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Research Article

THE EFFECT OF FOCUSED VERSUS UNFOCUSED CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON DEVELOPING GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' WRITTEN PERFORMANCE WITHIN DIFFERENT GENDER GROUPS

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ABSTRACT
The extent to which learners benefit from written corrective feedback (CF) has been debated since Truscott (1996) claimed that it is both ineffective and harmful and should therefore be abandoned. The aim of this study is to investigate whether focused CF and unfocused CF can cause any differential effects on the accurate use of the simple past tense between female and male EFL learners. The statistical analysis indicates that the focused group does better than both unfocused and control groups in terms of the accurate use of English simple paste tense. Therefore, these results suggest that focused CF promotes learners' grammatical accuracy in second language (L2) writing more effectively than unfocused CF. Furthermore, the findings show that gender does not cause a significant difference over effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF.

Keywords: *Focused Feedback, Unfocused Feedback, Gender, Grammatical Accuracy, Written Corrective Feedback, Written Performance*

INTRODUCTION
Corrective Feedback and Grammatical Accuracy
There has been a heated debate on the role of teacher feedback in the field of second language writing research. There are researchers who believe in giving corrective feedback (CF) to students to improve their written accuracy and those who do not.
According to Leki (1991), grammar feedback is viewed as helpful by college level ESL students. Hyland (2003) expressed a similar view that grammar feedback can serve as guidance for eventual writing development as far as students are concerned. Acknowledging the uncertainly from the existing research data, it is legitimate to further address this role of teacher feedback in L2 writing. Some researchers (e.g., Ahangari and Amirzadeh, 2011; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b; Chandler, 2003; Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Ferris, 2002; Evans *et al.*, 2011; Sheen, 2007) claim that CF is of value in promoting grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, there is now a growing body of literature on the efficiency of written CF for helping L2 writers improve the accuracy of their writing .On the one hand, there is evidence that written CF can help writers improve their written accuracy when asked to revise their texts (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1999, 2006; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). There are more recent evidence of the long-term effectiveness of written CF on accuracy improvement (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008a, 2010a; Chandler, 2003; Ellis *et al.*, 2008; Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Sheen, 2007; Sheen *et al.*, 2009). Several recent studies (e.g. Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2010b) have examined the relative effectiveness of different types of direct CF on improved accuracy. For example, Bitchener (2008) investigated the effectiveness of direct feedback combinations: (1) direct error correction with written meta-linguistic explanation and oral meta-linguistic explanation; (2) direct error correction with written meta-linguistic explanation; (3) direct error

correction; and (4) no corrective feedback. Feedback was provided on only two functional uses of the English articles (the indefinite article "a" and the definite article "the"). Groups one and three outperformed the control group while group two failed to do so.

Focused versus Unfocused Corrective Feedback

Ferris (1999, 2004) criticized the strong claim held by Truscott (1996, 2007) who believes CF is ineffective and harmful. Unfocused and focused CF is two types of feedback which are mentioned in this study. Unfocused CF corresponds to what might be considered normal practice in writing instruction; teachers correct all (or at least a range of) the errors in learners written work. In contrast, focused CF selects specific errors to be corrected and ignores other errors (Ellis *et al.,* 2008). Although many studies have been conducted to examine this issue, many issues remain regarding the kind of CF which can improve learners' writing process.

