

The Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on English

Articles: The role of metalinguistic explanation

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Abstract

This study examined how EFL learners benefit from teachers' provision of written corrective feedback (WCF). 88 Japanese university EFL learners, divided into three groups, completed three writing tasks in the space of nine weeks and were provided WCF on English article errors. Learners in the first group received indirect feedback on the use of English articles, the second group received both indirect feedback and metalinguistic explanation, and the third group, the control group, did not receive any feedback. The results indicated that the second group, but not the first, was able to make significant increases in the ability to use articles accurately. The results seem to suggest that while mere provision of indirect feedback may be sufficient in helping learners notice the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, it may fall short of helping them understand the target grammatical rule.

Keywords: EFL, grammar errors, indirect feedback, metalinguistic explanation, written corrective feedback

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of research that has been conducted to examine the relationship between corrective feedback (CF) and its impact on L2 learners' SLA. CF is an umbrella term used to cover all actions that provide learners with negative and/or positive evidence

and thus indicate explicitly or implicitly that their production is erroneous. In the past, many of the studies focusing on the efficacy of CF tended to center around oral corrective feedback (OCF) (e.g., Ammar & Spada, 2006; Egi, 2007; Ellis & Sheen, 2006; Han, 2002; Li, 2014; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey et al., 2010) rather than written corrective feedback (WCF). However, it has been reported that many foreign language (FL) teachers believe WCF to be important (e.g., Ferris, 1999, 2003, 2014; Saito, 1994), and in fact devote a significant amount of time inside and outside the classroom to providing it for their learners (e.g., Santa, 2006). Therefore, it is worthwhile to build on the body of research that investigates how WCF contributes to learners' L2 development, and more importantly, find out how best to provide it so that its efficacy can be maximized.

Written Corrective Feedback

WCF is “a written response to a linguistic error that has been made in the writing of a text by an L2 learner” (Bitchener & Storch, 2016, p.1). Broadly speaking, written errors can be treated through direct or indirect feedback. Direct feedback is a method in which teachers simply provide learners with the correct form. This can be achieved in the following ways: “crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase or morpheme, inserting a missing word or morpheme, and writing the correct form above or near the erroneous form” (Ellis, 2009, p. 99). An example of direct feedback is provided below (Figure 1).

Figure1.

Example of Direct Feedback



The image shows a handwritten sentence: "There is three dogs running in the garden." The word "is" is crossed out with a diagonal line. Above the word "three", the word "are" is written inside a rectangular box. A line connects the top-left corner of the box to the "is" that has been crossed out.

On the other hand, indirect feedback is a method whereby teachers indicate that learners have made an error and they give that indication without providing the correct form. Errors can be indicated in the following ways: “underlining the errors, using cursors to show omissions in the student’s text or by placing a cross ‘X’ in the margin next to the line containing the error” (Ellis, *ibid*, p. 100). An example of indirect feedback is provided below (Figure 2).

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Figure 2.

Example of Indirect Feedback

There is three dogs running in the garden

With different ways to tackle learners' written errors, many WCF studies have been conducted to answer the following questions: 1) Does WCF facilitate L2 development, and if so, how? And 2) Which type of WCF is more beneficial and why?

The Benefits of WCF

There is a general consensus that CF, both in written and oral form, brings about a positive impact on learners' L2 development (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Goo & Mackey, 2013; Sheen, 2007; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). As L2 learners are constantly testing hypotheses about the target language (TL) (e.g., Swain, 1995), CF gives them an opportunity to find out if the hypotheses they have formulated are correct or not. And in cases in which learners' hypotheses are incorrect, the negative evidence in the CF, i.e. information for learners about what is not possible in the TL, helps draw learners' attention to the problematic aspects of their interlanguages (IL) (e.g., Long, 1996). Furthermore, in cases in which CF includes positive evidence, i.e. a model of the target structure, the juxtaposition of learners' IL form and the correct TL form can also help direct their attention to the discrepancy between the two forms. This type of noticing is referred to as "noticing the gap" (Schmidt, 2010) and is considered to be a crucial ingredient for L2 development (e.g., Schmidt, 1990, 1993). Finally, CF encourages learners to reformulate their error(s). When learners engage in the process of reformulating their error(s) in response to CF, it can encourage them to produce pushed output (Swain, 1985) and promote automatization (e.g., Mackey, 1999, 2012; McDonough, 2005), both of which are known to facilitate L2 development.

