

# Differential effects of two types of written corrective feedback (direct focused and direct unfocused) on the accurate use of grammatical forms by teenage EFL learners

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## Abstract

This study examined the differential effect of two types of written corrective feedback (CF) which are direct focused CF and direct unfocused CF in improving teenage EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in the short term and in the long term. Using one intact class in a band 3 secondary school in HK, two groups were formed: focused group (n=17) and unfocused group (n=19). During the 8-week experimental period, the students completed three tests (pre-test, post-test, delayed post-test). Based on the data from the tests, it is found out that both type of corrective feedback have a positive influence on students' accurate use of three targeted grammatical structures (i.e. Number agreement, subject-verb agreement, and propositions) both in the short term and in the long run. The difference between the effect of direct focused and direct unfocused CF remains significant in the short term while the former type largely exceeds the latter. However, with regard to the long-term mastery of the targeted linguistic forms, the two ways of giving feedback seem to have a similar effect. This finding indicated that teachers' decision on CF selection should depend on the acting time and different educational purposes.

## Keywords

HK, teenage EFL learners, direct focused CF, direct unfocused CF, quasi-experimental design

## Introduction

The question of whether teachers should provide grammar correction in EFL/ESL classes has been a matter of considerable debate for many years but still. There is no clear answer to date due to the various limitations of the research design. Another question is which type of corrective feedback (CF) is more effective in students' second language acquisition. These two questions are worth studying as they may inform teachers when they mark their students' writings. Given that if providing students

with the proper types of CF, teachers not only save the marking time but also optimize the effect of error correction. The right CF may be helpful in guiding students to concentrate on their grammatical errors or increasing their linguistic sensitivity. Considering the value of the topic for discussion, this article thus aims to examine the role of the written corrective feedback in the writing accuracy and discover whether there is a differential effect of two types of written CF (focused direct and unfocused direct) for teenage ESL learners in Hong Kong. I begin by reviewing an array of literature addressing CF of different types and then present the research questions and methodology of the study discussed in this paper. After that, based on the data collected from the experiment, results analysis and discussion will respectively unfold. Implication and limitation of this research will be indicated, followed by a conclusion.

## 1 Literature Review

To date, whether or not to correct written errors remains contentious. Controversy exists in currently available literature on SLA and L2 writing research. The most reputable critic Truscott (2007, p.270) claimed that 'the best estimate is that correction has a small harmful effect on students' ability to write accurately'. He further elaborated that the provision of CF would result in the avoidance of using certain language structures in subsequent writings where learners might make mistakes. To refute this claim, Chandler(2000), Ferris (1995, 1997, 2006) and Lalande (1982) conducted research to testify the effectiveness of the CF. However, the absence of a control group which received no correction constituted the major limitation in these studies. Similarly, other studies in favor of CF had various limitations such as the absence of a pretest (Kepner, 1991) or not measuring the grammatical accuracy in new pieces of writing (Sachs and Polio, 2007). Despite the controversy regarding the effectiveness of CF, plenty of literature has compared different

types of written feedback to investigate which type produces greater grammatical accuracy in learners' L2 writing. The distinction worth examination is between focused written CF and unfocused written CF. The former selects specific error types for correction and the latter responds to all (at least a range of ) the error types as long as they appear in learners' writing. There are a number of studies shedding light solely on the effectiveness of focused CF. For example, Sheen (2007) investigated the differential effect of focused direct-only correction and focused direct metalinguistic correction on the acquisition of articles by adult intermediate ESL learners. It examined a highly focused type of CF as it only treated one single error type. The results indicated that both the treatment groups gained in the posttests and outperformed the control group. Apart from this research, more studies regarding the same topic got positive results to prove the effectiveness of focused CF.

