Relative Effects of Direct Focused and Unfocused WCF on the Accuracy Development of Two Language Forms

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This article reports on a classroom-based study that examined the effects of direct focused and unfocused written corrective feedback (WCF) on the accuracy development of the past hypothetical conditional (e.g., *If I had had money, I would have bought a new computer*.) and the indefinite article (*a/an*). The study employed a pretest-posttest-delayed posttest design with two feedback treatment sessions. Six intermediate classes, a total of 108 college freshmen at a university in Korea and two native English speaking instructors, participated in the study. The classes were assigned into a focused WCF group, an unfocused WCF group, and a control group. A text-reconstruction task was used as a writing material and a test instrument. The results revealed that both focused and unfocused WCF groups outperformed the control group in the accuracy gains of both target forms. When the relative effects of two types of feedback were considered, there was no difference in the contribution focused and unfocused WCF made for the accuracy improvement of the hypothetical conditional. However, focused WCF was more beneficial than unfocused WCF for the development of the indefinite article.

Key words: focused/unfocused written corrective feedback (WCF), L2 accuracy, different language forms

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of written corrective feedback (WCF) in second language (L2) development has been one of the most widely discussed topics in the past few decades (e.g., Bitchener, 2012; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Kang & Han, 2015; Truscott, 1996, 2004).

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WCF research framed in L2 writing has focused on the effects of CF on improving learners' overall writing skills (i.e., organization, coherence, mechanics, etc.), and most of the early WCF studies are based on this framework, so-called 'learning to write'. Thus, research has focused on the extent to which learners incorporate WCF into the subsequent revisions and has proved that WCF plays a vital role in the revision process (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Sommers, 1982). Unlike WCF studies based on L2 writing, WCF research grounded on second language acquisition (SLA) has explored the extent to which WCF benefits L2 learners' interlanguage development, mostly focusing on accuracy gains in a new text writing. In other words, writing is conceived as a tool of learning language (i.e., 'writing to learn'). Early SLA studies were indeed limited to measuring accuracy improvement in revision process via WCF (e.g., Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986). Critiques of these studies argue that learners' correct use of initially ill-formed forms after receiving CF in revisions should not be interpreted as L2 development since it can be attributed to a simple copy of correct form in CF or instant not permanent gains without going through the process of restructuring learners' interlanguage (e.g., Ferris, 2010; Truscott, 1996, 2004). In addition, many of the early WCF studies suffered from methodological drawbacks such as the lack of a control group (see Ferris, 2004 for a comprehensive discussion). These critiques have led SLA researchers to conduct a study carefully designed to explore the effectiveness of WCF in the development of learner interlanguage (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2008, 2012). The present study also set out to contribute to the ongoing SLA research into the effectiveness of WCF.

A growing body of evidence proves the usefulness of WCF in developing L2 accuracy (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Diab, 2015; Sheen, 2007). These studies have proposed that WCF can draw learners' attention to L2 forms, thereby helping them to notice gaps in their current L2 knowledge (Ellis, 2005). WCF can also help learners engage in "guided learning and problem solving, and, as a result, promote the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition" (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, p. 415). However, one concern that has consistently come to the fore is the applicability of research outcomes in L2 classrooms. This concern arises from two main issues: (a) WCF investigated in SLA research mostly targets the errors of one or two preselected language forms while L2 teachers offer CF to a wide range of forms, and (b) many WCF studies are conducted in laboratory settings which are contextually fairly different from real L2 classrooms. In order to address these concerns, the present study aimed not only to explore the effectiveness of both focused WCF (i.e., targeting the errors of a preselected language form) and unfocused WCF (i.e., targeting the errors of a range of language forms) but also to compare the role of these two types of WCF practiced in L2 classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Types of WCF

WCF refers to the information that is offered to L2 learners regarding their non-target-like written production (Loewen, 2012). Generally, although WCF is considered explicit since it overtly indicates that learners have made an error, the degree of explicitness varies depending on how it is provided. There are multiple ways to distinguish the type of WCF, and the most widely used method is to classify WCF according to whether the correct construction of the erroneous form learners have produced is supplied or not (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Direct WCF entails the correct construction; in contrast, indirect WCF only indicates the presence of an error, and no correct form is provided while learners are responsible for correcting the error on their own. Another distinction is whether WCF is focused or unfocused (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Unfocused WCF corresponds to the normal practice L2 writing teachers do in classrooms: the teacher corrects all or at least a range of L2 learners' errors in written work. In contrast, focused WCF treats errors of specific language forms and ignores other types of errors. Highly focused CF will deal with only one type of error (e.g., articles and simple past tense), and less focused CF will treat more than one error but will still limit correction to a restricted number of errors of preselected language forms.