While the abovementioned benefits are enjoyed by learners receiving both WCF and OCF, there is one apparent difference between the two types of CF. While OCF is unrecorded feedback provided orally and on a single occasion and cannot be later referred back to by the learner, WCF, on the other hand, allows learners to refer to the CF any number of times. This means that learners have additional time to draw on their stored L2 knowledge and consider it in relation to the information provided in the WCF before testing

out the correct L2 form to use (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). In this way, learners are able to make use of the positive and negative evidence in WCF efficiently.

Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback

In terms of whether one type of WCF is superior to another, arguments have been advanced for both direct feedback and indirect feedback. Those supporting indirect feedback claim that this type of feedback is theoretically more useful because it allows learners to engage in “guided learning and problem-solving” (Lalande, 1982, p. 140). This process of figuring out how best to reformulate the error(s) on their own is thought to foster long-term acquisition and written accuracy because of the increased learner engagement and attentions to forms. The flip side to indirect feedback, however, is that this approach to error correction is not effective when dealing with language structures which learners have not yet learned. Learners may fail to understand the intent of the correction and will not know how best to reformulate the error(s) on their own. For this reason, empirical studies have generally pointed to a clear advantage of direct feedback over indirect feedback (e.g., van Beuningen et al, 2008; van Beuningen et al., 2012; Bitchener & Knock, 2008). With regard to direct feedback, not only is the intent of the correction clear, it can provide learners with information to help them resolve more complex errors (Bitchener & Storch, 2016).

WCF with Metalinguistic Explanation

Recently, studies have been conducted to investigate whether the efficacy of WCF can be maximized if it is accompanied by metalinguistic explanation (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Bitchener et al., 2005; Sheen, 2007; Shintani and Ellis, 2013; Stefanou, 2014). Metalinguistic explanation is the provision of explicit explanation of the nature of the learners’ errors. An example of direct feedback provided with written metalinguistic explanation can be found below (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Example of Direct Feedback with Metalinguistic Explanation

are: SV agreement. Use the plural form.
~~There is three dogs running in the garden.~~

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Sheen (2007) conducted a study which sought to examine how direct feedback accompanied by metalinguistic explanation can facilitate learners' acquisition of English articles. In her study, learners (N = 91) were assigned to the following three groups: the first group received direct feedback (n = 31); the second group received direct metalinguistic correction (i.e., written direct feedback and written metalinguistic explanation) (n = 32); the third group (i.e., the control group) received comments on content but no feedback on erroneous target structure (n = 28). The results revealed that the two experimental groups outperformed the control group. Furthermore, it was found that the learners who received metalinguistic explanation with direct feedback performed better than the learners who only received direct feedback on both the immediate and the delayed post-test.

A study conducted by Bitchener et al. (2005) also suggests that there may be an advantage if direct feedback is accompanied by metalinguistic explanation. Their study is different from Sheen's (ibid) in that metalinguistic explanation was provided orally in the form of an individual conference. The study was designed so that 53 adult migrant students were assigned into one of the following three groups. 19 learners received direct feedback and a 5-minute student-researcher conference on the targeted features (i.e., prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article); 17 learners received direct feedback only; 17 learners received no feedback on the targeted features. The conference sessions were provided orally and they allowed learners the opportunity to ask questions to the researchers about their errors and the corrections they had received as well as the chance to receive additional explanation and examples directly from the researcher. The results revealed that learners who received oral metalinguistic explanation along with direct feedback outperformed the other two groups in two out of the three targeted features (i.e., the past simple tense and the definite article). With these results, they concluded that metalinguistic explanation may be a crucial factor in facilitating increased accuracy of some English grammatical forms.

