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A Comparison Study of the Effects of Implicit and Explicit Corrective Feedback on EFL Learners' Levels of Grammatical Accuracy

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Abstract: Regarding the importance of the term corrective feedback, this study was an attempt to investigate probable impacts of explicit and implicit corrective feedbacks on learners' levels of grammatical range and accuracy in their language learning and production. One-hundred pre-intermediate EFL learners, with an age range of 18-26, were participated in this study. They were assigned into four groups: one control group who received no treatment and three experimental groups who received three different types of corrective feedbacks (recast, error code, and explanation). The outcomes of the present study confirmed the efficacy of explicit feedback strategies than that of implicit and suggested that learners who used explanation as an explicit corrective feedback strategy achieved higher scores than those who used recast and error code feedback strategies.

Keywords: Corrective feedback; Metalinguistic feedback; Grammatical accuracy; Recast; Error code; explanation.

1. Introduction

In second language acquisition, a controversial topic that attracted the attention of most practitioners and researchers in SLA domain is providing Corrective Feedback (CF). In language teaching zone, error correction and the value of corrective feedback has been an issue of significant debate and has a continues history. CF has been investigated from different aspects of error correction such as the type that best fits certain groups of learners, and from different perspectives such as oral anxiety (DeKeyser, 1993), efficacy (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), and learners' preferences (Elwood and Bode, 2014), just to name a few. Sheen (2007) defined feedback as a teacher's reactive move that invites a learner to attend to the grammatical accuracy of the utterance produced by the learner. According to Ellis *et al.* (2006), CF takes the form of one or a combination of the following responses by a teacher when a learner makes an error: an indication that the learner committed an error, the provision of correct form of the error, and the provision of some metalingual explanation regarding the error (p. 340). The considerable characteristics of corrective feedback make it worthy of application. Ryan (1997) represents that providing feedback is effective and can make students aware about their current writing skills. Despite this widespread perception, much less agreement exists on the kinds of feedback that actually make a difference, or even on the kinds of gains in proficiency that can be expected from feedback. Numerous factors must be considered in any study of feedback to determine which ones are actually influential. For example, feedback can be provided by the teacher, other students, or an automated system on a computer. Feedback can be written or spoken, and it can focus on content, organization, grammatical form, or usage (e.g., spelling). Therefore, the type of feedback is an essential part of the language learning process on linguistic errors. Ellis (2008) categorizes types of corrective feedback into: direct corrective feedback (CF), indirect CF, Metalinguistic CF, Focused and unfocused CF, Electronic feedback and reformulation.

Therefore, the researcher aimed at finding out which of the corrective feedback strategies best serves EFL learners at pre-intermediate level with their grammatical accuracy. For that reason, this study is an attempt to investigate and compare the efficacy of three different corrective feedback techniques, namely, recast, error code, and explanation, among Iranian EFL university learners.

1.1. Literature Review

In the literature of second language acquisition, various terms have been used for the process of providing corrective feedback. Brandet (2008) proposes that feedback is considered as information provided to the learners and is related to some aspects of their performance on various tasks. Generally, in language learning process, the term feedback refers to information given to the learners by the teacher, peers, or others which they can use to revise their inter language.

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In language learning, the term "feedback" refers to information given to learners which they can use to revise their inter language. A distinction is made between "positive" and "negative" feedback. Positive feedback refers to information that indicates a hypothesis is incorrect (Ellis, 2000).

Good (1973) states that positive feedback refers to reciprocal interaction of parts of a dynamic system such that increasing out of part of the system so affects input as in turn to increase output of another part. Negative feedback refers to the reciprocal interaction of parts of a dynamic system such that increasing output of part of the system so affects input as in turn to decrease output of another part (ibid). It is useful to distinguish "cognitive" and "affective" feedback; the former relates to actual understanding while the latter concerns the motivational support that interlocutors provide each other with during an interaction (Ellis, 2000).

Along with varying definitions of error feedback, some main strategies used by teachers in reacting to students' errors have been identified. Following Ellis (2008) classification, teachers use direct and indirect error feedback. Direct error feedback or overt correction is provided when the teacher writes the correct form in students' papers while in the later, the teacher just indicates indirectly the location of the error. The indirect corrective feedback can be categorized into indicating along with locating the error and indicating only types.

