

The Effect of Focused and Unfocused Direct
Written Corrective Feedback on a New Piece of
Writing

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ABSTRACT

The value of written corrective feedback (CF) has been an issue of considerable debate in the literature (e.g. Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999), and this polemic has led to a trend in recent studies to draw on second language acquisition (SLA) research as a way to further comprehend the intricacies of this complex issue. Indeed, Ellis, Sheen Murakami and Takashima (2008) delineate between focused CF and unfocused CF. For direct CF, they found that both types of focuses were effective in new pieces of writing, and that this effect was durable. As only this one study has examined these focuses for the target form of articles, arguably further research is needed with different target forms. With this in mind, the study presented here contrasted the effectiveness of focused direct CF for past tense forms, unfocused direct CF and a control group (no CF) on the accuracy of student writing. Using mixed between-within ANOVAs, it was revealed that all three conditions improved in accuracy between two writing tasks; however, both the focused direct CF and unfocused direct CF groups significantly outperformed the control group in the second piece of writing.

Operationalizing Key Terminology

Embedded within the abstract are a number of terms that need to be operationalized prior to reviewing the literature. These included focused CF, unfocused CF and direct CF. Focused CF entails providing feedback on a small number of preselected forms while unfocused CF involves giving feedback on all or an array of errors. Direct CF comprises the crossing out of an error and the provision of its correction above the error. One can thus have focused direct CF or unfocused direct CF.

Literature Review

There has been a debate in the literature that has questioned the value of CF. Truscott (1996, p. 328) argued that CF has no place in the second language (L2) writing class due to the following four reasons:

‘(a) Research evidence shows it to be ineffective; (b) this lack of effectiveness is exactly what should be expected given the correction process and the nature of language learning; (c) grammar correction has significantly harmful effects; and (d) the various arguments for continuing it all lack merit.’

In essence, Truscott was claiming that there was no research evidence to support the idea that CF can assist with the acquisition of particular forms.

Ferris (1999) agreed with some of these assertions yet argued for the continued use of CF as students desire to be corrected, subject teachers demand accuracy in students' writing and L2 learners need to develop that ability to self-edit their errors. She called for additional research into CF to which Truscott (1999) agreed. After five years of additional research, however, Ferris (2004) acknowledged that the research base had failed to provide any conclusive evidence as to the benefits of CF.

These claims about acquisition and CF eventually drew the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) specialists who began to investigate CF utilizing theories and concepts from SLA and the more established findings of oral CF. Notably, Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima (2008) separated CF into focused and unfocused

types. By far the majority of research has been unfocused (e.g. Lalande, 1982; Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006). More recently those researchers from an SLA background have begun using focused CF (e.g. Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008).

While there has been this recent interest in focused CF, only one study has contrasted the effects of focused and unfocused CF. Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima (2008) investigated the effectiveness of focused direct CF, unfocused direct CF and a control group (no CF) on the accuracy of new pieces of writing. Utilizing 49 English as a foreign language (EFL) students at a Japanese university, they adopted a quasi-experimental design comprised of a pretest-treatment-immediate posttest and a delayed posttest. The three tests involved picture sequence writing tasks, and they investigated the English article system for the functions of first mention and anaphoric reference. They found that the writing for all three conditions improved between the pretest and the immediate posttest, yet there were group differences in the delayed posttest. These were between both the focused and unfocused direct CF conditions and the control group.

As only this one study has contrasted focused and unfocused direct CF for the English article system, there is obviously a need for further research into these types of CF with alternate forms. Indeed, it is to fill this gap that the following research question was devised.

Research Question

What effect does focused and unfocused direct corrective feedback have learners' use of the past tense in a new piece of writing?

Methodology

Structures

The linguistic structure investigated in this study was the simple past tense. It was selected on the basis of feedback from teachers currently teaching at the university where the research was conducted. They acknowledged that the acquisition of this form

was varied with some who had mastered it, and others who had not.

The simple past is not functionally complex; however, it does have numerous forms, so what actually constitutes the simple past needs to be discussed. In general, its function represents a completed action or state in the past. This function can be expressed through the use of the past tense copula (was or were), regular verbs (e.g. walked and talked) and irregular verbs (e.g. went and did). It can be expressed in the active or the passive voice. A decision was made not to give feedback on the passive voice. This decision was made on the basis that the passive voice represents a potentially untreatable sentence structure error (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In sum, the forms of the simple past for this study comprised the past tense copula verbs, irregular verbs and regular verbs, all of which were in the active voice.

Population and sample

This population for this study was university-level Chinese learners of English in Taiwan. In this context, classes are organized on the basis of the major of the students, and they stay in these classes for all the subjects that they are required to take for the duration of their undergraduate study. The sample was taken from one sophomore class that majored in computer science industrial engineering, a sophomore class of information telecommunication engineering students and a junior-year class of business management majors. This way of organizing classes meant that there was a range of proficiency in the classes, yet the vast majority could be classified as being at an intermediate level.