Sheen (2007) examined the effects of focused CF on the development of 91 adult ESL learners' accuracy in the use of two types of articles ("the" and "a"). The study included a direct only group (the researcher indicated errors and provided correct forms), a direct-meta-linguistic group (the researcher indicated errors, provided correct forms, and supplied meta-linguistic explanations), and a control group. The effectiveness of the CF was measured on post-tests, and delayed post-tests. Sheen found that both direct CF groups outperformed the control group. She explained this finding by pointing out that the feedback supplied to the students with the correct form was limited to two linguistic forms (i.e., articles "the" and "a"), which made the processing load manageable for them. Ellis *et al.,* (2008) compared the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the accurate use of English definite and indefinite articles; they reported that both focused and unfocused CF groups gained from pre-test to post-tests on both an error correction test and on a test involving a new piece of narrative writing. Furthermore, they outperformed the control group, which received no correction, on the second post-test. Therefore, the CF was equally effective for the focused and unfocused groups. However, Sheen *et al.,* (2009) mentioned the methodological problems in this study. They believe that the focused and unfocused CF were not sufficiently distinguished (i.e., article corrections figured strongly in both). In addition, they just studied one structure – articles (i.e., they did not examine whether focused CF had any effect on the accuracy of structures not targeted by the CF). Some researchers (e.g. Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Pashzadeh and Marefat, 2009) conducted research on the effects of focused and unfocused CF. They found that focused CF can have better effect on developing accurate use of articles. Bitchener *et al.,* (2005) investigated the extent to which different types of CF (direct CF with and without oral conferencing) influence the accuracy in new pieces of writing. They concluded that both types of direct CF had a significant impact on accuracy in new pieces of writing. However, this was only evident for the definite article and the simple past tense. The same type of feedback did not have a significant positive effect on accurate use of prepositions. Frear (2011) studied the effectiveness of focused direct CF, unfocused direct CF, and (no CF) on the accurate use of English simple past tense in students' writing. He found that both focused direct CF and unfocused direct CF groups significantly outperformed the control group in the second piece of writing. In addition, Chandler (2003) found that direct correction is best for producing accurate revisions, and students prefer it because it is the fastest and easiest way for them as well as the fastest way for teachers over several drafts. However, Rouhi and Samiei (2010), in their research based on Ellis *et al.,* (2008), found that there was not a differential effect on accuracy (in using the simple past tense) for different CF options.

Gender and Corrective Feedback

Zarei (2011) conducted a research on two groups of Intermediate male and female EFL learners. They were asked to complete questionnaires about error treatment strategies. The result showed that females had a higher tendency for error correction than males, even if the error was infrequent. There was no special reaction from males when there was no correction, whereas females found the lack of correction ineffective. In addition, female students found direct grammatical explanations more favorable than male students; as a result, the teacher's reformulation of the student's utterance did not fulfill the females' expectation. This might be attributed to the fact that male students prefer a meaning- based approach to

learning forms, whereas females prefer an analytic approach. Rassaie and Tavakoli (2011) conducted research in matched-gender and mixed-gender dyads. Learners in the matched-gender dyads received CF from interlocutors of the same gender while learners in the mixed-gender dyads received CF from interlocutors of the opposite gender. Analysis of the learners' performance in individualized post-tests revealed that learners in the matched-gender dyads outperformed the learners in the mixed-gender dyads. Heift (2004) found that gender and language proficiency do not have any significant impact on the student's response to CF. Most researches about feedback has focused on language proficiency and its effect on developing written performance. Few researches have investigated the effects of gender and CF on the development of written grammatical accuracy in the Iranian context. Male and female students may have different preferences over getting feedback on their written performance. Teachers must pay attention to effectiveness of feedback between two genders. In addition, studying the effects of gender and CF could have beneficial results for teachers. Therefore, in this study the researcher aimed to investigate the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the development of written grammatical accuracy in male and female students. Regarding the purpose of the study, the following research questions were asked:

1. Is there a difference between the performances of the learners grouped according to the levels of the first factor (focused vs. unfocused written CF) on the accurate use of English past tense?
2. Is there a difference between the performances of the learners grouped according to the levels of the second factor (gender) on the accurate use of English past tense?
3. Do the two factors interact?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The participants for this study were 120 Iranian EFL learners including 60 males and 60 females with an age range of 16-30. A Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered in order to be sure of their homogeneity and of having two groups at intermediate level. The test consists of four parts: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The subjects' scores were out of 100. In order to create homogeneous groups, those who obtained 60 or more were chosen as the participants of the study. Then 60 learners in each gender group formed three groups (20 learners in each group): two experimental groups and one control group. The experimental groups consisted of (1) a focused written CF group, and (2) an unfocused written CF group. The Control group did not get any CF.