There are considerable debates among teachers and researchers on whether and how to give L2 students feedback on their grammatical errors (Ferris, 2002;2004; Truscott, 1996;1999). Truscott (1996) stated that grammar correction should be abandoned and that it has no place in writing courses. Ferris (2002) believes that "students need distinct and additional intervention from their writing teachers to make up their deficits and develop strategies for finding, correcting, and avoiding errors" (p. 4).

Bitchener and Knoch (2010) stated that "learners who notice the difference between target – like input and their non-target-like output are able to modify it as target like output" (p. 194). Gass (1990) argued against the notion that just by presentation comprehensible input, learners can convert the information to intake and consequently to output. He stated that corrective feedback act as an attention getting device and fossilization might occur without it.

As it is shown by the results of these and many other studies, there is still considerable contradiction among scholars on the positive role of error feedback on improving learners' second language acquisition. On that account this study endeavors to determine to what extent different types of feedback, i.e. metalinguistic and recast influence students' language learning.

1.2. Empirical Background

Considering the role of providing different kinds of corrective feedbacks in EFL context, a bulk of studies has been done on investigating various corrective feedback types on improving learners' second language acquisition.

Ellis *et al.* (2008), addressed the differential effects of focused and unfocused feedback on accuracy improvement of English as Foreign Language student writings. Both feedback methods helped long-term accuracy of EFL learners more than no feedback method. This indicated that CF is effective in itself, at least where English articles are concerned. However difference in the performance of focused and unfocused feedback groups was non-significant.

According to Ellis (2008), there are some theories which offer that focused CF is more successful than other types of feedback since learners are more likely to pay attention to those corrections which focus on specific error types.

Sheen (2007), examined the differential effects of two approaches (direct and meta-linguistic) to focused feedback on the accurate use of English definite and indefinite articles in ESL student writings. This study showed that focused written CF helped improve ESL learners' accuracy, especially when meta-linguistic feedback was provided.

Sheen (2007) investigated the differential effects of the provision of direct focused written CF accompanied by oral meta-linguistic negotiation and mere direct written CF on the accuracy of EFL writing. The erroneous use of the forms in focus for the experimental group was negotiated in addition to CF provided, the erroneous use of the forms in focus was corrected through CF for the contrast group, and some comments on the quality of writings were provided for the control group. Both the experimental and the contrast groups showed improvement over time. The study showed that complementation of direct written CF and meta-linguistic discussion induced positive effects on writing accuracy, and that direct written CF with meta-linguistic discussion was superior to direct CF without such discussion.

In a study done by Lyster (1998), it was found that recasts are less likely to be successful at drawing learners' attention to their ill-form output, at least in content based classroom where recasts are not likely to be perceived by young learners at alternative or identical forms which are fulfilled other than corrective ones. Contrary to non-corrective repetition in classroom discourse, recasts deal with pursuing confirmation or the correction of errors from students' side. In Lyster (1998) study Recasts did not seem to be able to provide learners with negative evidence perhaps due to the fact that learners did not faced the correct form before.

In a study done by Kormos and Denes (2004) it was seen that fluency is not only a temporal phenomenon but some variables such as accuracy and grammatical complexity are also taken into consideration. It was seen that those who were fluent regarding high degree of speed in their speech also depicted more accuracy in speaking. The criteria they proposed for accuracy includes such factors as speed, pace, smoothness, and grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, Elder *et al.* (2002) investigated the impact of performance condition on perception of task difficulty. By the shift from the grammatical ability of learners to their real performance, the instruments of measuring this

ability really changed. They found that more complex tasks distract students' attention from the form and direct it towards context.

2. Research questions

1. What is the effect of recast as a corrective feedback on grammatical accuracy?
2. What is the effect of error code feedback on grammatical accuracy?
3. What is the effect of explanation feedback on grammatical accuracy?
4. Are there any significant differences among providing different kinds of corrective feedbacks (recast, error code, and explanation) on grammatical accuracy?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Four intact pre-intermediate EFL classes in an Iranian context provided the sample of the participants for the current study. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 26. Out of the total of 127 students, 100 students, majoring English at Islamic Azad University in Maragheh, were selected as the participants of the study. The participants had been placed in their level based on their scores on Preliminary English Test (PET). Accordingly, the participants were assigned into four groups: one control group who received no corrective feedback and three experimental groups who received three different kinds of corrective feedbacks (recast, error code, and explanation). Out of 100 learners participating in the study, 63 were females and 47 were males. The classes were held for four hours (or two sessions) a week, for eight sessions.