2.2. Effects of Focused and Unfocused WCF

A considerable number of studies have investigated the effectiveness of focused direct WCF on the improvement of L2 accuracy. For instance, in a series of studies, Bitchener and Knock (2008, 2010) and Bitchener (2008) explored the extent to which WCF affected learners' accuracy of the English article for first mention and anaphoric reference. The studies proved that direct WCF contributed to the accuracy improvement of the target form. More recently, Shintani and Ellis (2013), Shintani, Ellis, and Suzuki (2014), and Stefanou and Révész (2015) also reported the facilitative role of direct focused WCF in L2 accuracy development. However, it has been pointed out that the outcomes of these studies may not be applicable to the L2 classroom which mostly practices unfocused WCF: "researchers who focus only on one structure may find few instances of such structures in their students' writing" (Storch, 2010, p. 41).

Recognizing the need for more research in the form of WCF which is actually performed in L2 writing instruction, some studies have explored the role of unfocused WCF in L2 accuracy development (Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Kim, 2019b; Truscott & Hsu, 2008; van Beuningen et al., 2012). The studies have reported conflicting findings. For instance,

Truscott and Hsu (2008) investigated whether or not WCF with underlining was effective for improving the accuracy rate in a revision text and a new text writing. Forty-seven EFL graduate students participated in the study. The results showed that those who received CF in the revision text reduced the error rate which was significantly higher for students who did not receive CF in the revision text. However, grammatical accuracy improvement was not found in a new text writing, prompting researchers to assert that CF has no value as a teaching and learning device. More recently, Karim and Nassaji (2018) reported a similar finding in their study with fifty-three intermediate ELS learners. The researchers explored the role of one type of direct WCF and two types of indirect WCF. All types of WCF resulted in accuracy gains in revisions, but they did not bring about significant improvements in new writing. Truscott and Hsu (2008) and Karim and Nassaji (2018) showed that unfocused WCF contributed to error reduction in revision, but it did not play a role in L2 accuracy development *per se*.

As opposed to the aforementioned two studies, some other studies have proved the role of unfocused WCF as a learning device. For instance, van Beunungen et al. (2012) showed that ESL learners could process unfocused direct and indirect WCF and gained accuracy via the corrections, and its effects were sustained for four weeks. Bonilla López, Van Steendam, Speelman, and Buyse (2018) also reported a similar finding. The researchers assigned 139 intermediate L2 learners into four CF conditions and a control group (self-correction), and the results showed that direct unfocused WCF resulted in accuracy improvement in a new text writing. More recently, Kim (2019b) conducted a study to examine the effects of unfocused WCF. The study revealed that both direct and indirect unfocused WCF played a vital role in gaining L2 accuracy in writing a new text. These three studies proved that unfocused WCF has a vital value as a teaching tool.

The above-mentioned studies explored the extent to which learners benefited from either focused WCF or unfocused WCF for their L2 accuracy development; thus, the relative effects of the two types of WCF were not examined. There are a few studies which attempted to examine the relative effects of focused and unfocused WCF, and the studies have resulted in mixed findings. For instance, Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima (2008) compared the effects of focused and unfocused direct WCF on accuracy gains of indefinite and definite English articles. Forty-nine EFL intermediate learners were assigned into three conditions: focused WCF, unfocused WCF, and no WCF. The study found that both feedback groups improved accuracy as opposed to the no WCF group, yet the differences between the focused WCF and the unfocused WCF groups did not reach statistical significance. This result prompted Ellis et al. to conclude that both feedback forms were equally effective. However, Sheen, Wright, and Moldawa (2009), in their study that compared four conditions (direct focused WCF, direct unfocused WCF, writing practice, and no feedback), found that the direct focused WCF group significantly

performed better than the other groups. This led the researchers to claim that focused WCF is more effective than unfocused WCF. More recently, Frear and Chiu (2015) investigated the extent to which 42 Chinese EFL learners benefited from focused and unfocused indirect WCF in their accuracy gains of regular past-tense verbs. Learners who received WCF outperformed learners who did not receive any WCF, yet no significant differences were found. The researchers concluded that a single indirect WCF treatment "was probably insufficient for learners to have noticed the target structure" (p. 33).

If attention is important for acquisition, as cognitive SLA theories have claimed (e.g., Robinson, Mackey, Gass, & Schmidt, 2012), there is a good reason for believing that focused WCF will be more effective than unfocused WCF since learners are more likely to pay attention to corrections targeting a single error type and more likely to have clear understanding of the nature of the error. However, as the previous studies showed, the experimental research outcomes do not live up to this anticipation. Given that there are only few studies that have dealt with both focused and unfocused feedback and the mixed findings reported in the previous studies, it is important that the relative role of the two approaches needs to be explored more. This could help teachers to decide whether the time-consuming unfocused feedback is worth the time they invest or whether the focused feedback which takes much less time to implement has greater potential L2 development than unfocused feedback. This is one of the main goals of the present study.