While there are studies that examine the effect of direct feedback provided with some type of metalinguistic explanation, those that examine the efficacy of indirect feedback combined with metalinguistic explanation are yet to be explored. For example, where teachers provide metalinguistic explanation as a means to help students correct their own mistakes rather than giving them correct form directly. If this combination can be proven to be beneficial for L2 learners, it will be of interest for FL teachers who prefer to, or generally

provide indirect feedback to learners.

2. Research Questions

The present study was conducted to answer the following questions:

- (1) Can learners gain accuracy in the use of English articles by receiving (a) indirect feedback and/or (b) indirect feedback combined with metalinguistic explanation?
- (2) Do (a) learners receiving indirect feedback combined with metalinguistic explanation gain greater accuracy in the use of English articles than (b) those receiving indirect feedback only?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of the present study were 88 Japanese university EFL learners. They were assigned to one of the following three groups: a group which would not receive written feedback (Control Group, $n = 29$), a group which would receive indirect feedback (Experimental Group 1, $n = 29$), and a group which would receive indirect feedback with metalinguistic explanation (Experimental Group 2, $n = 30$). The researcher was the sole provider of CF.

3.2 Target Grammatical Structure

The target grammatical structure for which the learners received WCF were English articles. Specifically, two semantic categories of English articles—referential article “a” (e.g., I saw a strange man standing in front of my house.) and the referential definite article “the” (e.g., Can you pass me the pen?)—were chosen for this study. The accurate use of English articles can be difficult for EFL learners because the choice of “the” or “a” or “Ø” is ambiguous and can only be disambiguated in context. For this reason, English articles was chosen as an appropriate target grammatical structure.

3.3 Procedures

The procedures were as follows (see also Table 1):

In the first week, the learners in all of the groups took a pre-test. They listened to the story, *Three Little Pigs* in English. They were not allowed to take notes while they listened. They were then asked to rewrite the story in 20 sentences.

During weeks 2-10, the learners in all of the groups underwent three writing assignments. Similar to the pre-test, they were asked to listen to and rewrite three fables: *The Hare and the Tortoise*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and *The Woodcutter and the Axe*. Then the learners in the first and second experimental groups received indirect feedback on indefinite and definite articles in their texts (Figure 4). The learners in the control group did not receive CF on the target grammatical structure.

Figure 4

Indirect Feedback Provided in This Study

A tortoise won a race.

The learners in the second experimental group also received oral metalinguistic explanation in addition to form focused indirect feedback. In this study, the oral metalinguistic explanation was provided in the form of class conference rather than individual conference; in other words, they received a short oral lecture (approximately 10 minutes) on the use of the definite and indefinite articles in Weeks 3, 6, and 9. For example, learners were reminded how “a” is used when referring to something for the first time, while “the” is used to refer to something that has already been mentioned.”

On the 11th week, the learners took a post-test. To avoid the practice effect, they were instructed to summarize a different story: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

Table 1

Schedule for the Three Groups

	Control Group	Experimental Group 1	Experimental Group 2
Week 1	Pre-test		
Week 2	Writing assignment 1		

Week 3	Comments on content	Indirect feedback	Indirect feedback plus metalinguistic explanation
Week 4	Revise and re-submit writing assignment 1		
Week 5	Writing assignment 2		
Week 6	Comments on content	Indirect feedback	Indirect feedback plus metalinguistic explanation
Week 7	Revise and re-submit writing assignment 2		
Week 8	Writing assignment 3		
Week 9	Comments on content	Indirect feedback	Indirect feedback plus metalinguistic explanation
Week 10	Revise and re-submit writing assignment 3		
Week 11	Post-test		

3.4 Scoring

Accuracy was calculated using Pica's (1994) formula:

Number of the target structure forms supplied correctly

————— X 100

Number of obligatory contexts + Number of overused forms

4. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics from the pre- and post-tests.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Test Scores

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	
					<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Pre-test	Control	51.9	18.3	3.9	44.1	59.6
	Indirect only	56.3	23.6	3.9	48.6	64.1