3.2. Instruments

In order to measure learning gains which might have occurred during treatment sessions, three testing instruments were utilized in the study. Before treatment sessions, the participants were supposed to take the Preliminary English Test (PET) to ensure the homogeneity of the groups in terms of their L2 proficiency.A pre-test and a post-test of grammar were designed for the measurement procedure of this study. The tests comprised of 30 statements that contained one error relevant to the special target linguistic structure. The students were required to specify the error and provide the correct form of the erroneous part.

3.3. Procedure

The study aimed to scrutinize the effects of three different types of feedback techniques, namely, recast, error code, and explanation feedback, on improving students' grammatical accuracy in a quasi-experimental design. In order to fulfill the current study, according to the students' general proficiency test scores (PET), one hundred students out of a population of one hundred and twenty seven whose scores ranged between one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean, studying English in Islamic Azad University in Maragheh, were selected as the participants. The students were randomly assigned into four intact groups: one control group who received no CF and three experiments groups who received three different CF techniques. Before treatment sessions the students were supposed to take a grammar pre-test to measure their level of grammatical knowledge. The main target structures were learning passive voices and conditional sentences. These target structures of the study were chosen because of two major reasons. First of all, the researcher intended to examine the role of CF on previously learned structures to gain more control over those structures rather than completely new ones. The second reason was based on the idea of other teachers and most of the students in which these target structures were identified as some types of the recurring errors among the learners. The students in the control group were required to study these target structures but received no CF techniques and their errors were corrected in a conventional way (explicit direct correction).

Example 1: Ahmad is reading an English book (change to passive)
Learner: An English book is reading by Ahmad.
Teacher: No. "Is reading" is not correct. You should say "an English book is being read by Ahmad".

The participants' errors in experimental group one were corrected by using recast as a CF technique. Recasts were operationalized as a reformulation of a learner's errant utterance, without changing the original meaning intended by the learner in a communicative activity (Sheen, 2007). Recasts in the current study were delivered with no extra or unusual stress or emphasis on the corrected part of the learner's incorrect utterance. The following example from the current study's database represents how recasts were operationalized in the study:

Example 2: Ali eats an apple. (Change to passive)
Learner: An apple eats.
Teacher: An apple is eaten. (The teacher emphasized on "is eating")

In experimental group two, the teacher made use of error coded correction as a CF technique. Error coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of the error involved is indicated with a code. The following example demonstrates the use of error code feedback in this study:

Example3: (learning conditional sentences)
Learner: I pass the exam if I study hard.
Teacher: I pass (Future V) if I study hard.

The teacher provided CF in the form of grammatical explanation of errors for the subjects in experimental group three. In this group, the teacher numbers errors in text and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the end of the text.

Example 4: (learning conditional sentences)

Learner: She got the best score if she read this book.

Teacher: She got (1) the best score if she read this book the day before the exam.

(1) – You should change the tense of the verb, because in conditional sentences you should pay attention to the tense of the verb in the conditional sentence and modify the tense of the second verb in the response sentence.

The students in all groups were required to study comments and apply them in their subsequent papers. As a final point, the participants were asked to take a grammar post-test. The data sheets were collected and submitted to SPSS for windows to analyze the efficacy of different CF techniques.

4. Data Analysis

Having collected all data from the pre-test and the post-test, the researcher employed SPSS for windows to calculate the impact of different types of corrective feedbacks - namely: recast, error code, and explanation – on Iranian learners' grammatical accuracy. To this end, the obtained data were analyzed through the use of analysis of variance (ANOVA).

As aforementioned, to ensure the homogeneity of the students regarding their previous grammatical knowledge, a pre-test was administered. To see whether there is a significant difference among scores, a one-way ANOVA was run. Tables 1 and 2 represent descriptive and one-way ANOVA results respectively.

