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### The effect of direct and indirect written corrective feedback on Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in sentence completion exercises

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#### Abstract

Learning to write correctly, besides the learning of fluent speaking a foreign language, as two important productive skills had been under a great attention from the beginning of the research over the English language teaching and learning. Errors and mistakes, as inevitable parts of learning a 2<sup>nd</sup>/FL have also paid much attention, though sometimes considered as a sign of progress, and sometimes as sins to be stopped. However, it requires the ESL/EFL teachers to provide the learners with appropriate written Corrective Feedback (CF) to prepare learners with desirable written Grammatical Accuracy (GA). Different written CF forms are available out of which this study investigates the effect of direct and indirect forms of it comparatively, on Iranian EFL learners' GA performance in sentence completion exercises (SCE). Fulfilling the requirements of the study, 83 homogenous participants in three intact classes were selected from a language school in Tabriz, Iran. Two direct and indirect written CF experimental groups, as well as a control group receiving no feedback were randomly assigned. The participants were pretested on the target structure of the study, the performance on present/past participle adjectives and showing no significant difference, they went under the treatment phase. The GA test, as the post test was performed after the treatment, and the gathered data were compared through the SPSS. Meanwhile a one-way ANOVA and Tukey's post-hoc tests were also used to compare the results. The criteria  $p < 0.05$  was also considered for the group differences. The findings not only indicated the positive effect of CF, being either direct or indirect, but also the more effectiveness of direct CF on the learners' GA in SCE.

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*Keywords:* grammatical accuracy; corrective feedback; direct written corrective feedback; indirect written corrective feedback; EFL learners

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## 1. Introduction

Accuracy in grammar, being a fundamental issue, requires the language learners to master the structural elements, correct forms, as well as the correct organizations in sentence level, though it doesn't seem to be as vital issue in the other receptive skills and even in the speaking as the other productive skill. Writing demands a much more accuracy in grammar, as it is the point which is under a greater scrutiny

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all the time. It is evident that grammar is all the time affected by the teaching and learning methods, from both the teacher, and the learner's side, as it is also true for other language learning skills and sub skills. The problem of the grammatical inaccuracy in Iranian EFL learners' context, as one of the eye-catching points for the researcher, was most of the time reportedly mentioned in the papers and Iranian EFL learning discussions and texts. This is witnessed mostly in the English learned and used by the learners, especially when they face academic writings and or even the academic interviews. This shortcoming needs to be dealt with and examined by the researchers to find a better and short way for fulfilling it.

### *1.1. Literature review*

In this part some issues related to the paper's title and works done so far theoretically and empirically are mentioned briefly and also some vital issues related to the topic are discussed.

#### *1.1.1. Feedback*

One of the factors which could find a better opportunity for improving the learning, especially grammatical correctness, is doubtlessly the feedback given by the teacher in the classroom context. This could find a good way for getting useful information on the degree of the learners' internalization of whatever they were supposed to master in a result of a teaching period of topics proposed. In fact, it seems like a bridge of the teacher-student gap as it fosters the correct points versus incorrect ones and prohibits the fossilization among learners. In foreign language learning context, feedback means the comments, corrections, or other forms of information that learners receive while learning or after receiving their test results, from the teachers, classmates, or any other people around them in learning and production context.

#### *1.1.2. Written versus spoken language and corrective feedback*

While teaching, these are the teachers who are the most feedback providers for the learners in evaluating their own instructional effect on the learner and the learners' learning progress. In fact, teachers face many situations in which the learners commit errors of what they have been taught as signs of their need to be retaught or explained again and undoubtedly, this is the best time that instructors could get in to give corrective feedback (CF) and provide the learners with an opportunity to correct their errors. Writing and speaking are the language skills which are mostly inclined to be given feedback, as the productive language learning and teaching skills which could be apparently witnessed and need correction. However, writing is the most feedback receiving one, due to formality and correctness which is more vital in writing skill and as Penny Ur (1996) states, the difference existing, is 'between formal, detached discourse and informal, interactive discourse (p. 172). Hence, grammatical errors are more noticeable in writing, as the spoken language contains more ellipsis (omissions of many words without changing in the meaning) and it is following a different pattern than the writing texts.

However, there have been different opposing reactions to the learners' mistakes or errors, as some such as the communicative approaches' proponents' desire communication at any cost without any correction, and being more tolerant, while the behaviorists believe even in correcting the aural mistakes and errors as well, as they believe they could lead to fossilization. In considering the mentioned controversy over the correction or the CF, there exist many beliefs. Some researchers and educators believe in abandoning the whole practice or kind of grammatical correction. Truscott (2007) discussed about not only the ineffectiveness of the error correction, but also being as a disadvantageous career. However, Ferris (1999) stated that such arguments were incorrect as he claimed that Truscott overlooked the research evidences which positively supported correction and called his claim as a premature one.

