

The value of a focused approach to written corrective feedback

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Investigations into the most effective ways to provide ESL learners with written corrective feedback have often been overly comprehensive in the range of error categories examined. As a result, clear conclusions about the efficacy of such feedback have not been possible. On the other hand, oral corrective feedback studies have produced clear, positive results from studies that have targeted particular error categories. This article presents the results of a study that examined the effectiveness of targeting only two functional error categories with written corrective feedback in order to see if such an approach was also helpful for ESL writers. The ten-month study was carried out with 52 low-intermediate ESL students in Auckland, New Zealand. Assigned to groups that received written corrective feedback or no written corrective feedback, the students produced five pieces of writing (pre-test, immediate post-test, and three delayed post-tests) that described what was happening in a given picture. Two functional uses of the English article system (referential indefinite 'a' and referential definite 'the') were targeted in the feedback. The study found that those who received written corrective feedback on the two functions outperformed the control group on all four post-tests.

Introduction

In 1996, Truscott declared that the provision of written corrective feedback on ESL student writing was ineffective and harmful and that it should therefore be abandoned. He maintained that there was empirical evidence (for example Semke 1984; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed 1986; Kepner 1991) to show that the practice was not worth continuing. Ferris (1999), in her response, pointed out, among a range of arguments, that the research base he was drawing upon was too limited and conflicting in its findings and that restraint should be exercised while further investigations were undertaken. Of the studies that have been conducted until fairly recently, most, in terms of their design, execution, and analysis, were flawed to some extent (see Guenette 2007; Bitchener 2008 for a review of these issues) so this has meant that firm conclusions about the efficacy of written corrective feedback are not yet available.

Another reason for the failure of earlier work to produce conclusive answers to the question of efficacy is the unfocused approach that was taken with regard to the range of error categories treated. Up to 15 different linguistic error categories were sometimes included in these studies so it was likely to produce too much of a cognitive overload for learners to attend to. By

comparison, oral corrective feedback research (for example Doughty and Varela 1998; Lyster 2004), by focusing on a single error category, has been able to reveal clear, positive effects for the focused approach.

Although positive findings have been reported in three recent written corrective feedback studies (Sheen 2007; Bitchener 2008; Bitchener and Knoch 2008) that were conducted over a two-month period, another shortcoming of the existing research base has been its primary focus on text revision. Little attention has been given to investigations of the extent to which written corrective feedback can facilitate accuracy improvement in the writing of new texts.

In order to address both of these issues, this article presents the findings of a ten-month longitudinal investigation of the extent to which a targeted focus on two functional error categories resulted in improved accuracy in four new pieces of writing.

The study

Introduction

The study investigated the following research question: does accuracy in the use of two functions of the English article system improve over a ten-month period as a result of written corrective feedback?

Accuracy was measured over a ten-month period by means of a pre-test post-test design (a pre-test after one week; an immediate post-test following the corrective feedback treatment after two weeks; three delayed post-tests after two, six, and ten months).

Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Department of a university in Auckland, New Zealand. Students from four existing low-intermediate classes were invited to take part in the study. Fifty-two students were available for the ten-month data collection period. Students who were new to the university were assigned to a proficiency level after taking a standardized grammar test, a writing test, and a one-on-one interview. Students who had previously been studying at a lower proficiency level were placed in the low-intermediate level on the basis of earlier competency-based assessments. The English Language Department describes its approach to the teaching of English as communicative and gives an equal focus to reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Most of the students were migrants who had settled in New Zealand within 18 months of commencing study at the low-intermediate level. Four hours of instruction were provided five days a week. The students (19 males and 33 females) were predominantly from East Asian countries: Korea (15 per cent), Japan (11 per cent), and the People's Republic of China (18 per cent). Other countries represented were Vietnam, Yemen, Russia, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Chile, Brazil, Serbia, Turkey, Somalia, Romania, Iran, Sri Lanka, India, and Indonesia. The average age of the students was 31.7 years. The majority (78 per cent) claimed to have had formal instruction though their length of earlier study varied across a seven-year period. The four classes were arbitrarily assigned to one of three written corrective feedback groups ($n = 39$) or the control group ($n = 13$) that did not receive corrective feedback.