Table-1. descriptive Statistics of the Scores of Pre-Test among Four Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
control	25	15.7600	3.92938	.78588	14.1380	17.3820	10.00	23.00
recast	25	15.8000	3.53553	.70711	14.3406	17.2594	10.00	24.00
error code	25	15.9200	2.95691	.59138	14.6994	17.1406	10.00	21.00
explanation	25	15.8800	2.94845	.58969	14.6629	17.0971	10.00	20.00
Total	100	15.8400	3.31729	.33173	15.1818	16.4982	10.00	24.00

Table-2. One-Way ANOVA of the Pre-Test Scores among Four Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.400	3	.133	.012	.998
Within Groups	1089.040	96	11.344		
Total	1089.440	99			

The results presented in Table 1 indicated that the mean scores among the four groups are approximately at the same level. As well, according to the results of the ANOVA in Table 2, there is no significant difference among the four groups in terms of their proficiency level in grammatical knowledge in pre-test.

To assess the efficiency of each type of corrective feedback strategy and to answer the aforementioned research questions, the post-test scores were submitted to one –way ANOVA analysis. Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate the results.

Table-3. Descriptive Statistics of the Scores of Post-Test among Four Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
control	25	16.1600	3.54354	.70871	14.6973	17.6227	11.00	23.00
recast	25	17.3200	2.79464	.55893	16.1664	18.4736	13.00	25.00
error code	25	18.3200	2.89713	.57943	17.1241	19.5159	13.00	24.00
explanation	25	18.6400	2.92803	.58561	17.4314	19.8486	13.00	23.00
Total	100	17.6100	3.16194	.31619	16.9826	18.2374	11.00	25.00

As it is demonstrated in table 3, there is considerable difference between the mean scores of the post-test and the scores of the pre-test. Additionally, the difference among the post-scores of the groups is significant. The participants in the explanation group outperformed the other participants. As well, those who received error code as

corrective feedback strategy performed better than that in recast and in the control groups. Finally, participants in the recast group were superior to the control group. (Explanation=18.64> Error code=18.32> Recast=17.32> Control=16.16). In order to find out whether the difference among the scores of the groups is significant, a one-way ANOVA was run. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table-4. One-Way ANOVA of the Post-Test Scores among Four Groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	99.710	3	33.237	3.481	.019
Within Groups	916.480	96	9.547		
Total	1016.190	99			

Concerning the different types of corrective feedback strategies, as it is demonstrated in Table 4, it can be concluded that the difference between the performances of the participants in control group and those who were in three experimental groups including recast, error code, and explanation , F(3.481), p=.01<.05. It means that using corrective feedback strategies had a positive effect on improving participants' grammatical accuracy. So as to distinguish where the difference lies, a Post hoc data analysis was run on the post-test scores. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table-5. Post-hoc Analysis Mean Differences among Four Groups

(I) groups	(J) groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
control	recast	-1.24000	.87392	.159	-2.9747	.4947
	error code	-2.24000*	.87392	.012	-3.9747	-.5053
	explanation	-2.56000*	.87392	.004	-4.2947	-.8253
recast	control	1.24000	.87392	.159	-.4947	2.9747
	error code	-1.00000	.87392	.255	-2.7347	.7347
	explanation	-1.32000	.87392	.134	-3.0547	.4147
error code	control	2.24000*	.87392	.012	.5053	3.9747
	recast	1.00000	.87392	.255	-.7347	2.7347
	explanation	-.32000	.87392	.715	-2.0547	1.4147
explanation	control	2.56000*	.87392	.004	.8253	4.2947
	recast	1.32000	.87392	.134	-.4147	3.0547
	error code	.32000	.87392	.715	-1.4147	2.0547

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

According to the outcomes of Table 5, the mean score of the control group had significant difference with the mean scores of the error code group and the explanation group. However, the difference between the mean score of the control group and the recast group is not significant. Of course, as it is clear, the mean score of the control group is lower than those in three experimental groups. Consequently, it can be claimed that these corrective feedback strategies (recast, error code, and explanation) had an impact on grammatical accuracy. Yet the difference between the performances of the three experimental groups on the post-test did not reach significance level.

In sum, in comparison with the control group, all aforementioned corrective feedback strategies were influential in learning grammatical structures. Since, the P value in all of them was statistically significant. However, among those feedback strategies, using explanation, as a kind of explicit metalinguistic feedback, was more effective than the others. Given that, according to the comparison of the mean scores of the groups in both pre-test and post-test, the divergence between the performance of the subjects whom explanation corrective feedback was assigned, in both pre and post-tests, was superior than the participants in other groups. In contrast, participants who received recast as a kind of implicit corrective feedback strategy achieved higher scores than the control group, but lower scores than those in other experimental groups who received explicit metalinguistic corrective feedback strategies. Therefore, it confirmed the success of metalinguistic feedback strategies usage in general, and explanation in particular, than implicit feedback strategy, recast.