2.3. Relative Effects of Feedback on Different Language Forms

It has been explained that one form or structure may be more difficult to learn than another (Young, 1996) and that the different form may be acquired at different developmental stages (Pienemann, 1998). In L2 writing research, it has also been suggested that some forms may be more 'treatable' than others (Ferris, 1999): rule-based structures such as the regular past tense (adding suffix –ed) may be more 'treatable' than item-based forms which are not governed by rule such as the irregular simple past tense. Frear (2012) proves this hypothesis by reporting that focused direct WCF led to improvement in new pieces of writing in the case of the regular past tense but not for irregular past tense. Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) also suggest that WCF is more likely to be effective with 'treatable' structures. This issue has also been discussed in some WCF studies (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

However, some rule-based structures may be more inherently complex than others. In other words, the linguistic environment in which the forms are used may increase the range of linguistic elements that learners need to pay attention to. For instance, the rule for the use of the indefinite article for first mention (e.g., *I met a student*.) is relatively less complex than the rule for the hypothetical conditional (e.g., *If I had had money, I would*

have bought a new laptop.) because it involves complex verb forms and semantically challenging (Ellis, 2006). In addition, in some cases, the matter of whether a form is rule-based or not may be eclipsed by the degree of perceptual salience of the form in the context where it is used. That is, learners are more likely to attend to forms which are more important to understand meaning irrespective of the degree of the regularity of rules (VanPatten, 2004).

Growing evidence has proved the facilitative role of WCF in L2 development. However, the research has so far been limited to examining its effectiveness with certain morphosyntactic forms (e.g., the English articles). The extent to which WCF can contribute to the development of different domains and categories of linguistic knowledge is still unclear and has yet to be fully explored. This is an important question for understanding the full potential of WCF for L2 development.

This is one of the aims of the present study. For the purpose of filling the gaps in current WCF studies, the present study was designed to investigate the following research questions:

1. Does WCF help Korean EFL learners to improve accuracy in the use of two target forms, the indefinite article *a/an* and the past hypothetical conditional?
2. Is there a difference in the effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF in the accuracy gains of the target forms?

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

Six intermediate freshmen English classes at a university in Korea participated in the study (called Class 1, Class 2, Class 3, Class 4, Class 5, and Class 6 *hereinafter*), and a total of 108 students and two teachers took part in the study. The classes aimed to develop four English skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and were taught by two native speakers of English with more than 8 years of teaching experience in Korea (called Teacher A and Teacher B for the sake of convenience). The classes were held twice a week for 75 minutes. Teacher A taught Class 1 (18 students), Class 2 (20 students), and Class 3 (15 students), and Teacher B taught Class 4 (19 students), Class 5 (18 students), and Class 6 (18 students). Students were assigned into the intermediate level based on a MOCK TOEIC administered by the university, and their TOEIC scores ranged from 500 to 650. Students had various majors including Social and Political Science, Korean Language and Literature, Psychology, and so on. They were first-year students, aged 19-21. They did not

have any experience living and studying in an English-speaking country, and they had received at least ten years of formal English instruction. The classes were chosen based on the consideration of the students' proficiency level and the overall goal of instruction.

3.2. Target Structures

The present study explored the role of feedback in developing a morphosyntactic feature, the indefinite article *a/an*. In addition, this study investigated a syntactic feature (the past hypothetical conditional), which has been little examined in past WCF research. These two features were selected as the target forms because learning these forms is challenging for English learners (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

The past hypothetical structure expresses the hypothetical outcome of an event that did not take place in the past. This structure requires knowledge of the tense-aspect system, model auxiliaries, and negation. Izumi, Bigelow, Fujiwara, and Fearnow (1999) note that this structure is difficult because it entails encoding both hypotheticality and past time reference. They also point out that it is the most difficult conditional sentence because it requires an additional maker of past time using the form of the past perfect to distinguish it from unreal conditional sentence as in the following example:

If she studied harder, she would pass the exam (unreal conditional).
If she had studied hard, she would have passed the exam (hypothetical conditional).

Due to the complexity, it is well known that L2 learners have difficulty acquiring this structure (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

In addition, the English article is one of the most demanding forms for Korean EFL learners to acquire due to the absence of the equivalent form in Korean and the low salience of the form in input (Ko, Ionin, & Wexler, 2009). In particular, the present study only dealt with the indefinite article while most of the previous studies looked into both definite and indefinite articles (e.g., Bitchener & Knock, 2008, 2010; Sheen, 2007). This decision was made by following Shintani et al. (2014) advice: "learners tend to overgeneralize the use of the definite article, making it difficult to determine if they have really acquired *the* to realize a specific grammatical function" (p. 112). Among many functions of the indefinite article, the present study focused on its use to express some person/thing stated for the first time (e.g., *I met a cute girl.*).

Both target forms had never been explicitly taught in the classes before the study was conducted, and the teachers were advised not to provide grammar instruction about the forms until the study finished.

3.3. Treatments

Two treatment sessions took place during the participants' normally scheduled class. All experimental group received one feedback treatment (either focused WCF or unfocused WCF).

3.3.1. Focused WCF group

The errors related to the target forms were directly corrected as in Example 1.

[Example 1]

have   a   hadn't watched

I would V read more as V child if I ~~did not watch~~ TV. But, I watched a lot of TV, so I didn't read book and didn't listen my mom.

