji, 2007; Zhang, Zhang, & Ma, 2010). Additionally, as Erel and Bulut (2007) point out, even if research doesn't support the effectiveness of CF, "student expectations and teacher responsibilities will compel language teaching programs to find strategies to respond to student writing in some ways" (p. 399). Thus, given the growing evidence in favor of CF provision as well as students' strong desire for receiving feedback on their written errors, the main question for many researchers and teachers is not so much as to whether CF is effective but rather what type of CF is more beneficial and how it should be given to students (Nassaji, 2007).

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1.1. Scaffolded CF (A Literature Review)

The Vygotskian Socuicultural theory, which has recently gained considerable momentum, views learning, including language learning, as a socially and interactionally mediated process, in which the learner proceeds from object/other regulation to self-regulation, a stage when the learner become capable of independent problem solving (Lantolf, 2000). The proponents of the theory, however, argue that not all interactional and regulatory encounters could promote learning or development, maintaining that "for intellectual growth to occur, interactions need to operate within the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, p. 52). Assistance or other regulation within a learner's ZPD is referred to as *scaffolding* (Mitchel & Myles, 2004). It is a dialogic process in which an expert (e.g. a teacher) assists a novice (e.g. a student) in solving a problem that he or she cannot solve alone (Ellis, 2003). Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) point to three mechanisms involved in scaffolded assistance: 1) graduation (help is given gradually from implicit to explicit until an appropriate level is reached), 2) contingency (help should be given only when it is needed and stopped as soon as it becomes clear that the learner is able to tackle the problem in question independently), and 3) ongoing assessment of the learner's need and abilities and adjusting of help to fit these.

Due to the momentum that negotiation and collaboration have gathered in recent years, a number of researchers have conducted studies on the extent to which negotiated feedback can contribute to the acquisition of L2 rules. The bulk of these studies, however, have addressed the effect of negotiation on students' oral performance. For example, and Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study on the effect of form negotiation (carried out through four feedback types of elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetition) revealed the effectiveness of this technique in generating student repair. Van den Branden (1997), however, did not show significant effect of negotiation on the grammatical accuracy and complexity of the learners' output. William's (1999) study indicated that negotiated feedback was more beneficial for students with higher language proficiency than those with lower proficiency. Swain (2000) showed that negotiation leading to pushed output could enhance L2 learners' accuracy.

A few studies have examined the role of scaffolding in assisting learners to improve their writing. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) examined the effect of negotiated CF on three L2 learners' written errors, using a twelve-level 'Regulatory Scale' which provided help to the learner from the most implicit to the most explicit. They found that the amount of scaffolding provided by the teacher to the learner decreased (i.e. the teacher's help became implicit over time), as they gained control over the L2. In a follow-up study, Nasaji and Swain (2000), using the same regulatory scale, examined the effect of scaffolded CF on two learners' incorrect use of English articles in writing. This study, too, showed positive effects of feedback given within the learners' ZPD. Nassaji (2007) conducted a study on the effect of the degree of negotiation on L2 students' writing, comparing three groups of students receiving extended negotiated feedback, limited negotiated feedback, and non-negotiated feedback. The results showed that feedback involving extended and limited negotiation resulted in significantly more correction than the feedback involving non-negotiation; however, the difference between the feedback with extended negotiation and that with limited negotiation was not significant.

The present study was an attempt to incorporate the concept of scaffolding to the context of addressing EFL students' written grammatical errors. The objective was to examine whether providing scaffolded CF on students' errors could be more effective than the simple and orthodox reformulation of errors in improving the accuracy of their compositions, and if so, whether it could make leaners retain this achieved accuracy, the issue not addressed by any of the studies in the literature.

Since correcting L2 students' written errors is an exhausting and time-consuming activity, the results of this study could shed light on what degree of feedback would be sufficient for

making the learner internalize a certain grammatical point, that is, does the learner need larger quantity of feedback like the scaffolded feedback or simpler and less time-consuming ways will suffice?

1.2. Research Questions
1. Is there a significant difference between the two groups of EFL students (Scaffolded CF group and Reformulation group) in accurate use of English articles in writing?
2. Is there a significant difference between two groups of students (Scaffolded CF group and Reformulation group) in accurate use of English past tenses (simple, progressive, and perfect) in writing?

2. METHOD

2.1. Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest, first posttest and second posttest, using two intact EFL classes. There were one experimental group (i.e. the Scaffolded CF group) and one control group (Reformulation group). The feedback treatment and test time served as the independent variables, and the students' written accuracy performance on the articles and past tenses was the dependent variable.