However, few researches compared the focused written CF with unfocused written CF except the one conducted by Ellis et al. (2008) and the one by (Sheen et al, 2009). The former utilized a quasi-experimental design involving the focused group, the unfocused group and a control group to examine the efficacy of the focused and unfocused written CF on the accurate use of articles by a group of Japanese college students. It was reported in their posttests that both treatment groups increased their accuracy without statistically significant differences between them. However, there is a solid reason to doubt this claim. The shortcoming is that the two different types of CF were not sufficiently distinguished (the targeted grammatical form 'articles' were prominent in both groups). To resolve the problem, the study by Sheen et al. (2009) limited the number of errors per linguistic feature to two in the unfocused CF group. However, this well-designed research was still not sufficiently reliable due to the short length of the treatment period which only lasted 3 weeks. By reviewing the above literature relating to CF, this article has discovered some research gaps worth further investigating in order to remedy the design flaws mentioned previously:

- ✓ The effect of CF for teenage ESL learners has been rarely examined.
  - ✓ Most research on writing CF deals solely with focused CF but pays little attention to the effect of unfocused CF.
  - ✓ The efficacy of incorporation of two types of CF (i.e. direct+focused, direct+unfocused) has rarely been investigated.
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## 2 Research Questions

The study proposed below was designed to investigate the following research question:

- Is there a difference in the effect of direct focused and direct unfocused CF on the learners' accurate use of the targeted linguistic forms in the short term and in the long term respectively?

The dependent variables in the research question are the accurate use of the targeted linguistic forms. It is influenced by the independent variables (the treatment). The varied treatment could be operationalized as follows:

- Direct focused written CF was operationalized as (1) indicating the location of errors by circling the errors of only one certain type of the targeted linguistic structures each time (i.e. Checking subject-verb agreement for the 1<sup>st</sup> writing assignment, checking number agreement for the 2<sup>nd</sup> writing assignment, and checking preposition for the 3<sup>rd</sup> writing assignment) and (2) providing the correct relevant forms. The errors here refer to three different situations, including the inappropriate omission, the wrong use and redundant use of the targeted linguistic forms. Take the second treatment as an example which requires teachers to only circle and correct the errors of number agreement.
  - Direct unfocused written CF was operationalized as (1) indicating the location of errors by circling the errors of a range of targeted linguistic structures (i.e. Checking subject-verb agreement, number agreement and preposition in each writing assignment) and (2) providing the correct relevant forms. The errors here refer to three different situations, including the inappropriate omission, the wrong use and redundant use of the targeted linguistic forms.
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## 3 Methodology

Drawing on the research by Ellis et al. (2008) and Sheen et al. (2009), the current study adopted a quasi-experiment design involving one intact classes of 40 students enrolled in the two experimental groups. The treatment consisted of three narrative writing tasks. In each task, students were required to write a short essay of around 150 to 200 words on assigned topics (i.e. Write about a person that you are very familiar with; write about your favourite movie; write an one-day activity plan for your school). Considering the current level of the students in writing narratives which was known from their past writing papers, guidelines on how to

construct the narrative of the particular topics were provided in the writing worksheet. Then different kinds of CF (direct focused CF and direct unfocused CF) were given to the experimental groups. The effectiveness of the two different CF was measured in error correction tests over three testing sessions (pretests, immediate post-tests, and delayed post-tests).

### 3.1 Participants

The participants enrolled in the current study were 2 English teachers and 1 intact English class in the St. Bonaventure College and High School. There were totally 40 students including 23 boys and 17 girls. The students were all 14 or 15 years old from Form 3. There were no English native speakers. 80% of the students were intermediate English learners according to the results of uniform tests and observations by subject teachers. Based on students' academic record, they were assigned to two groups according to the balance of language proficiency in each group. The sample size was 20 and 20 respectively for direct focused CF group and direct unfocused CF group. Due to some unexpected reasons (e.g. Sickness, lateness of submitting required writing worksheets), the valid participants were reduced to 36 students among which 17 were in the focused group and the other 19 were in the unfocused group. From the result of a questionnaire investigating what their Primary English curriculum had covered, it was discovered that all the students had learnt the targeted linguistic forms (i.e. Subject-verb agreement, number agreement and preposition). That becomes one reason for choosing those linguistic forms as the targeted language features. The other reason is that there was high frequency of those types of errors in students' daily work.