3.3.2. Unfocused WCF group

The errors related to not only the target forms but also other areas were directly corrected as in Example 2.

[Example 2]

hadn't watched much   have   books   a lot of

If I ~~didn't watch~~ so ~~many~~ TV, I would V read more ~~book.~~ I did watch ~~many~~ TV, so

        books

I never read history ~~book~~.

3.4. Design and Procedure

The six classes were assigned into one focused WCF group (Class 1 and Class 4, $n = 37$), and one unfocused WCF group (Class 2 and Class 5, $n = 38$), and one control group (Class 3 and Class 6, $n = 33$). The study was conducted using regular class time, and Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3 were instructed by Teacher A, and Classes 4, 5, and 5 were instructed by Teacher B (see Table 1 for Overall Procedure). All groups took a pretest, an immediate posttest, and a delayed posttest. Between the pretest and the immediate posttest, two WCF sessions were offered. In the focused WCF group, only the errors related to the target forms were corrected while, in the unfocused WCF group, the errors of the target forms and other forms (e.g., prepositions, S-V agreement, etc.) were also corrected. The learners in the

control group did not receive any corrections, but they were asked to self-correct their errors. In Session 1, all of the groups engaged in the same tasks, answering the background questionnaires and the first writing task (see Writing Task Materials below for details). The questionnaires and the writing task were collected. In Session 2, the focused and unfocused WCF groups received their original drafts with the teacher's corrections, and they revised the drafts based on the corrections they received. The control group also received the text they wrote, but no correction was provided. The students were asked to correct the errors on their own. After the revision stage, the students engaged in the second writing task. In Session 3, the students had a chance to revise the second writing task based on the correction (in the case of WCF groups) or self-correct their errors (in the case of the control group). After the revision stage, the students worked on the third writing task. In Session 4, all groups engaged in the last writing task.

TABLE 1

Overall Procedure

Session	Focused WCF ($n = 37$)	Unfocused WCF ($n = 38$)	Control ($n = 33$)
Session 1	Background Questionnaire (5 mins.) + Writing Task 1 (Pretest) (15 mins.)		
Session 2 (3 days after Session 1)	WT 1 Revision based on F-WCF (15 mins.)	WT 1 Revision based on UF-WCF (15 mins.)	WT 1 Revision; Self-correction (15 mins.)
	WT 2 (15 mins.)	WT 2 (15 mins.)	WT 2 (15 mins.)
Session 3 (4 days after Session 2)	WT 2 Revision based on F-WCF (15 mins.)	WT 2 Revision based on UF-WCF (15 mins.)	WT 2 Revision; Self-correction (15 mins.);
	WT 3 (Immediate Posttest) (15 mins.)	WT 3 (Immediate Posttest) (15 mins.)	WT 3 (Immediate Posttest) (15 mins.)
Session 4 (2 weeks after Session 3)	WT 4 (Delayed Posttest) (15 mins.)	WT 4 (Delayed Posttest) (15 mins.)	WT 4 (Delayed Posttest) (15 mins.)

Note. F-WCF = Focused WCF; UF-WCF = Unfocused WCF; WT = Writing Task

3.5. Writing Task Materials and Analysis

The study employed four text reconstruction writing tasks. Each task contained six hypothetical conditional sentences and seven to nine instances of the usage of indefinite articles. The study chose a text-reconstruction writing task to guarantee that the learners used the target forms in their writing. In a text-reconstruction task, learners are required to rewrite the passage they have read; thus, they are put in a position that requires them to use the language structures employed in the text they have read.

The students in each group received a reading passage and they were informed that they would reconstruct the passage on their own without referring to the original text. The students had 10 minutes to read the passage. They were allowed to take note of some

keywords while reading which they would need as they rewrote the passage, but they were instructed not to copy entire sentences from the text. They were encouraged to ask the teacher questions about the meanings of words if needed. The reading passage and their notes were collected after 10 minutes. Then, the students were instructed to reconstruct the text on their own within 15 minutes.

The first, the third, and the fourth writing tasks served as a pretest, an immediate posttest, and a delayed posttest respectively. Following the coding criteria employed in Shintani et al. (2014), the learners' use of the past hypothetical conditional form was coded (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Criteria for Scoring the Past Hypothetical Conditional

Clause	Features	Components	Point
If clause (max. 2 points)	The past aspect	Have (aux.) + verb	1.0
	The past tense	had	0.5
	The past participle (PP) form	Correct past participle (PP)	0.5
Main clause (max. 3 points)	The modal in the past tense	Past modal	1.0
	The perfect aspect	Have (aux.) + verb	1.0
	The modal form	Correct form of have (aux.)	0.5
	The PP form	Correct form of PP	0.5
Total			5

For instance, if a student wrote the sentence "If I married him, I was happy" as a corresponding sentence of "If I had married him, I would have been happy" in the original text, the student gained 1 (0.5 in If clause and 0.5 in Main clause) out of 5. A total percentage score for each student was calculated as follows:

$$\text{(Number of points scored) x 100} / \text{(Number of conditional sentences x 5)}$$