Feedback, being supported by some, while being rejected by the others, has got some crucial support as it is said to be a factor of “encouraging and consolidating learning” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 92). According to Leki (1991) giving feedback would provide a good assistance for students in improving their writing, as they would show more grammatical accuracy afterwards.

#### *1.1.3. Direct versus indirect written corrective feedback*

Ellis (2009) classifies the WFC (Written Feedback Correction) into two direct and indirect ones, so introducing them as the direct written corrective feedback (DWCF) and the indirect written corrective feedback (IWCF). The direct correction implies the direct and clear indication of the teacher to the student’s error and supplying the correct form (Lyster & Ranta, 1997), but the indirect one, according to Bitchener (2008), is the condition that the teacher reveals the existence of the error while the correct form is not provided.

Feedback in general would have an advantage of clarifying the learners’ progress rate in the written form of the language especially, and would also be as an indicator for the instructors’ diagnosis in assessing their students’ problematic points to deal with. Salimi and Ahmadpour (2015) believe that in case of the lack of any feedback, the learners might lose encouragement and would have no idea of how they proceed in the field and would not find their shortcomings in the line of mastering the language. In a comment, Asiri (1996) and Sommers (1982) believe that with no feedback learners might feel that they are truly understood communicatively and that they do not need to change or modify their written form of language. Al Bakri (2015) believes that based on the instructors’ opinion, learners seeing the corrections as feedback would be able to maintain the corrections in their mind and remembering them would avoid them repeating them in their following written assignments.

There has also been a controversy over the kind of issue suitable, if the feedback is accepted by the experts in the field. There are many opposite results reported concerned with the type of feedback given to the learners, being direct or indirect. According to a paper written and based on a survey by Ferris and Roberts (2001), DWCF is possibly better than IWCF as it is concerned with the EFL learners of elementary and pre-intermediate levels of English proficiency. On the other hand, a survey conducted by Sheen (2011) revealed a controversial result compared to that mentioned, as it supported DWCF being more effective as it is challenging to increase the specific grammatical features’ acquisition. However, some studies (Lalande, 1982) indicate that indirect feedback would be more helpful as it would encourage the language learners to self-correct their errors.

#### *1.1.4. Error types and written corrective feedback effectiveness*

Correcting the EFL learners’ errors would also be dependent on the type of errors they commit. Tran (2013) classified the written errors into global and local errors defining them as the ones impeding the text comprehensibility and those not respectively, and was criticized as this type of dichotomy would be confusing. One global error may be local in another text depending on the teacher or reader’s interpretation (Tran, 2013, p.3). Other typology was introduced by Ferris (1999) as she classified them into treatable and untreatable. Later Bitchener (2008) describing them gave them new names as the ‘rule-governed’ and ‘idiosyncratic’, the first as those concerned with the strong grammatical rules and the second as those related to word choice or prepositions. One more dichotomy was made to call the errors as ‘rule-based’ versus ‘item-based’ (Bitchener and Ferris, 2012). Suggestions were made based on the studies conducted that receiving WCF would be fruitful in rule-governed errors and would lead the learners to the production of correct and more exact and manipulated output in the later writings (Bitchener and Storch, 2016; Guo, 2015).

### *1.1.5. Corrective feedback and EFL learners' proficiency level*

The learners' background knowledge has an important effect in their cognition as correction and the given feedback would challenge their existing current knowledge against new input through the WCF. Loewen and Reindres (2011) take the learners' proficiency level as their background knowledge in using the new language. Van Beuningen et al. (2012) also consider the proficiency level of the learners as their overall indicator of the current linguistic competence which has a vital role in their accepting and/or rejecting the correction as a feedback. Hence, it would be advantageous to know the learners' proficiency level before introducing them with the corrective feedback. Some theoretical claims are for the effectiveness of the ICF for the lower proficiency EFL learners as they lack enough self-correction power due to their incomplete and insufficient knowledge of the target language being learned (Ferris, 2004; Ferris, 2006; Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Consequently, the higher proficient learners of the language are more equipped with the language knowledge and competence, and the DCF would be more helpful for them, as it can arise their self-correction and in result a better self-confidence and also a higher satisfaction (Van Beuningen et al., 2012).