A questionnaire investigated general background information on the participants. The ages of the participants were between 19 and 21 years of age, who had on average been studying English for around 10 years and 65% were male while 35% were female.

This study represented part of a larger pilot study investigating CF and acquisition, and the sample used for this part of that research included 106 students who completed the initial piece of writing. However, at the completion the second writing task, only 91 were included in the study. While this would appear to be an extreme mortality rate, there are some legitimate reasons for this reduction in the number of participants. First of all, some of the learners failed to provide at least two obligatory occasion analyses,

and they were removed from the study. Other students only attended one of the two episodes of data collection or arrived to class late so they too were not included. Finally, if a participant obtained a 90% obligatory occasion analysis score for the first piece of writing, they were deemed to have acquired the target form, and they also were cut from the sample. This 90% score is a criterion that is used to identify whether or not someone has acquired a particular form (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

The participants were randomly and equally assigned to one of the three groups following the completion of the first writing task. After removing learners due to the aforementioned reasons, there were 30 in the focused direct CF group, 30 in the unfocused direct CF one and 31 in the control.

Design

Using the two CF conditions and the control group, the design was quasi-experimental. The following represent the three experimental conditions:

1. Unfocused direct CF

This entailed providing the correct form for all linguistic errors by crossing out the errors and writing the correct forms above the errors.

I walk hame yesterday and eat a breakfasts.		
walked home	ate	breakfast
I walk hame yesterday and eat a breakfasts.		

2. Focused direct CF

Focused direct CF involved crossing out only the target form and providing the correct form solely for these errors.

I walk hame yesterday and eat a breakfasts.	
walked	ate
I walk hame yesterday and eat a breakfasts.	

3. Control

The control group had no CF and were required to undertake conversation tasks designed to enhance fluency.

With the exception of the control group, which completed the writing tasks and conversation tasks, each of the two CF conditions followed the pilot's structure as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Design of the Pilot Study

Task 1 (writing task) → Corrective Feedback → Task 2 (writing task)

Instruments

There were two types of instruments used to collect the data: a questionnaire and two writing tasks. The questionnaire was designed to collect the participants' background data including age, gender, field of study, years of studying English and average hours studying English per week before university and during university.

The writing tasks doubled as both the tests and the means for eliciting a writing sample to which CF and revision were provided. Each task included instructions in English and the following materials within a task package: a text; pictures that corresponded to the content of the text; a sheet with a rectangular box in which to write key words; a lined piece of paper that had the first sentence of the text written on it for rewriting the text. The text comprised a narrative genre in the form of a fictional newspaper article reporting on an event unique to the Taiwanese context. In order to ensure the texts were not too difficult, the verbs used in the text were selected from the General Service List.

There were two narrative tasks designed by the researcher, both of which had six pictures that corresponded to their content. The stories were told from the perspective of a policeman who reported on the events. "A Landslide in Nantou" reported the events surrounding a woman being trapped in her house following a landslide. "The Lost Bag" recounted the events of a woman who lost her bag at the Shi Lin Night Market.

These tasks were designed by the researcher, so a number of procedures were employed to ensure that they were both as authentic as possible, and that they elicited

the target structure. The texts were first given to two experienced ESOL tutors at Auckland University, and their feedback was used to enhance their authenticity. Prior to the implementation of the pilot study, four different writing tasks were given to a class of 31 students at the same university in Taiwan. This was done so as to ascertain whether the writing tasks elicited sufficient obligatory occasions. This trial was successful in eliciting the simple past forms.

However, the trial brought to the attention of the researcher a problem with the procedures used for their implementation. The design of the tasks required the teacher to read the text to the students, and this limited the ability to counterbalance the tasks. Counterbalancing involves splitting the tasks equally within a class so as to remove the influence of varying degrees of difficulty. A decision was made to counterbalance the classes rather than tasks. That is, each of the three classes had the three experimental conditions, yet each class had different writing tasks.

Procedures

There were a series of different procedures applied for the writing tasks and CF sessions.

A. Writing tasks

The procedure for completing the writing tasks was as follows:

1. The participants were given the task package including the aforementioned materials.
2. They were informed that they had to rewrite a text based on a narrative text provided.
3. They were instructed to read the text once and underline any unknown vocabulary.
4. The students were put into groups of four and asked to discuss any unknown vocabulary.
5. Any vocabulary that the students did not know was explained by the teacher.
6. The students read the narrative again.

7. The narrative text was collected by the teacher.
8. The narrative was then to be read to the students twice during which the students noted down important words on the page designed for these key words.
9. The students then compared key words with a partner and added any new ones to their list.
10. The participants were told that they could use the pictures and the key words to rewrite the text, and that they should double space their writing.
11. The completed writing task was collected.