The passage used for the text-reconstruction task entailed seven to nine obligatory occasions of the use of an indefinite article. An obligatory instance included the case of any singular noun denoting [+specific referent] and [-hearer knowledge]. To score the students' use of the indefinite article, target-like use (TLU) formula was employed:

$$\text{(Number of grammatical morphemes supplied accurately) x 100} / \text{(Number of obligatory contexts + Number of overused forms)}$$

To examine the reliability of the scoring, an independent rater re-scored 25% of the data. The rater was a native speaker of English who held an MA in TESOL with 10 years of

teaching experience in ESL and EFL settings. The rater also had experience analyzing feedback data and practiced the coding criteria used in the current study. Pearson's correlation was used to evaluate the inter-rater reliability. The agreement rate between the raters was significant: $r = .93$ for the past hypothetical conditional and $r = .89$ for the indefinite article.

3.6. Statistics Analysis

A series of statistical analyses were employed to measure the students' performance in the text-reconstruction tasks. A one-way ANOVA analyzed the scores of the first writing to examine the differences between the students' accuracy scores before the feedback sessions. A mixed-repeated measure ANOVA was used to investigate the differential effects of the two types of WCF and of no feedback over time, and a post hoc Bonferroni comparison test was employed to measure the main source of the difference. Effect sizes for the mixed ANOVAs were computed as eta-squared (η^2), and the value of .01, .06, and .14 respectively represents small, medium, and large effect (Cohen, 1988).

4. RESULTS

The research questions asked whether or not focused and unfocused WCF facilitated the accuracy development of the past hypothetical conditional and the indefinite article, and, if so, which WCF resulted in more improvement than the other. Table 3 presents the mean scores and the standard deviation of the accuracy of the past hypothetical conditional in the first writing task (WT) (pretest), the third WT (posttest 1), and the fourth WT (posttest 2). In order to examine whether or not the pretest scores differed across the groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted, and the test found no difference: $F(2, 107) = 1.57, p = .212$.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics for the Accuracy Scores for the Hypothetical Conditional

	Pretest			Posttest 1			Posttest 2		
	M	*%*	*SD*	*M*	*%*	*SD*	*M*	*%*	*SD*
F-WCF (*n* = 38)	3.53	25.47	5.62	4.08	52.47	8.80	3.97	51.42	7.95
UF-WCF (*n* = 39)	3.61	24.46	4.57	4.15	51.05	6.85	4.21	50.28	5.89
Control (*n* =33)	3.69	26.45	3.78	3.72	28.78	4.67	3.81	29.72	4.31

Note. F-WCF = Focused WCF; UF-WCF = Unfocused WCF; *M* = Mean Number of Attempts to Use the Hypothetical Conditional

Table 4 shows the results of a mixed repeated measures ANOVA. The outcome of the analysis revealed that there were significant main effects for groups ($F(2, 107) = 92.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .63$), and time ($F(2, 214) = 680.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .86$) and a significant time x group interaction ($F(2, 214) = 116.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .68$). As Figure 1 shows, both focused WCF and unfocused WCF groups improved accuracy over time far more than the control group did. Bonferroni pairwise comparison revealed that the difference between the focused WCF group and the control group and the gap between the unfocused WCF group and the control group were both statistically significant ($p < .001$), showing that the improvement both feedback groups gained over the control group is noteworthy. The pairwise comparison also showed no difference between the focused WCF and the unfocused WCF, and this means that focused and unfocused WCF were equally effective in the accuracy development of the hypothetical conditional ($p = .903$). Both feedback groups gained accuracy over time: while the difference between the pretest and the posttest 1 were significant ($p < .001$), the difference between the posttest 1 and the posttest 2 were not in both groups ($p = 1.000$). This suggests that the feedback effects were sustained until the posttest 2.

TABLE 4

Results of Mixed ANOVA: Hypothetical Conditional

Source	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Time (within subjects)	2	680.76	< .001	.86
WCF*time	4	116.91	< .001	.68
WCF (between subjects)	2	92.65	< .001	.63