Reading and studying the findings of the surveys concerned with the effectiveness of the direct versus indirect written corrective feedback, there would be conflicting results. While there were no differences found between these two direct and indirect strategies in some studies (Hosseiny, 2014; Nematzadeh and Siahpoosh, 2017; Robb et al., 1986), in some other there existed some who favored the indirect over the direct correcting strategies (Eslami, 2014; Lalande (1982), and some who favored the direct over the indirect ones (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Van Beuningen et al., 2008, 2012). However, some researchers argue that these differences and the related results might be related to the types of errors under study, the EFL learning setting of teaching and learning, the treatment strategies and the proficiency levels of the language learners (Bitchener, 2017).

## *1.2. Study Objectives and Question*

Due to facts concerned with the grammatical mistakes and the ways to face them by the teacher in classroom contexts and because of the necessity of an understanding of the origins of the errors made by the Iranian EFL learners, witnessed by the researcher in the grammar area of the English language, the current study was conducted while examining the possible effects of the two mentioned types of written corrective feedbacks on the accuracy of grammar in EFL context. Therefore, the aim of the current study would be to investigate the following research question:

RQ: Do the Iranian EFL learners who receive direct, indirect, and no written corrective feedback perform equally in terms of their grammatical accuracy in sentence completion exercises?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Sample / Participants*

In this study 83 language learners were selected from a private language teaching institute from the North-East of Iran through a proficiency test. To control the gender factor all the students were chosen from female students. They were all ELT learners of pre-intermediate level and were chosen from young and old learners of the same level of learning. The participants were all selected at random and accidentally from a larger population of EFL English language learners.

## 2.2. *Instrument(s)*

Before the treatment, a language proficiency test (OPT) was applied to measure the study groups' proficiency level and also for the purpose of the homogenization. The test included vocabulary, reading comprehension and English structure, comprising sixty test items.

The second and third instruments used in the pre and posttest were grammatical accuracy tests for the purpose of the current study's comparing reasons of the participants in the control group and the two experimental ones, the direct and indirect correction feedback receiving groups. The tests consisted of 20 items each, supposed to measure the participants' ability in the grammatical completion items covering the subjects proposed in the treatment phase of the study. A pilot test was applied of the items on the 30 learners with the same characteristics of the target groups to establish the reliability and validity of the test items in pre and posttest. Finally, the problematic items were revised, omitted and/or replaced before being conducted on the project's real participants.

## 2.3. *Data collection procedures*

The OPT test was administered to select homogenous subjects first and those scored between +1 and -1 of standard deviation were selected which totaled a group of 83 subjects while 22 scoring lower or higher that were excluded from the study. The subjects were randomly assigned into three groups of direct (DF), twenty six, indirect (IF), twenty nine, and the control group (NF), twenty eight, receiving no feedback.

Pretest was administered comprising 20 sentence completion test items, and due to the similarity of the variance of the errors of the all groups and no significant difference, the participants were put in treatment.

The treatment was conducted as the participants in the three DF, IF and NF groups were taught the present and past participle adjectives, as this structure was not treated so far in the studies performed for the similar purposes of the current study and as it was a simpler subject to be treated and learned, and could be considered as a rule-governed grammatical structure, as well. The correction and feedback given for the subjects' written and completed sheets were different, as those in the control group, only received their scores with no papers' return and no feedback, while the other two groups had a different treatment. Those in the direct feedback treatment group, received their papers corrected in red and their errors' corrected forms to be checked for some minutes, while those in the indirect feedback treatment group only received the papers with the errors just circled in red with no correct forms provided, to be corrected by themselves and returned to the teacher afterwards.

The last phase was the posttest composed of grammatical accuracy sentence completion items applied for getting the needed data for the sake of comparisons concerned with the treatment results on the three groups of the study.

## 2.4. *Data analysis*

A quasi-experimental method was proposed for the current study and the data analysis was performed through statistical software SPSS 20. One-way ANOVA was used for checking the probable differences among the study groups in case of their grammatical accuracy in completion test items, in both the pre and posttest. As the F ratio was significant due to the statistically significant difference in the groups and the inability of the ANOVA to discover the exact difference location, a post hoc comparison of the means was also performed by the use of a Tukey post hoc test. The reliability of the pre and post tests were also analyzed before their application. There was also a report of the descriptive and inferential statistics as follows in this part.