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	Indirect + meta	52.5	20.8	3.8	44.9	60.1
	Control	47.6	27.8	4.4	38.9	56.2
Post-test	Indirect only	61.9	23.1	4.4	53.2	70.6
	Indirect + meta	67.6	18.9	4.3	59.1	76.1

To answer the first research question, a two-way ANOVA test was performed with total scores as a dependent variable, with “tests” (pre-test and post-test) and “CF treatment” (three levels) as independent variables. The test revealed that there was a statistically significant interaction between CF treatment and tests, ($F(2, 85) = 3.289, p = 0.042, \eta_p^2 = 0.072$). The results of the post-hoc test showed that the scores achieved by learners in the indirect feedback plus metalinguistic explanation group made significant gains from the point of the pre-test to the post-test ($F(1, 29) = 9.130, p = 0.005, \eta_p^2 = .239$). On the other hand, neither the other experimental group’s increase in score nor the control group’s decrease in score were significant ($p = 0.336$ and $p = 0.432$ respectively). As for the research question concerning differential effects among groups, a between-subjects analysis revealed a statistically significant difference ($F(2, 85) = 3.348, p = 0.040, \eta_p^2 = 0.073$). The results of pairwise comparison showed that there was a significant difference between the control group and the group which received indirect feedback and metalinguistic explanation ($p = 0.004$). However, neither the difference between the scores of the control group and the group which received indirect feedback ($p = 0.058$) nor that of two experimental groups were significant ($p = 0.623$).

To summarize, the results of the statistical analysis revealed that the learners who received indirect feedback with metalinguistic explanation were able to make significant improvement in their use of articles, and furthermore, outperform the learners in the other two groups.

4. Discussion

The result of the present study corroborates those of Bitchener et al. (2005) and Sheen (2007) in that metalinguistic explanation accompanying a WCF is beneficial in improving grammatical accuracy.

Japanese EFL learners struggle with the understanding of when and how to use English articles. This is because (1) there is no article system in Japanese and (2) articles lack saliency (Muranoi, 2000). The result of the present study shows that explicit metalinguistic explanation may help Japanese learners comprehend more clearly and fully about how errors with English articles occur and can be corrected. More specifically, it may have been the case that the two experimental groups underwent different levels of noticing. That is to say, learners receiving indirect feedback with metalinguistic explanation may have experienced “noticing *with* understanding” while those receiving merely indirect feedback experienced noticing *without* understanding (Schmidt, 2010). While the latter is limited to the conscious registering of specific language forms, the former requires a higher level of awareness that fosters generalizations across instances. In other words, to truly benefit longer term from the corrective feedback, learners must be able to understand *why* there is a discrepancy between the language they have produced as well as how it should be corrected.

5. Limitations and Pedagogical Implications

This study is not without limitations. First, the target structures in this study focused only on English definite and indefinite articles, so further study is necessary to investigate the role of feedback targeting a variety of linguistic forms. This is especially so when considering how the effect of WCF may differ in relation to error types (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005, Ferris, 1995). Second, only one post-test and three writing tasks were completed in this study. Further research is, therefore, required to explore the effects of feedback over longer periods of time to see the enduring effect of CF.

The result of the present study, nevertheless, provides valuable pedagogical implications. When providing WCF it may be desirable to provide learners with metalinguistic explanation if the goal is to develop grammatical accuracy. There is however, the issue of practical limitations with giving metalinguistic feedback. For example, giving metalinguistic feedback can involve detailed, and sometimes technical explanations that may require more time and care than directly correcting an erroneous text, or simply indicating the presence of an error through indirect feedback. This problem can be ameliorated, however, by providing metalinguistic explanation to the whole class by focusing on the most common errors made by the students in the class. Hence, WCF can be provided efficiently by

following the three steps. (1) Provide indirect feedback on frequently committed error(s) by the learners. (2) Return the learners' assignment with indirect feedback then provide oral metalinguistic explanation on the focused item in the form of a whole-class lecture. (3) Ask learners to revise their errors. The above three steps may help language teachers deal with students' written errors efficiently and effectively.

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