### 3.2 Testing Instruments

The test in the current study deployed over three testing sessions (pretests, immediate post-tests, delayed post-test), each being an error correction test. It consisted of 15 statements and each contained one error which fell into the category of targeted linguistic forms. It should be noted that the test questions for each testing session were not exactly the same in order to avoid the possibility that students might find the answer of their doubts in their private time and do better when they encounter the same question in the immediate post-test and delayed post-test. What students need to do in each test was circling the errors and then giving correct forms. Each step would be awarded 1 mark. Therefore, the full score for each test is 30 marks.

### 3.3 Procedure

The entire study was spread over a period of 8-week block practice. At the beginning of the study, all the students in the experimental groups took the two pretests to examine their existing ability to use the targeted forms. In each of the treatment sessions from week 2 to 4, students were first given 5 to 10 minutes to read the teachers' written corrective feedback and self correct if required. This would be done in class to ensure that every student read teacher's feedback carefully. The second part of the treatment session was a narrative writing task in which students needed to write a short article of around 150 to 200 words on assigned topics as homework. The post-tests started immediately in week 5 after reviewing the corrective feedback for the last writing task. The delayed posttests were performed in week 8.

Throughout the whole period, no explicit instructions in class on the targeted error categories were provided by teachers. Besides, to ensure the validity and reliability of the testing instruments, all the test papers and writing worksheets had been piloted among three students who were from the same intact class but were excluded from the experimental groups. Suitable adjustment had been made to make the written instruction more explicit and reader-friendly.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

To examine the effect of different CF, the results of the error correction tests over the three testing sessions were obtained and analyzed in a quantitative manner. One point was awarded for each indication of the wrong use or omission of the targeted linguistic forms. Another one point would be given if the student could provide the correct forms. The two scores should be added up to make the final score for the error correction test. Then, in order to answer the research question, several independent t-tests were conducted. To increase the reliability of this data analysis, 15 % of papers have been marked by a second researcher.

## 4 Results and discussion

### 4.1 Pre-test

As was mentioned before, the selection and grouping of the 36 students which were based on the result of their past uniform tests and reports from their English teachers sought a balance for the capability of grammatical knowledge. To ensure that the balance had been achieved, which means the students from the focused and unfocused groups had mastered grammatical knowledge to a similar

degree, an independent t-test must be used to test if there is a difference between the mean scores of pre-tests for two experimental groups and if the difference is significant. It is found in Table 2 that the mean scores and variation for both groups regarding the direct focused and direct unfocused CF are quite similar (focused:10.71 - unfocused: 11.47). Other statistics set out in Table 2 further revealed that there is no significant difference between the two groups ( $df=34$ ,  $tStat < tCritical$ ,  $p=0.50 > 0.05$ ). Therefore, it could be claimed that both groups have a similar starting point.

Table 2 T-test for mean scores of the pre-tests between two groups

	Variable 1 (focused group)	Variable 2 (Unfocused group)
Mean	10.71	11.47
Variance	11.97	11.26
df	34.00	
tStat	0.68	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.50	
tCritical two-tail	2.03	

To get a more detailed profile of students' current grammatical level, we should look deep into the statistics for different types of targeted linguistics forms. From Table 3, it appeared that the two groups have similar mean scores for the questions regarding the number agreement and subject-verb agreement. As for the accurate use of prepositions, unfocused group seemed to surpass the focused group a little bit. Overall, the performance at the starting point for both groups were not satisfactory as they did not even reach the half of the full marks (10), which reconfirms the need to include these types of linguistics forms into the experiment. The use of prepositions was especially alarming (1.82 out of 10, 2.84 out of 10).