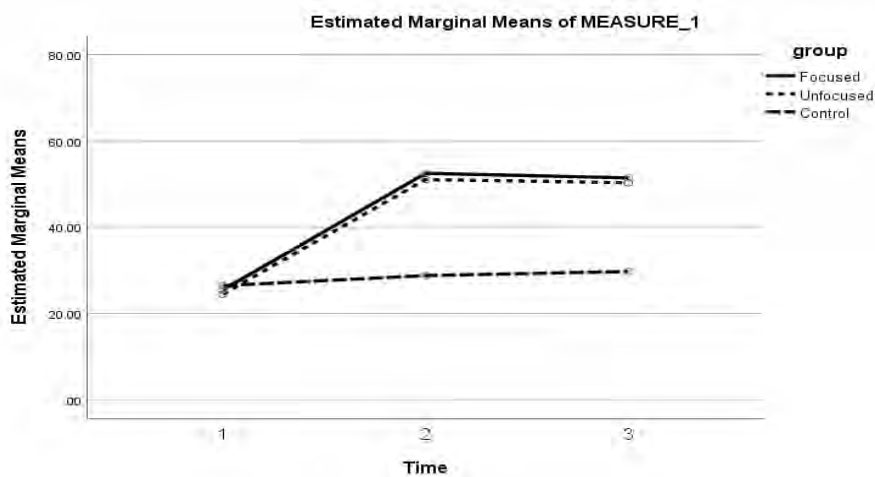**FIGURE 1**

Accuracy Scores: Hypothetical Conditional

Table 5 presents the mean scores and the standard deviation of the scores of the indefinite article in the first WT (pretest), the third WT (posttest 1), and the fourth WT (posttest 2). A one-way ANOVA proved no differences among the group prior to WCF: $F(2, 107) = .355$ $p = .702$. A mixed repeated measures ANOVA reported a significant group difference ($F(2, 107) = 45.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$), time ($F(2, 214) = 236.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 68$), and time x group interaction ($F(2, 214) = 51.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .49$) (see Table 6). As Figure 2 presents, both feedback groups improved accuracy over time far more than the

TABLE 5
**Descriptive Statistics for the Accuracy Scores for the Indefinite Article**

	Pretest			Posttest 1			Posttest 2		
	M	*%*	*SD*	*M*	*%*	*SD*	*M*	*%*	*SD*
F-WCF ($n = 38$)	5.05	29.65	8.51	6.42	61.05	10.62	6.47	59.52	8.42
UF-WCF ($n = 39$)	4.77	28.13	7.88	5.33	45.72	13.25	5.41	44.35	14.32
Control ($n = 33$)	4.93	28.48	8.37	5.15	30.88	8.78	5.18	32.18	8.92

Note. F-WCF = Focused WCF; UF-WCF = Unfocused WCF, *M* = the mean number of obligatory occasions

TABLE 6
Results of Mixed ANOVA: Indefinite Article

Source	*df*	*F*	*Sig.*	η^2
Time (within subjects)	2	236.23	< .001	.68
WCF*time	4	51.57	< .001	.49
WCF (between subjects)	2	45.32	< .001	.45

FIGURE 2

Accuracy Scores: Indefinite Article
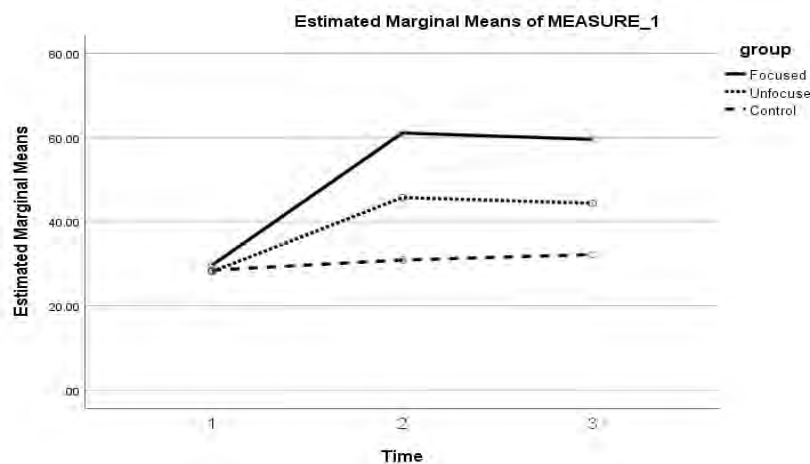
control group, and the pairwise comparisons proved that the accuracy gains the feedback groups obtained were statistically greater than the control group ($p < .001$). Both feedback groups increased accuracy between the pretest and the posttest 1 ($p < .001$), and the effects of WCF were sustained up to the posttest 2 in both groups ($p = 1.000$). When the two feedback groups were compared, the difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the focused WCF were more effective than the unfocused WCF.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. The Effects of Focused WCF

The present study found that focused WCF was effective in the accuracy development of both target forms, the hypothetical conditional and the indefinite article. The effects of direct WCF on accuracy gains has been reported in many WCF studies (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009; Stefanou & Révész, 2015). One thing that deserves discussion is that focused direct WCF was not found to be ineffective in Shintani and Ellis (2013), which is very similar to the present study. Shintani and Ellis (2013) examined whether or not two types of focused WCF, direct WCF and metalinguistic explanation (ME) had an effect on adult ESL learners' L2 knowledge in the indefinite article, and it found no effect of direct WCF while ME had an impact on the improvement. In their discussion, using the data from the stimulated recall and the eye-tracking, they noted that direct WCF "was ineffective because it failed to develop the learners' awareness of the rule. In other words, the learners may have been conscious of their errors at the level of "noticing" (Schmidt, 1993) but they were not conscious at the level of understanding thus did not develop explicit knowledge" (p. 300). In a way, this sounds plausible. However, the reason why focused direct WCF was ineffective in Shintani and Ellis (2013) may be due to the procedures, not the feedback itself. In their study, a picture-prompt task was used as a writing task, and the errors in learners' production related to the target form received focused direct WCF. The number of corrections each learner received was two or three, and only one feedback session was provided. In addition, although learners were allowed to look over the corrections they received for five minutes, they did not have a chance to revise their original writing by referring to the corrected version (i.e., an original text with corrections was collected after the five-minute reflection time). In other words, learners were given neither sufficient corrections nor ample time to process the corrections they had received; thus, they seemed not to have an opportunity to 'understand' the corrections.