Instrumentation

The instruments were five short fables, based on Aesop's fables which were used as written narrative tasks during treatment sessions. Additionally, to examine the effects of the two types of treatments on learners' use of the simple past tense, two different picture compositions were taken from Hughes (2003). The picture prompts, consisting of four picture frames, helped to control the propositional content of the story that the students wrote. One of the tests was administered in a pre-test session and the other one in a post-test session. These picture frames were shown sequentially and the learners were asked to look at them and write a story. They were supposed to narrate the story using the simple past tense.

Procedure

After administering a (Pet) test, 120 Students were divided into two male and female groups. Each gender group (consisting of 60 students) was divided into three groups, two experimental groups and one control group (20 students in each). Then, a week prior to starting the treatment sessions, a narrative writing test (picture composition) as a pretest was given to all participants in order to be sure of their homogeneity and to measure their writing proficiency in use of English simple past tense at the beginning of the study. The participants were asked to look at the pictures and write a story in details about 150-200 words within a given time (30 minutes).

Afterwards, over the next five weeks, all three groups in both gender groups completed five written narrative tasks in every other session, each of which was followed by a CF treatment session in the

following class (the researcher as the teacher corrected students' papers. The narrative tasks involved reading and then rewriting fables. Every task in treatment session was completed in two sessions. Teacher collected students writing and corrected them at home. The next session students could review their papers and know about their errors and teachers' written corrective feedback). However, the used tasks were the same for every group. In both gender groups, the first experimental group received focused CF; the second experimental group received unfocused CF, while the control group received no feedback. The grammatical target for the focused group was the use of English simple past tense, whereas the target for the unfocused CF group was every kind of grammatical errors. Finally, one session after receiving CF for the last writing task, the learners were given another narrative writing test (picture composition) as a post-test. Writing test scores were calculated by means of obligatory occasion analysis (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005) in order to measure the differential effects of the treatments on the acquisition of accurate use of English simple past tense. 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.
A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey (with an alpha level of .05) was conducted on the scores in pre –test and post-test tasks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the pre-test scores of Male and Female groups

male	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	female	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Focused	20	30.42	19.55	Focused	20	31.22	12.15
Unfocused	20	34.20	28.11	Unfocused	20	30.20	21.51
Control	20	31.33	12.42	Control	20	35.58	18.52
Total	60	31.98	20.02	Total	60	32.33	17.39

In order to find out whether there are any statistically significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the accurate use of English simple past tense in the pre-test by male and female learners, a one way ANOVA was performed. As Table 2 shows, the result of the ANOVA is F (2, 57) = .116, p = 0.891 for the males and F (2, 57) =.245, p = 0.789 for the females.

Table 2: Comparing Pre-test Mean Scores of Male and Female Groups

Anova

Male	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Female	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	27.533	2	13.767	.116	.891	Between Groups	34.451	2	16.725	.245	.789
Within Groups	6765.099	57	118.686			Within Groups	7531.883	57	151.103		
Total	6792.632	59				Total	7566.334	59			

Since there were three groups in each gender group of this study, the researcher decided to apply the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the means across these groups.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the pre-test scores of the male and the female learners in each of the three groups. The main purpose of giving this pre-test to the learners at the beginning of the study was to measure the accuracy of English past tense and guarantee the homogeneity of the learners. As the table 1 shows, the mean scores of the three groups in two gender groups are very close to each other.

This revealed that the difference between groups is not significant. Two groups are homogeneous in the pre-test. In as much as the mean differences in the pre-test were not significant, post hoc comparisons were not applied.

In Table 3, the mean scores and standard deviations for the post-test scores of the male and female groups are shown. The mean scores of the learners on the post-test are different from the pre-test mean scores, which were very close to each other. These obtained results mean that after receiving the treatment of the study, the three groups showed dissimilar performances. All three groups increased the accuracy of their use of English simple past tense from the pre-test to post-test. However, in the male group, the gained mean score by the focused group is (M =66.25, SD =10.25), and in the female group, the gained mean score by the focused group (M = 70.15, SD = 11.18) on the post-test is higher than the other two groups.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the post-test scores of Male and Female groups

male	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	female	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Focused	20	66.25	10.25	Focused	20	70.15	11.18
Unfocused	20	50.21	12.55	Unfocused	20	55.28	15.85
Control	20	42.25	10.58	Control	20	46.45	9.18
Total	60	53.90	11.12	Total	60	58.29	12.07

Therefore, another one-way ANOVA analysis was applied to see whether the differences across the three male and female groups are statistically significant or not. As Table 4 presents, the result for the males is F (2, 57) =60.143, p = 0.000. Furthermore, the result for the females is F (2, 57) =62.543, p = 0.003. Therefore, providing the two different types of feedback had significantly different effects on the written performance of male and female learners on the accurate use of English simple past tense in the post-test.