Table 3 Mean scores of different types of questions in the pre-tests

	Focused	Unfocused
pre-test (Preposition)	1.82	2.84
pre-test (Number agreement)	4.65	4.32
pre-test (Subject-verb agreement)	4.24	4.32

#### 4.2 Comparing the grammatical gain in the short term (immediate post-test – pre-test)

Table 4 represents the means of grammatical gain between the pre-test and immediate post-test for both groups. The gains were quite substantial while the focused group had a higher gain (9.88 vs. 6.05). The t-test further verified the difference between the two groups were significant ( $df=34$ ,  $tStat > tCritical$ ,  $p=0.04 < 0.05$ ). However, not everyone in both groups had experienced similar progress. Revealed from the Variation for both groups, there was a bigger difference between the subjects within focused group (Variance: 32.74) than within unfocused group (Variance: 23.16).

Table 4 T-test of grammatical gain between the two groups in the short term

	Variable 1 (focused group)	Variable 2 (Unfocused group)
Mean	9.88	6.05
Variance	32.74	23.16
Standard Deviation	5.72	4.81
df	34.00	
tStat	2.18	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.04	
tCritical two-tail	2.03	

#### 4.3 Comparing the grammatical gain in the long term (delayed post-test – pre-test)

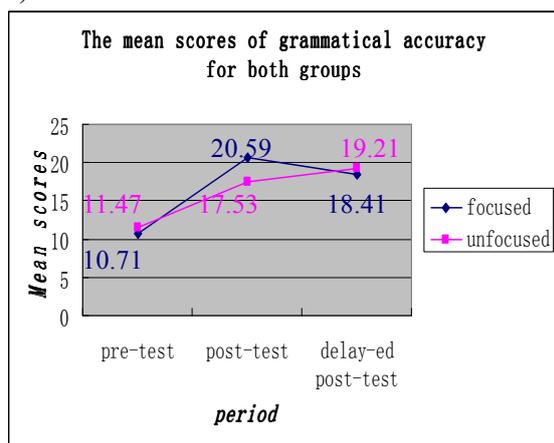
Table 5 represents the means of grammatical gain between the pre-test and delayed post-test for both groups. The gains in the long run for both groups were still quite appealing (7.71-7.74) and at the same time similar. The focused group had a slightly lower mean score. However, this difference was confirmed to be insignificant by a t-test ( $df=34$ ,  $tStat < tCritical$ ,  $p=0.98 > 0.05$ ). As for the Variation, there was a smaller difference between the subjects within focused group (Variance: 19.72) than within unfocused group (Variance: 24.65), which was contrary to the variance comparison done in the last part (comparing effect of different CF in a short term).

Table 5 T-test of grammatical gain between the two groups in the long term

	Variable 1 (focused group)	Variable 2 (Unfocused group)
Mean	7.71	7.74
Variance	19.72	24.65
Standard Deviation	4.44	4.96
df	34.00	
tStat	-0.02	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.98	
tCritical two-tail	2.03	

Based on the statistics and analyses above, some meaningful findings could be listed here and further discussion specializing in these aspects would be conducted in the next part of this essay.

First, the direct focused CF is more effective than direct unfocused CF in the short term in improving students' accurate use of targeted linguistic forms. However, the superiority of the direct CF was lost in the long run. Second, the Variation for grammatical gain remains high within the focused group and unfocused group all the time. Third, The grammatical gain keeps increasing during the 8-week experiment period for the unfocused group while it increases during the initial 5 weeks and then drops for the focused group. (See Diagram below)