As opposed to Shintani and Ellis (2013), the present study employed a text-reconstruction writing task that provided the learners with the input of the target form. More importantly, the task made the learners use the target forms in their writing, and this created opportunities to receive corrections to the errors of the target forms. In addition, the learners received two feedback sessions, and they were also given fifteen minutes to reflect and revise their original text by referring to the corrections to their errors. These conditions appeared to create the conditions where the learners got benefits from the focused WCF on both target forms.

With regard to the target forms, in this study, both focused and unfocussed WCF were effective in the accuracy gains of both target forms, the hypothetical conditional and the indefinite article. Shintani et al. (2014), however, reported a different result. Shintani et al. (2014) explored the effects of focused direct WCF and metalinguistic explanation (ME) on Japanese university students' accuracy gains of the same target forms as the current study, the hypothetical conditional and the indefinite article. They reported that the students obtained accuracy improvement of the use of the hypothetical conditional through both direct WCF and ME. However, both forms of feedback did not contribute to the accuracy gains of the use of the indefinite article. Shintani et al. (2014) explained this outcome based on the interviews conducted with five students (out of sixty-two students): "The interview suggested that the learners paid little attention to the indefinite article in their text reconstructions… Given the demands imposed on the learners' processing capacity by the need to recall and encode the propositional content of a text, they focused their attention on the structure that was more salient and more semantically important" (p. 124). This sounds very plausible, and this explains why focused WCF was more effective than unfocused WCF for the indefinite article in the current study, which will be discussed later. Another possible explanation is that text-reconstruction tasks were employed in Shintani et al. (2014) and the present study. However, the form of input that learners received differed. Shintani et al. (2014) used dictogloss, thereby exposing learners to oral input: an audio-recorded text. In contrast, the present study offered input in a written form: learners read the text. For intermediate level students, understanding and reconstructing oral input could be more challenging than understanding written input, and more significantly, the indefinite article could be less salient in oral input. The difference between the tasks seemed to bring about the different results between Shintani et al. (2014) and the present study.

5.2. The Effects of Unfocused WCF

Unfocused WCF contributed to the accuracy gains of both target forms in this study. As noted earlier, some of the forgoing studies have also proved the effectiveness of unfocused

WCF in L2 accuracy improvement (e.g., Kim, 2019b; van Beunungen et al., 2012). The present study certainly added empirical evidence to support the facilitative role of unfocused WCF. Since some of the previous studies examined the overall accuracy improvement, the outcome of this study will be discussed mainly based on the two studies (Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009) which explored the role of unfocused direct WCF in the accuracy gains of certain target forms. Like the current study, Ellis et al. (2008) reported unfocused WCF played an important role in improving accuracy of the English articles (indefinite and definite articles) for Japanese university students in Japan. In contrast, Sheen et al. (2009) found that unfocused WCF had no effects on the English articles for ESL students in the US. Because Ellis et al. (2008), Sheen et al. (2009), and the present study all used a text-reconstruction writing task, the difference may not be due to the task itself.

There are three probable explanations for this difference. The first possible reason is the number of corrections given to the target forms. Ellis et al. (2008) provided three treatment sessions and the present study offered two feedback sessions, while Sheen et al. (2009) provided one feedback treatment session. Since Sheen et al. (2009) did not indicate the number of error corrections given to the target forms in the feedback groups, the number of corrections the unfocused WCF group was exposed to was unknown. However, based on the number of feedback sessions, it can be easily assumed that learners in the unfocused WCF group in Sheen et al. (2009) would receive the least amount of feedback to the target forms compared to Ellis et al. (2008) and the present study. Most of the studies that have proved the effects of unfocused WCF on overall accuracy improvement employed multiple feedback sessions (e.g., Bonilla López, et al., 2018; Kim, 2019b). Less exposure to corrections appears to lead to less improvement. Another possible reason is that Sheen et al. (2009) did not offer learners enough time or a chance to revise their original drafts. They noted that learners were given 'a few minutes' to look over the corrections. In the present study, learners were given 15 minutes to study the corrections and revise their original text based on the corrections they received. Learners in unfocused WCF in Sheen et al. (2009) not only had less exposure to corrections to the target forms but also had less time and chances to process the corrections compared to the present study. Lastly, learner characteristics could be attributed to the different outcome of the studies. Ellis et al. (2008) and the present study were conducted in EFL classes where students were accustomed to form-based instruction learning. In contrast, Sheen et al.'s (2009) students were ESL learners who were immigrants and international students. The students varied greatly in terms of age, ethnicity, and linguistic and educational backgrounds. Although Sheen et al. (2009) did not mention whether or not they had experienced form-based instruction, it can be assumed that, overall, they were relatively less accustomed to form-based instruction and teacher CF compared to EFL learners in Ellis et al. (2008) and the present study.