2.2. Participants

45 Iranian EFL university students from two intact classes constituted the participants of the study. They were all freshmen studying English at the Islamic Azad University of Tabriz, Iran. They were pre-intermediate students taking a course in English grammar and writing. Their age range was between 19 and 28. All of the students had already passed a course in English grammar; thus, the objective of the treatment involved in the study was to restructure and consolidate the declarative knowledge the students might have gained through the deductive instruction given in the first academic term.

2.3. Instrumentation

In order to ascertain that the students in both groups were of comparable level of proficiency, an Oxford Placement Test (Elementary to Intermediate) was administered before the treatment. The test included four subtests of vocabulary and grammar, reading, and writing.

Each of the pretest, first posttest and second posttest contained four short narrative writing tasks. Each task involved a number of incomplete ideas (words or phrases) which the students were to organize into well-formed paragraphs. Some of these idea organization tasks were taken or adapted from various resources (especially from Alexander, 1965, 1967), and some were teacher-made (See examples of these tasks in the Appendix A).

2.4. Target Categories

Two grammatical categories were used to measure the students' accuracy performance: articles and past tenses (simple, progressive and perfect). The reason for choosing two categories was to explore whether or not CF is sensitive to the type of linguistic category, as claimed by some researchers (e.g. Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999), and the reason for choosing articles and past tenses was that obligatory occasions for using articles and past tenses appear frequently in the past narrative genre. English articles are multi-functional, but the present study considered only one and the most common function of each of the indefinite and definite articles, namely, using 'a/an' for singular unspecified nouns and 'the' for specified nouns in past narrative compositions.

2.5. Procedure

The study was conducted during the eight sessions of an academic term. There was one session per week, each lasting for about 90 minutes. In the first session of the term, the Oxford Placement Test was administered to the two intact classes to find out whether they were homogeneous in English proficiency. There were 21 students in one class, and 24 students in the other. The class with the smaller number of students was intentionally selected by the researcher (who was also the teacher) as the scaffolded CF group because the teacher had to allocate 4 to 5 minutes to negotiating with each student, and this was more feasible with the smaller class. In the second session, the pretest was given to the groups to ascertain if they were homogeneous in using the target categories. In the third and fifth sessions, the students wrote short narratives with the time allotment of 20 minutes, followed by the feedback treatment in the fourth and sixth sessions. In the seventh session, the students took the first posttest, and three weeks later (in the tenth session), they sat the second posttest. Each of the tests (pretest, first posttest and second posttest) as well as treatment tasks required the students to write four short stories by using a number of ideas in note form (words or phrases). Since the target categories chosen for accuracy measures were articles and past tenses, the ideas were devoid of articles, and the verbs were in the form of infinitive without 'to'. Although the typical tense used in writing a past narrative is the simple past, the teacher manipulated the ideas in a way that obligatory contexts for using the past progressive and perfect tenses could also be provided for the students.

The students in the scaffolded CF group received CF on the target errors in the form of 4 to 5 minute teacher-student negotiations. During the negotiation with each student, the teacher tried to push him/her toward identifying and correcting his/her errors. He started with implicit levels of help and, if the student failed to solve the problem in question, the teacher made the help more explicit until either the student could solve the problem or the teacher provided the solution. Typically, the teacher first identified the location and then the type of error. Encountering the student's unsuccessful response, he moved on to the next stage of providing metalinguistic clues, and in case the student still failed to correct his/her error, the teacher gave the correct response. It is noteworthy that in the metalinguistic feedback stage the teacher resorted to the students' L1 if they failed to understand the English explanations. Unlike some communicative approaches to language teaching and learning which disapprove of using L1 in the L2 classroom, in the Sociocultural theory, L1 is viewed as a helpful tool for providing scaffolding and establishing intersubjectivity (Anton & DiCamilla, 1999). It should also be noted that while the teacher was providing a student with negotiated CF, the other students were doing the textbook exercises they had been tasked with (See an example of the scaffolded CF in Appendix B).

The students in the Reformulation group simply received the oral reformulation of their erroneous target categories from the teacher. No explanation on the errors was given to the students.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results of the proficiency test (Oxford Placement Test) administered to the two intact classes before the treatment classed both groups as pre-intermediate students. An independent samples t-test run on the students' proficiency test scores revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = 0.539$, $df = 43$, $p = 0.593$), testifying to the homogeneity of the students in the groups. Also, the one-sample K-S test showed that both groups' proficiency scores had normal distributions.