Target structures

Compared with earlier studies on the value of written corrective feedback (see Ferris 2003), where sometimes as many as 15 linguistic forms and

structures had been examined, this study investigated the effect of targeting two functional uses of the English article system: the referential indefinite article ‘a’ for referring to something the first time (first mention) and the referential definite article ‘the’ for referring to something already mentioned (subsequent mention). Other functional uses of the definite and indefinite articles were not targeted in the study.

These structures were targeted because students across English language proficiency levels experience difficulty in the use of the English article system (Butler 2002; Bitchener, Young, and Cameron 2005). For example, they may experience difficulty deciding whether an article is required and, if it is required, whether it should be the definite or indefinite article. So that second language learners are not stigmatized as a result of incorrect usage when communicating with native speakers of English and so that doubts do not arise about which items they may be referring to, it is important that corrective feedback be provided on the use of articles when students reveal recurrent difficulties with correct usage. The occasional error may not necessarily impede the overall coherence and cohesion of a text but frequent errors may well do so. The extent to which written corrective feedback, as one form of input, can facilitate the acquisition process is investigated in this study. Accuracy in the use of these functions in the pre-test revealed a mean score of 59.41 per cent, thereby indicating that students at a low-intermediate level have only a partial mastery of the functions.

Treatment

Each of the three groups within the wider written corrective feedback group received different combinations of written corrective feedback. These are presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Group treatments

Written corrective feedback group	Group one—received direct error correction, written, and oral meta-linguistic explanation Group two—received direct error correction and written meta-linguistic explanation Group three—received direct error correction
No written corrective feedback group	Group four—received no corrective feedback

The three types of written corrective feedback referred to in Table 1 involved the procedures given in Table 2.

Feedback type	Feedback procedures
Direct error correction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Place tick/check above correct uses of two functions. ■ Correct incorrect uses with ‘a’ or ‘the’ above each error. ■ Insert ‘a’ or ‘the’ where they were omitted but required.
Written meta-linguistic explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use ‘a’ when referring to something for the first time. ■ Use ‘the’ when referring to something that has already been mentioned. e.g. A man and a woman were sitting opposite me. The man was British but I think the woman was Australian.

Oral meta-linguistic explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The 30-minute mini-lesson. ■ Above rules and examples explained. ■ Additional examples illustrated on whiteboard and discussed with class. ■ Students completed five-minute controlled practice exercise, filling gaps in each sentence with 'a', 'the', or neither, and answers were then discussed.
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TABLE 2
Feedback procedures

Instruments Each of the five pieces of writing required a description of what was happening in a given picture (settings at a beach, a picnic, a campsite, a family gathering, a sporting event). Picture descriptions were chosen because the range of people, objects, and activities illustrated had the potential to create obligatory opportunities for the use of both English article functions. Thirty minutes was given for the writing of each description.

Procedure The procedures of the study were administered according to the timeline provided in Table 3.

Day one	Pre-test (writing task one)
After one week	Written corrective feedback treatment provided
After eight weeks	Immediate post-test (writing task two)
After six months	Delayed post-test one (writing task three)
After ten months	Delayed post-test two (writing task four)
	Delayed post-test three (writing task five)

TABLE 3
Timetable for procedures

The sequence of activities for the immediate post-test varied as follows across the groups:

Group one

The immediate post-test was completed after the students had been given five minutes to consider the error corrections and the written meta-linguistic explanation and had received the 30-minute lesson (oral meta-linguistic explanation).

Group two

The immediate post-test was completed after the students had been given five minutes to consider the error corrections and the written meta-linguistic explanation.