### 3. Results

In order to check the normal distribution of the English language proficiency among participants, an OPT (Oxford Placement Test) test was given to the participants. Descriptive statistics of the scores are provided in Table 1 as follows:

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of OPT Exam

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Scores	83	13	34	21.24	6.47	.46	.26	-1.0	.52

In order to compare the groups' homogeneity in the case of language proficiency, the homogeneity of the participants in no feedback group (NF group), direct feedback group (DF group), and indirect feedback group (IF group) were checked. The related results are shown in Table 2:

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Study Groups' OPT Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. D	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
NF Group	28	13	34	20.89	6.60	.61	.44	-.77	.85
DF Group	26	13	33	20.80	6.65	.40	.45	-1.45	.88
IF Group	29	14	34	21.96	6.37	.44	.43	-1.00	.84

As indicated in table 2, the homogeneity of participants in all groups were approved and the distribution was normal.

#### 3.1. Reliability of the pre and posttest

Prior to the application of the pretest and posttest, they were piloted and according to the Cronbach's Alpha amount of .84 and .82 for the pretest and posttest, both were accepted of having a good reliability, and the item analysis also made the researcher to modify some items needed.

#### 3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Grammatical Accuracy Tests

The next step was the calculation of the pretest and posttest administration statistics for the all three groups of the study including the DF, IF, and NF groups. The following table shows the descriptive statistics including the mean, and standard deviation, concerned with the pre and posttest of the whole three groups:

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of Grammatical Accuracy Tests

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	DF Group	26	5.50	2.14
	IF Group	29	6.24	2.06
	NF Group	28	5.89	2.28
Posttest	DF Group	26	15.88	2.71
	IF Group	29	13.65	3.00
	NF Group	28	11.42	4.07

### 3.3. One-way ANOVA

In order to see any probable difference of the language proficiency among the three groups of the study, and the possible difference in the participants' performance in grammatical accuracy test prior and post to the treatment, One-Way ANOVA were performed for OPT, pretest, and posttest of the study as shown below, tables 4, 5, and 6:

**Table 4.** One-Way ANOVA for OPT Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	23.49	2	11.74	.27	.76
Within Groups	3419.68	80	42.74		
Total	3443.18	82			

In order to find any probable difference of the subjects in the three groups of the study before the treatment, a One-Way ANOVA was also done for the pretest concerned with the participants' grammar accuracy, and the results are shown in the table 5:

**Table 5.** One-Way ANOVA for Grammatical Accuracy Pre-test Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.53	2	3.76	.80	.45
Within Groups	374.48	80	4.68		
Total	382.02	82			

A One-Way between subjects ANOVA was run for the grammatical accuracy post-test scores of the study groups.

**Table 6.** One-Way ANOVA for Grammatical Accuracy Post-test Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	267.81	2	133.90	12.09	.00
Within Groups	886.06	80	11.07		
Total	1153.88	82			

### 3.4. Tukey post hoc test

At the end of the data analysis phase a Tukey post hoc test was also used for the ANOVA for the purpose of conducting multiple comparisons among the study groups. This statistics reveals more evidences while comparing the study conditions over every other ones. Therefore, it (Table 7) compares the feedback being direct, indirect, and non-application of it to each other one by one.

**Table 7.** Multiple Comparisons of Study Groups' Means through Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test  
Dependent Variable: Grammar Posttest Scores

(I) Study Groups	(J) Study Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval
					Upper B. Lower B.
No Feedback	Direct Feedback	-4.45*	.90	.00	-6.62 -2.29
	Indirect Feedback	-2.22*	.88	.03	-4.33 -.12
Direct Feedback	No Feedback	4.45*	.90	.00	2.29 6.62
	Indirect Feedback	2.22*	.89	.04	.08 4.37
Indirect Feedback	No Feedback	2.22*	.88	.03	.12 4.33
	Direct Feedback	-2.22*	.89	.04	-4.37 -.08

\* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

## 4. Discussion

Based on the findings of the current study, the previous proponents of the feedback (e.g. Sadat et al., 2015) for the grammatical improvement in learning languages were supported though this debate still remains on the direct or indirect form of it to be applied in language teaching and learning contexts. The findings of the current study indicates a positive effect of the direct written corrective feedback on the learners' grammatical accuracy improvement compared to the indirect one, which is in line with the findings of the studies of some experts as Salimi and Ahmadpour (2015). In fact they advocated the explicit teaching and error correction which is one major factor in the DCF strategy. They believe DCF would provide the language learners with such an explicit knowledge which could be beneficial in their hypothesis testing in learning a new language. It is discussed that ICF is not successful as it could not provide sufficing knowledge in facing complex language errors and would have no idea of the correctness of their hypothesis (Chandler, 2003).

However there are some advocates of the ICF such as Sadat et al. (2015), Ghandi and Maghsoudi (2014), and Lalande (1982), with unreliable findings due to the fact that they surveyed only the talented learners in their studies.