Each student's accuracy score for the pretest and posttests was calculated using the 'Obligatory Occasion Analysis' (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008). That is, the total number of the correct uses of a target category was divided

by all the obligatory occasions for using that category, and the result was multiplied by 100 (i.e. the score was expressed in percent). For example, 4 correct uses of an article from 10 obligatory occasions yielded a score of 40. For each student, two scores were obtained, one for articles and the other for verb tenses. To calculate the reliability of the writing test scores, 30 papers were randomly selected from the pretest (15 papers from each group) and were scored by two L2 writing teachers (the researcher and his colleague). The inter-rater reliability coefficients for the scores on the articles and past tenses were.94 and.92 respectively.

To ensure the homogeneity of the groups in using the target forms (articles and past tenses) in writing prior to the treatment, they were compared through a pretest one session before the treatment began. The independent samples t-test revealed no significance difference between the groups in using both articles ($t = 0.172$, $df = 43$, $p = 0.864$) and past tenses ($t = 1.33$, $df = 43$, $p = 0.190$).

To examine the effect of feedback type (scaffoded vs. reformulation) on the students' learning and retention of articles, the two groups' progress was compared from the pretest to the first posttest and then to the second (delayed) posttest. To this end, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run with the treatment and test time as the independent variables and the students' accuracy scores for articles as the dependent variable. The results showed no significant effect of feedback type at 0.05 level ($F (1, 43) = 0.004$, $p = 0.951$), implying that accuracy performance on articles did not vary according to the feedback type. The interaction effect of the feedback type and test time was not significant, either, indicating that both groups had similar patterns of movement (improvement or decline) across the test times. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the two groups' scores for articles across the pretest, first posttest, and second posttest, and Figure1 is the visual representation of the groups' progress across the three test times.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Groups' Performance on the Articles.

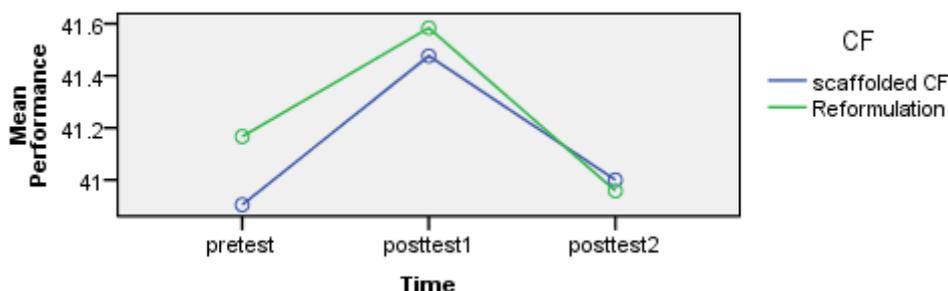|		Pretest		Posttest 1		Posttest 2	
Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Scaffolded CF	21	40.90	4.70	41.48	5.78	41.00	5.59
Reformulation	24	41.17	5.39	41.58	6.32	40.90	8.28

Figure 1. The two groups' accuracy performance on articles

The two groups were also compared on their use of past tenses across the three test times. It is noteworthy that the past tenses targeted in the study were taken as a single category rather than separate categories. Once again, the two-way repeated measures ANOVA was used with the treatment and test time as the independent variables and the students' performance on the past tenses as the dependent variable. The results revealed that the effect of feedback type was significant at 0.05 level, with the Scaffolded CF group outperforming the Reformulation group in using the past tenses ($F (1, 43) = 4.092$, $p = 0.049$). The interaction effect of the feedback type and test time was not significant, implying similar patterns of progress for the two groups.

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Table 2 represents the descriptive statistics for the two groups' performance on the past tenses, and Figure 2 shows the progress of the groups through the three test times.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Two Groups' Performance on Past Tenses.

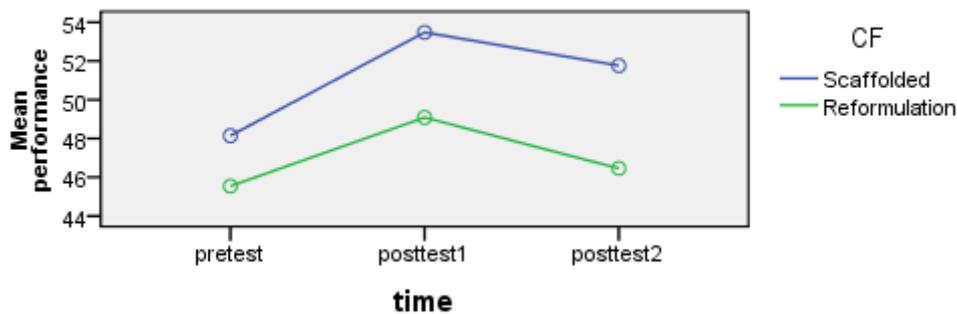| Group	N	Pretest		Posttest 1		Posttest 2	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Scaffolded CF	21	48.14	6.183	53.48	8.195	51.76	7.661
Reformulation	24	45.54	6.821	49.08	7.138	46.46	7.187