Learners' orientation to language forms and attitude toward corrections can decide the extent to which they attend to CF and perceive it as a correction to forms (e.g., Sheen, 2004). Thus, unfocused WCF were unlikely to help learners in Sheen et al. (2009) to gain accuracy of the target forms while unfocused WCF worked for learners in Ellis et al. (2008) and the present study.

5.3. The Relative Effects of Focused/Unfocused WCF on Different Language Forms

This study found that both feedback groups outperformed the control group in both target forms. However, in the accuracy gains of the indefinite article, the focused WCF group obtained more accuracy than the unfocused WCF, although both groups were equally effective in the development of the hypothetical conditional. As previously noted, the hypothetical conditional is a complex structure. It has been suggested that complex structures are less treatable than simple ones (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ferris, 1999; Kim, 2010). If this suggestion is right, it can be proposed that what constitutes 'treatability' is not just a matter of the complexity of the rule. When it comes to the treatability via CF, what seems vital is the perceptual salience and the semantic demands of the forms being corrected.

Perceptual salience refers to "how noticeable and or explicit in a linguistic structure is in the input" (Loewen & Reinder, 2011, p. 152), and it has been argued that salience can determine the effects of oral CF (Kim, 2019a; Li, 2014). Although little is known about the degree to which salience affects the benefits of WCF, it can be hypothesized that when the corrections target the language forms which are salient and semantically meaningful in their writing, learners are more likely to attend to the corrections compared to cases when the corrections are offered to the errors of the language forms which are less salient and less meaningful (Kim, 2019a; Shintani et al., 2014). This explains why in the present study, focused WCF was equally effective for both forms while unfocused WCF was not. In the case of focused WCF, the corrections were focused on the errors of the target forms; thus, although the indefinite article was not less salient and semantically meaningful, it seemed that the learners' attention was drawn to the correction. In contrast, unfocused WCF was offered to the errors of a wide range of language forms, and, in this condition, due to limited attentional capacity (Robinson et al., 2012; Schmidt, 1993), it appeared that the learners strategically attended more to the hypothetical conditional than the indefinite article.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study found that EFL learners benefited from both focused and unfocused

WCF in their accuracy development of the target forms, the hypothetical conditional and the indefinite article. While these two types of WCF had no differential effects on the hypothetical conditional, focused WCF was more effective than unfocused WCF for the indefinite article. This study showed both the possibilities and limitations of practicing unfocused WCF in L2 classrooms. In terms of the possibilities, many of the previous CF studies based on the framework of SLA have suggested that CF is effective when it deals with the errors of one or two language forms since "[a] mass of corrections directed at a diverse set of linguistic phenomena (and perhaps also at content and organizational issues) is hardly likely to foster the noticing and cognizing that may be needed for [corrective feedback] to work for acquisition" (Ellis et al., 2008, p. 109). This suggestion proved to be only partially correct in this study in that unfocused WCF did contribute to the accuracy development of the target forms, and this finding supports the utility of teacher's use of unfocused WCF. However, the effectiveness of unfocused WCF became weakened when it dealt with the less salient and less semantically meaningful language form, the indefinite article, showing a limitation of unfocused WCF. This suggests that the teacher needs to be aware of and understand the characteristics of language forms in which learners tend to make errors. Different correction strategies need to be offered depending on the types of language forms. Cares may need to be less taken for salient and semantically meaningful forms, but, for the forms with low salience and semantic content, more focused and consistent correction may be beneficial.

This study is meaningful in that it helps WCF research take a step forward by exploring the relative role of focused WCF and unfocused WCF in accuracy gains in L2 classrooms, which has not been explored enough in the field of SLA. As noted above, the study is also suggesting some practical tips for the use of unfocused WCF in L2 classrooms. However, a few main limitations should be taken into consideration when considering the outcome of the study. First, learners' individual variations were not taken care of in this study. It has been claimed that learner individual differences such as learner proficiency, language aptitude, and belief play a crucial role in affecting the effectiveness of CF (Kormos, 2012). While the relationship between learner variations and the effects of CF has been widely explored in oral CF (Li, 2015a, 2015b), it has received relatively less attention in WCF. Thus, future WCF research into this issue will be able to offer more valuable guidelines for practicing WCF in L2 classrooms. Another limitation is that a single measurement (i.e., text-reconstruction task) was used to gauge learner accuracy development. Using multiple measurements will allow us to look into the effects of CF on learners' different types of knowledge (e.g., explicit and implicit knowledge) and/or skills (Ellis, 2005). Lastly, this study employed two feedback sessions, and one delayed posttest, which may be limited to claiming the long-term effects of CF. Thus, future research would benefit from offering multiple feedback sessions by conducting research for a longer period of time.

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Applicable Levels: Tertiary

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