5. Discussion

The main objective of the present study was two folds: first it was designed to compare the effective of metalinguistic explicit corrective feedback strategies (error code and explanation) and implicit corrective strategies (recast), then to confirm the usefulness of each of these types of corrective feedback strategies (recast, error code, and explanation) on EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in an Iranian context. The outcomes of the present study

confirmed the efficacy of explicit feedback strategies than that of implicit and suggested that learners who used explanation as an explicit corrective feedback strategy achieved higher scores than those who used recast and error code feedback strategies.

It is possible that explicit feedback is more likely to be seen as corrective as implicit feedback. In both implicit and explicit feedback, the teacher's correction overlaps with the learner's preceding move. However, metalinguistic feedback needs around six words as opposed to one word needed with recasts. This possibly makes metalinguisitic feedback more apparent as overtly corrective, perhaps making it more likely that the learner will successfully repair the error following the feedback move (Ellis, 2008).

Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2008) believe implicit corrections may be more meaning-based than explicit corrections. The learners may not interpret the implicit feedback as providing error correction. Instead, they might perceive it as the researcher continuing the flow of communication. They say explicit correction may possibly better help with target grammar features because the information in the feedback helps the learners confirm rules in their developing L2 grammars. Implicit correction may not be as effective as explicit correction because it may not provide the learners with enough information. This could imply that implicit correction may be less effective in allowing learners to understand what is wrong with their incorrect utterance.

The result of the present study is in line with the study carried out by Fawbush (2010). In the study, he focused on whether his middle school ESL students benefit more from implicit or explicit corrective feedback. He made use of metalinguistic information for explicit feedback and recast for implicit corrective feedback. The results point to a slight advantage for metalinguistic feedback.

Another study done by Carroll (2001) tested forming nouns to verbs with 100 adult low-intermediate ESL learners in 2001. The participants were tested with conversations in sentence format. The results of the study concluded that all types of feedback helped students learn the targeted items, but few differences existed between the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit corrective feedback.

Another study conducted in 2003 by Sanz (2003) studied 28 first-year university learners of Spanish studying pronouns between the object and verb and placed them into two groups. Group one received metalinguistic feedback and group two received implicit feedback. Sentence completion and written video retelling found that both groups considerably increased ability to supply the target structure with no difference between the groups.

Finally, two studies were conducted in 2004, one by Lyster (2004) and one by Rosa and Leow; each used corrective feedback with participants and divided them into three groups. Explicit feedback outperformed recasts and the control group.

However, recast studies show implicit feedback is effective in terms of L2 acquisition (Ellis *et al.*, 2006). Of the previous studies, Leeman (2003) found recasts to be the more effective type of corrective feedback.

6. Conclusion

Concerning the effects and the quality of teacher corrective feedback including their legibility and their attendance by the students, this study was set out to implement a process-oriented approach to grammatical accuracy and to provide the explicit metalinguistic and implicit teacher corrective feedback strategies, first to compare the overall effects of explicit and implicit feedbacks and secondly, to see which form of corrective feedbacks (recast, error code, and explanation) result in more grammatical accuracy progress. The results revealed that explicit metalinguistic corrective feedback strategies can have a positive role in improving grammatical accuracy, while recast as an implicit corrective feedback strategy was less influential than explicit ones. As well, of the two metalinguistic modes, the explanation one lead to more significant improvement compared to the error code one, suggesting that Iranian EFL students benefit more from more direct and detailed forms of feedback rather that more indirect and brief ones. This study shed more light on the effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback as a meaningful form of input which encourages students to analyze and modify their output (self-repair). The findings of this study can help instructors to provide their students with the most useful type of feedback to ensure their improvement in grammatical accuracy. Moreover, these findings may lead to the increase in learner's self-awareness of their own improvement in grammatical knowledge. In other words, provision of metalinguistic feedback led to a significantly fewer errors in grammar and helped learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor their own learning, become more independent learners, and develop accuracy. Therefore, teachers are recommended to find the most effective corrective feedback that students need in order to learn a foreign language.

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