Figure 2. The two groups' performance on the past tenses

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To make a contribution to the research on the effect of feedback type on the improvement of accuracy, the present study addressed the efficacy of the scaffolded CF, in which a group of EFL students were pushed towards self-correction of their errors. Pushing L2 learners through gradual guidance is a main premise of some theoretical stances like the Sociocultural theory and Output hypothesis. Swain (1985, 2000, 2005), the main proponent of the Output hypothesis, asserts that negotiation of meaning should promote comprehensible input, but not at the cost of accuracy and appropriateness, arguing that meaning negotiation should also involve pushed output leading to modified output. She maintains that pushed output could encourage learners move from semantic processing to syntactic processing through noticing and noticing the gap. The present study set out to explore whether scaffolded CF could work better than the conventional reformulation of the error in restructuring and internalizing two grammatical categories of articles and past tenses.

The findings showed that the effectiveness of CF type depends to a large extent to the error category to be corrected. There was no significant difference between the experimental group (Scaffolded CF group) and control group (Reformulation group) in their accuracy performance on using articles in narrative writing. In spite of the fact that the scaffolded CF group was more mentally engaged by being pushed in a stepwise fashion towards resolving their erroneous use of articles, they failed to do better than the reformulation group. This result could be attributed partly to the complex nature of articles and partly to the non-salience of them in that their non-use or misuse rarely leads to communication breakdown (Sheen, 2007). The students' first language may also be an influential factor. All the students were bilinguals of Persian and Turkish, both of which lack the definite article.

On the other hand, the feedback type did affect the students' performance on the past tenses. The students in the scaffolded CF group were significantly better than those in the reformulation

group in using the past tenses on the first posttest, and they could retain this improved knowledge on the second posttest.

One way of accounting for this differential effect of feedback is to make a reference to Pienemann's (1998) teachability hypothesis, which holds that "teaching should be restricted to the learning of items for which the learner is ready" (cited in Dabaghi & Bastrkmen, 2009, p.93). Engaging the students' attention in problem solving through scaffolded help did not take effect for the learning articles, but it was beneficial for learning past tenses. It can be concluded that extended feedback and extended engagement of the learner's mental resources do not guarantee his/her success in internalizing a given linguistic category. Feedback provision is tiresome and time-consuming, and accordingly, teachers should be selective about the error types as well as the strategies for error correction. A specific CF strategy can hardly be effective for different linguistic categories.

The findings of this study indicated that scaffolded CF could prove an effective strategy in promoting the internalization of the past tenses; however, in the case of articles, its effect was equal to the quick and simple provision of the correct form of an error. Thus, for certain errors, larger degrees of CF might fare well, but for others, simpler and less time-consuming strategies just for triggering noticing will suffice, as noticing is the essential requirement for acquisition (Schmidt, 1990).

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Appendix A

Examples of idea organization tasks

Instruction: Write stories using the given ideas. Expand each story as much as you wish. (Note that you have to put the verbs into correct forms)

1. Last week I invite my friend to dinner – expensive restaurant – good meal – ask for bill – notice that I leave my wallet at home – borrow some money from my guest

2. I smoke in bed last night – go to sleep – suddenly wake up – sheet burn – I jump up – put fire out – big hole in sheet

        (Adapter from Alexander, 1967)

Appendix B

An example of scaffolded corrective feedback given to a student on a past tense

Student's written sentence: While I smoked, I went to sleep…

Teacher: There is something wrong with this part 'While I smoked'.

Student: hmmm [silence]

Teacher: Look at 'While'. 'While' shows that the action is in progress or it was continuous.

Student: O, yes. Smoking!

Teacher: Good, but 'smoking' only shows the progress, but not the time of progress. You must use an auxiliary to show the time of this progress.

Student: Aux… What?

Teacher: Auxiliary [The teacher provided the Persian equivalent of 'Auxiliary']

Student: was smoking?

Teacher: Good! You got it right.