B. Corrective feedback sessions

The CF sessions involved the following procedures for direct CF and the control group:

1. Direct CF
 - a. The students were returned their corrected texts.
 - b. They were asked to study the corrections for five minutes.
 - c. The teacher did not give any further comment on the corrections.
 - d. The corrected texts were collected.
2. Control
 - a. The control group was given fluency conversation tasks to complete in pairs.

Data collection

The data was collected over a three week period as presented in Table 1. It involved a trial of the tasks, the completion of a background questionnaire and the signing of ethics approval documents. Additionally, the two tasks were completed and a CF session carried out.

Table 1: Data Collection Schedule for the Study

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Trial Tasks	Background questionnaire	CF session
Ethics approval		
	Task 1	Task 2

Data analysis

The data analyses of the writing tasks involved tests for reliability, the use of obligatory occasion analysis and the subsequent statistical analysis of these data through SPSS version 16 so as to address the research question.

The obligatory occasion analyses were subject to a test of reliability. This comprised a second scoring of the data two months after the initial scoring by the researcher. Forty texts were randomly selected from the pretest across the three experimental groups. An intra-rater reliability score of $r = .995$ was calculated using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

The type of obligatory occasion analysis chosen for this study was Pica's (1983) Target-Like Use Analysis (TLU), which takes into consideration the overuse of a particular form. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) provide the following formula for TLU:

$$\frac{n \text{ correct suppliance in contexts}}{n \text{ obligatory occasions} + n \text{ suppliance in non-obligatory contexts}} \times 100$$

In the process of scoring simple past tense forms to be applied to TLU, however, two scoring issues were raised. The first related to errors in obligatory contexts. If a student provided a correct past tense irregular verb form but the meaning was wrong, for example, it was coded as an obligatory occasion but not a correct suppliance. The second coding issue related to missing verbs. If a sentence had a verb missing and the context established that a simple past tense form was needed, it was coded as an

obligatory occasion but not a correct suppliance. On the other hand, if a verb was missing but there were a variety of possible past tense forms that could be used (e.g. the past progressive tense or the past perfect tense), it was neither coded as an obligatory occasion nor an incorrect suppliance.

Following the scoring of the TLU, these data were subject to a variety of statistical analyses to address the research question. A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey was first of all conducted on the scores from task 1. The scores for tasks 1 and 2 underwent a mixed between-within ANOVA (three groups x two times).

Results

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics for task one and task two. All the mean scores increased for all three groups between the two episodes of writing. A one-way ANOVA of writing task 1 revealed no significant differences between the three conditions ($F(2, 88) = 1.83, p = .17$). There was no effect of significance for the time-group interaction ($F(2, 88) = 2.07, p = .13$); however, there were for group ($F(2, 88) = 4.06, p = .001$) and for time ($F(2, 88) = 83.85, p = .001$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Effect of Corrective Feedback on a New Piece of Writing

Corrective Feedback	<i>n</i>	Task 1		Task 2	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Focused Direct	30	38.93	27.15	63.35	18.70
Unfocused Direct	30	29.85	22.44	60.29	23.83
Control	31	27.32	24.82	44.70	27.93

Discussion

The research question investigated the effect of focused and unfocused direct CF on a new piece of writing. Between task one and task two, the two types of CF were applied while the control group completed a conversation task. The results revealed that the writing for all three conditions significantly improved in accuracy between the two

times. There were also group differences between the groups and post hoc analyses revealed that these were between both the focused and unfocused direct CF conditions and the control group.

Thus, the writing process alone would appear to result in improvements in the accuracy of the participants' writing as claimed by Truscott (1996); however, both focused direct CF and unfocused direct CF resulted in considerably more accurate writing. Of course, there is also the possibility that the control group may have become aware of the form, a situation that could have influenced the results.

What is surprising about the findings is that there were no differences between the focused and unfocused direct CF. One would expect that focused CF would result in more accurate writing. Ellis, Sheen, Murakami and Takashima (2003) had the same result in their delayed posttest, and they suggest a possible reason for this being related to the degree of focus. In other words, the two focuses might better be described as focused and less focused rather than focused and unfocused. An analysis of the types of error that the participants made in the unfocused group would be able to provide an insight into the extent of how focused the unfocused condition actually was.

Conclusion

The study was not without its limitations, however. Perhaps the greatest problem is that there was no delayed posttest, so no assertions can be made about the long-term benefits, or otherwise, of the three conditions. The issue of counterbalancing is another concern. The decision to counterbalance the classes rather than the tasks increased the chances of the participants in the control group becoming aware of the target structure, hence influencing the results of, in particular, the control group.

As for the pedagogic implications of this study, the limitations hinder its generalizability so little can be definitively stated. However, as the findings are similar to those of the only other study that has investigated focused and unfocused CF, the inclusion of focused and unfocused direct CF in EFL writing classrooms may well be justified. Repeating this study under more robust conditions would provide a better understanding of the focus of feedback.

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