## 5 Further discussion

Based on the findings mentioned above, some implications could be drawn to further enhance the teaching and learning in Hong Kong secondary schools regarding the three grammatical items. The fact that the effectiveness of focused and unfocused direct CF varies in the short term and long run

makes it difficult for us to decide which type of corrective feedback would be most beneficial for students. It should be noted that there was no best but the most suitable CF as the decision of CF selection depends on the purpose of education/teaching/learning. If the CF is intended to serve the high-stake exams, such as the HKDSE, focused direct feedback is suggested to be deployed to improve students' grammatical knowledge as it can easily help students make big progress in a short period. However, focused direct feedback would not weigh the same if long-term mastery of certain grammatical structures becomes the goal. In this case, both kinds of CF would be fine with direct focused CF having a small advantage over the other because of its characteristic of time-saving in marking process. As was reported in a survey conducted by CUHK in 2008, 85% of the Hong Kong secondary teachers worked longer than 11 hours per day and many of them suffered from a variety of mental sickness because of the heavy workload. Therefore, it is crucial to reduce their workload and using focused CF as feedback is advisable to be a useful strategy.

To ensure that either direct focused or direct unfocused CF can work effectively, teachers should bear in mind that the first thing they need to do is to help students form the habit of reading feedback from their teachers. There are some ways that can possibly encourage students to go through teachers' corrective feedback carefully when they get their writing back and meanwhile will not have any negative influence on the experiment discussed in this essay. Teachers can ask students to correct some mistakes by themselves if the same error occurs for the second time. In case that no same error is made in the same writing task, teachers can ask students to copy the sentence in which errors occur to ensure that students can recognize the incorrect linguistic forms. In addition, it would also be a feasible idea to ask students write a reflective summary of the frequent confusing grammatical patterns or structures regularly which may make reference to the mistakes they made in recent writing tasks and the feedback from their teachers.

The second noteworthy fact mentioned previously regarding the Variation within each experimental group leads us to think that it is not sufficient for teachers to simply write down corrective feedback. Instead, teachers should provide more tailored and detailed feedback to individuals to cater for their personal learning needs so that the variation in grammatical gain would not be that big.

The last finding proposed previously is surprising that students in the unfocused group become more accurate to use the targeted linguistic

forms after three weeks during which period they were not given any writing tasks and corrective feedback. The only assumption that I could make is that the participants may benefit from their personal tutoring on those targeted linguistic forms so that they performed better in the delayed post-test than the previous two. The research on differential effect of written CF designed would be more reliable if I can well introduce the purpose and procedure of the project and ask for students' cooperation to avoid any extra tutoring on the targeted grammatical structure.

## 6 Conclusion

This research aims to investigate whether there is a difference in the effect of two written corrective feedback (i.e. Direct focused and direct unfocused) in the short term and in the long run. After the 8-week experiment, it is found out from the results of three tests (i.e. Pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) that both type of corrective feedback have a positive influence on students' accurate use of three targeted grammatical structures (i.e. Number agreement, subject-verb agreement, and propositions) both in the short term and in the long run. The difference between the effect of direct focused and direct unfocused CF remains significant in the short term while the former type largely exceeds the latter. However, with regard to the long-term mastery of the targeted linguistic forms, the two ways of giving feedback seem to have a similar effect. This finding can well answer the research question and makes sense that teachers' decision on CF selection should depend on the acting time and different educational purposes.

Apart from the major finding, there are several facts worth discussing observed from the statistics of the tests. The Variation in the performance of targeted students in the three error correction tests for both groups gives the implication that Hong Kong teachers should give a variety of feedback to students to optimize their learning opportunity. Additionally, the unexpected improvement observed in the unfocused group in the accurate use of targeted grammatical forms during the three-week treatment-free period has not been successfully interpreted and illustrated. The only reasonable assumption is that the surprising phenomenon was due to the limitation of the experiment - the absence of explicit instruction which should have been given before the experiment was implemented. To make the research more polished and qualified, the purpose and procedures of the whole project should be clearly conveyed to every participant to ensure no one would do anything that could possibly have a negative influence on the validity and reliability of

the research.

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