Group three

The immediate post-test was completed after the students had been given five minutes to consider the error corrections.

Group four

The immediate post-test was completed as soon as the uncorrected pre-test piece of writing had been returned.

Analysis The analysis of the data involved several steps:

- 1 Obligatory uses of the targeted features were identified.
- 2 Written corrective feedback or no corrective feedback was provided (as described above).

- 3 Accuracy was calculated as a percentage of correct usage. For example, in any one script, three correct uses of the targeted features from ten obligatory occasions meant a 30 per cent accuracy rate.
- 4 Inter-rater reliability calculations with a trained research colleague revealed a 95 per cent agreement on the identification of targeted errors and a 98 per cent agreement on the assignment of errors to the targeted categories.
- 5 Descriptive statistics for the pre-test and the four post-tests were calculated separately for the written corrective feedback groups and the no feedback group.
- 6 Because no statistically significant differences on the pre-test scores were found between the groups, a two-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was chosen to address the research question.

Results

Table 4 below shows the descriptive statistics for the treatment group and the control group at the five different testing periods.

Group	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3		Time 4		Time 5		
	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1 CF	39	59.15	17.71	84.05	11.70	79.31	11.49	81.44	12.20	86.21	11.15
2 Control	13	63.23	17.51	67.08	21.45	56.62	22.29	62.46	18.97	58.92	16.16

TABLE 4
Descriptive statistics for mean test scores by group and testing period

SD = standard deviation CF = corrective feedback

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the mean percentages for the five testing periods for each group. Table 4 and Figure 1 illustrate that whilst both groups scored around 60 per cent on the pre-test, only participants in the treatment group were able to increase their accuracy after the pre-test and keep that gain in accuracy over the following testing periods.

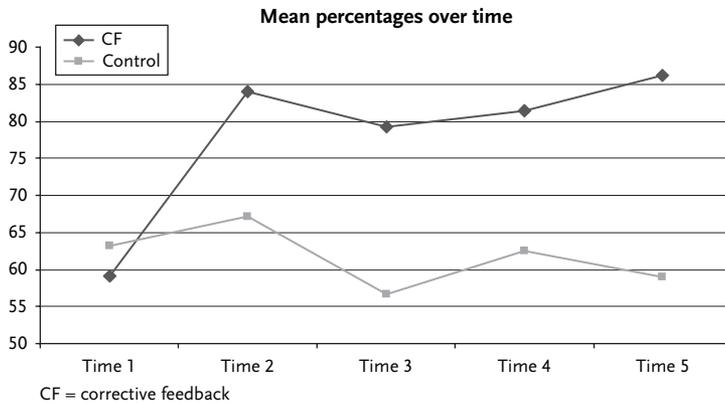


FIGURE 1
Mean percentage accuracy for treatment group and control group over time.

To determine the most appropriate data analysis technique, an independent *t*-test was conducted to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the two groups on the pre-test. As this was not the case, $t(50) = -.721, p = .474$, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was chosen to analyse the data (Table 5 below).

TABLE 5
Two-way ANOVA
analysis

Source	df	F	p
Between subjects			
Group	1	1293.29	<.001
Within subjects			
Time	4	13.06	<.001
Time × group	4	15.52	<.001

Table 5 shows that there was an interaction effect between time and group, which illustrates that the two different sets of participants performed in different patterns over time. This interaction effect occurred because the control group showed no significant increase over time, whilst the treatment group did. To identify which testing periods differed statistically significantly for the treatment group, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted with Tukey’s post-hoc pairwise comparisons. These showed that all post-tests differed statistically significantly from the pre-test ($p < .001$). Interestingly, even without another treatment, students performed significantly better at testing period five (after ten months) than at testing period four (after six months), $p < .001$. Testing periods two and three as well as three and four showed no differences. The same analysis was conducted on the test scores of the control group. In this case, none of the testing periods showed any significant differences.