Table 4: Comparing Post-test Mean Scores of Male and Female Groups

Anova

Male	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Female	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10353.397	2	5176.699	60.143	.000	Between Groups	12573.466	2	6786.733	62.543	.003
Within Groups	4440.974	57	77.912			Within Groups	4559.172	57	79.985		
Total	14794.372	59				Total	10132.638	59			

These results indicated that in the post-test, participants in the focused CF group improved their correct use of the simple past tense from the pre-test to the post test to a significantly greater extent than the other two groups.

Having applied the One-way ANOVA, the researcher acknowledged that means are significantly different from each other. In order to determine the exact location of mean differences, a post hoc analysis should be applied.

Tables 5 and 6 illustrate the significant differences between the groups with an asterisk mark in the second column. These tables reveal that the experimental group, which received focused CF, significantly outperformed the other two groups (unfocused group and control group) at the 0.05 level of significance in both female and male groups.

Table 5: Results of the Tukey Post Hoc Test of Male Group

Multiple Comparisons

(I) G	(J) G	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
focused	Unfocused	25.70190*	2.59127	.000	18.9840	32.4180
	control	29.41650*	2.59127	.000	22.8995	35.3335
unfocused	focused	-25.70190*	2.59127	.000	-32.4180	-18.9840
	control	3.91550	2.59127	.146	-2.8015	10.6325
control	Focused	-29.41650*	2.59127	.000	-35.3335	-22.8995
	unfocused	-3.91550	2.59127	.146	-10.6325	2.8015

Table 6: Results of the Tukey Post Hoc Test of Female group

Multiple Comparisons

(I) G	(J) G	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
focused	Unfocused	15.37200*	2.42817	.000	10.8662	24.1178
	control	22.53050*	2.42817	.000	15.7247	29.3363
unfocused	focused	-15.37200*	2.42817	.000	-24.1178	-10.8662
	control	5.15850	2.42817	.179	-1.6473	11.9643
control	Focused	-22.53050*	2.42817	.000	-29.3363	-15.7247
	unfocused	-5.15850	2.42817	.179	-11.9643	1.6473

In other words, the focused CF group was able to isolate itself from the other groups. The computed p value in both male and female groups for the difference between focused and unfocused group and also between focused and control group is 0.000 which is less than 0.05, and it means that these differences are significant. The interesting point is that the p value in the male group for difference between unfocused and control group is .146 which is more than 0.05. The p value in the female group for difference between unfocused and control group is .179, which is more than 0.05. In other words, it can be concluded that although focused group did differently from the other groups, the unfocused group had a similar performance to the control group.

The first research question concerned the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on the learning of English simple past tense by Iranian male and female EFL learners. The results indicated that the focused CF group improved their correct use of the simple past tense from the pre-test to the post test to a significantly greater extent than the other two groups.

Conclusion

Concerning the general effectiveness of written CF, the results of the study corroborate those of recent studies on corrective feedback (Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener and Knoch, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a; Farrokhi and Sattarpour, 2011; Sheen, 2007; Sheen *et al.*, 2009). However, concerning the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF, this study's findings differ from those of Ellis *et al.*, (2008) and Rouhi and Samiei (2010). They failed to find significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused CF on developing grammatical accuracy of written performance. On the other hand, the results of the current study were very similar to those of Farrokhi and Sattarpour (2011) and Sheen *et al.*, (2009). They proved that the group receiving focused CF achieved the higher accuracy scores than the unfocused CF and the control groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that firstly, providing written CF is an effective way for responding to EFL learners' written performance in general. Secondly, focused written CF has more positive effect on these learners' acquisition of the targeted structures than the unfocused written CF.