On the other hand, some are still neutral in their advocacy of the direct versus indirect corrective feedback as Frantzen (1995) and Robb et al. (1986), but evidently as discussed above they neglected the other intervening factors such as the learners' proficiency level and/or metalinguistic knowledge (e.g. Ferris, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2006), the error typology (Ferris 2002), the instructor's achievement aim by correction (Ferris 2010), and the novelty of the information teacher is meant to convey opposed to the already imperfect knowledge learned.

## 5. Conclusions

It is doubtless that enough input and feedback would be valuable in grammatical accuracy as it is interdependent with the productive language learning skills, and was supported in the findings of the current study. Both feedback presence kinds, direct or indirect, and regardless of their type of correction in written and spoken forms, would be advantageous for the learners, as they provide enough input and corrections, whether provided explicitly or left for the learner's self-editing and it would make the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and change them into intake. This sort of explicit correction and feedback would be a beneficial remedy for the learners' tedious job in looking for the grammatical correct forms in the grammar books and dictionaries. The learners would be provided with the correct forms after they had their learning hypotheses are tested and faced erroneous forms, and following that a rapid way for correct learning would be made available.

In language learning contexts such as Iran that the learners face an EFL setting, the role of classroom context and the teacher would be more outstanding as the learners only face learning opportunities in classrooms and not the direct society they live in. Hence, the teachers and the strategies they take in presenting the courses would have a crucial influence on the learning process. The learners' awareness of their errors, as made in IF would not suffice and it would demand a DF, especially in tertiary levels. Progressing in learning English would of course provide for a beneficiary IF as well, as the learners could look for and replace the erroneous grammatical forms in a self-correcting manner.

## 5. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: January 08, 2021).

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## Doğrudan ya da dolaylı yazılı düzeltme geribildirimiminin yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerin cümle tamamlama alıştırmalarında dilbilgisel tutarlılıkları üzerindeki etkisi

### Öz

Doğru yazmayı öğrenmek, bir yabancı dili akıcı konuşmayı öğrenmenin yanı sıra, araştırmaların başlangıcından itibaren İngilizce öğretimi ve öğrenimi üzerinde iki önemli üretken becerisi olarak büyük ilgi görmüştür. Yabancı dil öğrenmenin kaçınılmaz parçaları olan hatalar ayrıca fazlasıyla dikkat çekmiştir, ancak bazen bir ilerleme işareti ve bazen de durdurulması gereken suç olarak görülmüştür. Ancak, İngilizce Yabancı Dil öğretmenleri, öğrencilerini uygun yazılı dilbilgisi doğruluğu ile hazırlamak için öğrencilere uygun yazılı düzeltici geribildirim sağlamalarını gerektirir. Farklı yazılı düzeltici geribildirim formları mevcuttur. Onun haricinde bu çalışma Yabancı Dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen İranlı öğrencilerinin cümle tamamlama alıştırmalarında dilbilgisi doğruluğu performansı üzerindeki doğrudan ya da dolaylı biçimlerinin karşılaştırmalı olarak etkisini araştırmıştır. Çalışmanın gerekliliklerini uygulayan üç sınıftaki 83 homojen katılımcı, İran'ın Tebriz'deki bir dil okulundan seçildi. İki Doğrudan ya da Dolaylı yazılı düzeltici geribildirim experimental grubu ile geribildirim almayan bir kontrol grubu rastgele atandı. Katılımcılara çalışmanın hedef yapısı şimdiki / geçmiş ortaçağ sınıfların hakkında ön test yapıldı, performansları önemli bir fark göstermeyen katılımcılar öğretim aşamasına geçtiler. Dilbilgisi doğruluğu testi, son test olarak öğretim suresinden sonra yapıldı ve elde edilen veriler SPSS ile karşılaştırıldı. Bu arada sonuçları karşılaştırmak için tek yönlü ANOVA ve Tukey'in post-hoc testleri de kullanıldı. Grup farklılıkları için  $p < 0.05$  kriteri dikkate alındı. Bulgular, düzeltici geribildirimiminin doğrudan ya da dolaylı olumlu etkisini göstermekle kalmadı, aynı zamanda doğrudan düzeltici geribildirimiminin öğrencilerin dilbilgisi doğruluğu üzerinde daha etkin olduğunu da gösterdi.

*Anahtar sözcükler:* dilbilgisi doğruluğu; düzeltici geribildirim; doğrudan yazılı düzeltici geri bildirim; dolaylı yazılı düzeltici geri bildirim;cümle tamamlama alıştırmaları, İngilizce yabancı dil öğrencileri

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