To investigate if the accuracy of the two groups differed on any of the post-tests, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. All these tests were significant as can be seen in Table 6 below, indicating that the treatment group consistently outperformed the control group.

TABLE 6
Independent samples
t-tests for post-tests

Post-test	t	df	p
Time 2—after 2 weeks	3.618	50	.001
Time 3—after 2 months	4.783	50	<.001
Time 4—after 6 months	4.196	50	<.001
Time 5—after 10 months	6.796	50	<.001

Discussion

Students who received written corrective feedback outperformed those who received no feedback in all four post-tests even though all groups developed differently over time. This means that the provision of written corrective feedback on a single occasion had a significant effect, enabling the learners to use the targeted functions with greater accuracy over the ten-month period. These results corroborate and extend those of three recent studies (Sheen op. cit.; Bitchener op. cit.; Bitchener and Knoch op. cit.) that examined the effect of written corrective feedback on new pieces of writing over a two-month period. The enduring effect on accuracy over a ten-month period is clear evidence of the potential for focused written corrective feedback to help learners acquire features of a second language. Whereas earlier research has focused on a comprehensive range of error categories, the results of this study demonstrate the value of focusing on a single error category. In this respect, they corroborate the findings not only of the written corrective feedback studies referred to above but also of those on oral corrective feedback (for example Dougherty and Varela op. cit.; Muranoi 2000).

Excerpts 1 and 2 below, from the pre-test and immediate post-test texts of one student, illustrate the accuracy with which the two article functions were used in the second text after written corrective feedback had been provided.

Excerpt 1 (pre-test text)

At the kiosk, a woman buys two ice-creams. A woman gives the ice-cream to her child and keeps ice-cream for herself.

Excerpt 2 (immediate post-test text)

On the other side, there is a bull. The bull is chasing a boy near the gate but I think the boy will beat the bull.

In Excerpt 1, the students appeared to be unclear about the need to use ‘the’ when referring to the same woman in the second sentence and about the need to use ‘a’ when referring to one of the ice creams for the first time. In Excerpt 2, however, it can be seen that the student has used the articles correctly. Ten months later, as Excerpt 3 below reveals, the student appears to have retained a clear understanding of these article uses.

Excerpt 3 (delayed post-test 3)

Lots of children are playing in the room. A baby is playing with blocks and an old man is sleeping on a sofa. The baby is putting the blocks beside the sofa while the old man is sleeping.

While these excerpts illustrate the accuracy gains that can be made when written corrective feedback is focused, further research is required to determine the extent to which it is effective with other error categories in other linguistic domains. It is especially important that it be tested with more complex features to determine whether or not its optimal effect is with single rule-based functions such as those examined in this study.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, a number of pedagogical recommendations can be offered. Teachers should feel confident about providing direct written corrective feedback on their students’ linguistic errors, providing it is based to the best of their knowledge on their students’ ‘readiness’, both in terms of their proficiency level and their understanding of the merits of focusing their attention on written accuracy. We believe that student motivation is more likely to be gained if teachers negotiate with their students about which features they will focus on, about how frequent the feedback will be given, about the type of feedback that will be given, and about what the students will be expected to do in response to the feedback. The study has also shown that a single feedback session can be effective in developing accuracy in the use of two rule-based features but if teachers are able to provide additional feedback on more occasions, it may be possible to increase the accuracy rate and also reduce the amount of time that is required to help learners achieve a high level of mastery over recurrent errors. Finally, and most importantly, we believe that there is clear evidence from the study to recommend that teachers provide selective, focused feedback on one or two linguistic error categories at a time rather than feedback on too comprehensive a range of features. Although it might be argued that this approach hinders good language learners from making more rapid progress in acquiring features that have been problematic if they are required to proceed in a lockstep manner with the class as a whole, we

would suggest that once there are signs of accuracy development, teachers renegotiate an additional feedback focus with such students. In order to confirm the advantage of this approach over the more comprehensive approach, future research is required to compare the two approaches within a single research design.

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