The second research question investigated whether there is a difference between performances of the learners according to their gender. The results showed that, the scores of the female groups are higher than the males in the post-test. However, the difference is so marginal to be mentioned. It can be said that there is no difference between the two genders in terms of the effectiveness of CF. Concerning the general effects of written CF apart from its specific type, the results of this study are in line with the study of Heift (2004) who found that gender and language proficiency do not have any significant impacts on students' responses to CF.

The third research question investigated whether two factors interact. The findings of the study showed that in both gender groups, the two experimental groups receiving feedback did better than the control group. However, the focused CF group outperformed the unfocused CF group in both genders. The control group did not show any significant changes from pre-test to post-test in both gender groups. The scores of the female groups in all focused, unfocused and control groups were higher than the male groups' scores, but the difference is so marginal. It revealed that providing focused written CF could lead to more improvement on accurate use of the targeted structures by EFL learners. According to Sheen *et al.*, (2009), one reason that unfocused CF was not as effective as focused CF is that when the correction addresses a range of grammatical errors, learners are unable to process the feedback effectively, and even if they attend to the corrections, they are unable to work out why they have been corrected. Han (2002) has also argued that "a consistent focus on one aspect of L2 use" is one of the key conditions for recasts (as one type of CF) to have an effect on acquisition. Finally, Sheen *et al.*, (2009) has pointed out the probable reasons of differential effectiveness of focused and unfocused CF as follows:

Focused CF may enhance learning by helping learners to (1) notice their errors in their written work, (2) engage in hypothesis testing in a systematic way and (3) monitor the accuracy of their writing by tapping into their existing explicit grammatical knowledge. In contrast, unfocused CF runs the risk of (1) providing CF in a confusing, inconsistent and unsystematic way and (2) overburdening learners (p. 567).

From the pedagogical point of view, the results of this study are important for second and foreign language teachers to establish which type of written CF, whether focused or unfocused, helps to improve accuracy of learners' written performance. As this study revealed, teachers should feel confident that providing error correction alone on specific functional uses of limited number of rule-based features (focused CF) is more effective and helps learners to improve better in accurate use of these features than correcting all of the existing errors from different grammatical features in learners' writing. Consequently, it is suggested that language teachers provide their learners with more systematic and focused form of written CF rather than unsystematic forms, which may overload the learners' minds.

Considering the limitations of the study, it is recommended that teachers investigate the differential effects of the focused and unfocused CF on grammatical features other than English paste tense to shed more light on the issue of efficacy of written CF. Furthermore, adding a delayed post-test to the design of the future studies would be useful in testing the long-term effects of these two types of feedbacks. In addition, the variables of language proficiency and age of the participants can be taken into account in future studies to see whether there is any difference in the effects of focused and unfocused CF between students with low and high language proficiency or across different age ranges of participants. In addition, it would be very revealing to investigate students' attitudes towards focused and unfocused CF by accompanying a questionnaire to the study. We also need, for example, to conduct replication studies to know just how practical focused CF is in different teaching contexts to be able to generalize the findings of the current study.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

A paper corrected by focused corrective feedback: An eagle, overwhelm[overwhelmed] with sorrow, satted[sat] on the tree with a Kite. "Why I see you with such a rueful look?' A mate is suitable for me, and I am not able to find one." "Take me," tell [told]the Kite, "I am stronger. The Eagle, persuad[persuaded] by these words, accepted as her mate. Eagle said, "Fly off and bring it back to me." Ostrich you promised." The Kite, soaring aloft into the air, brought back the mouse "Is this fulfillment of your promise?' The Kite say[said], "That I might attain your royal hand, there is nothing that I would not have promised, however much I knew that I must failed[fail] in the performance."

Appendix B

A paper corrected by unfocused corrective feedback: One farmer place[placed] net on newly-sown plow lands and catch[cought] Cranes, which came to pick up his seed. With they[them] he [trapped] a Stork that was fractured his leg in [the] net and spare[spared] his life. Let me go free this once. My broken limb excite[excites] your pity. And, I am no Crane, I am a Stork, a bird; and see how I love my father and mother. Look to my feathers. The Farmer laughs [laughed]aloud and said, "It is like you say, I only know this: I am[have] taken you and you must die .