

Written Corrective Feedback: The role of metalinguistic explanation

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Abstract

This study examined how learners benefit from teachers' provision of (a) indirect feedback (only), and (b) indirect feedback accompanied by oral metalinguistic explanation. 91 Japanese EFL university students completed three writing tasks in the space of nine weeks and were provided feedback on English article errors. Learners in the first group received indirect CF towards the English articles, the second group received indirect CF preceded by oral metalinguistic explanation, and the third group, the control group, did not receive feedback. The results indicated that the second group, but not the first, was able to make significant increase in the ability to use the articles. It may be the case that, while mere provision of indirect CF may be sufficient in helping learners *notice* the gap between their interlanguage and the target language, it may fall short of making them *understand* the target grammatical rule.

Keywords

metalinguistic information, written feedback

1 Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition, a substantial body of empirical studies has been conducted to explore the most efficient way of providing written corrective feedback (CF). Previous studies have pointed out that indirect feedback, a CF method in which a teacher indicates that an error has been made without providing the student writer the correct form, is helpful for learners as this type of CF requires learners to analyze their errors at a deep level of cognitive engagement (e.g., Sheen, 2011). In contrary, some researchers argue that indirect CF is ineffective because learners cannot always understand the intent of the correction, and thus favor the use of direct feedback, a CF method in which a teacher provides learners with the correct form (e.g., Chandler, 2003). As such, how

written errors should be treated remains a matter of controversy. Recently, however, it has been reported that when feedback is provided with metalinguistic information, learners are able to utilize written corrective feedback successfully (e.g., Sheen, 2011).

2 Research Question

The present study was conducted to answer the following question:

What effect does indirect written CF have on EFL learners' acquisition of English articles when they are provided with or without metalinguistic information?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 91 Japanese EFL university students. They were assigned to one of the following three groups: a group which did not receive written CF (Control Group, n = 29), a group which received indirect CF (Experimental Group 1, n= 29), and a group which received indirect CF with metalinguistic explanation via oral conference (Experimental Group 2, n = 30).

3.2 Target Grammatical Rules

The target grammatical rules on which the students received CF were ones that concerned the use of the English indefinite and definite articles.

3.3 Procedures

The procedures were as follows:

- 1) In the first week, the students took a pre-test. They listened to the story, *Three Little Pigs*, in English. The students were not allowed to take notes while they listened. They were then asked to rewrite the story in 20 sentences.
- 2) During weeks 2-10 the students underwent

three writing assignments.

- 3) Finally, the students took a post-test. This time, they were instructed to summarize *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

3.4 Scoring

Accuracy was calculated using Pica's (1994) formula: [(the total number of the target structure form supplied correctly by the student) ÷ (the total number of obligatory cases of the target structure form + the total number of overused forms)] x 100.

4 Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the pre- and post-tests. The one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant group differences in the pre-test scores among the three groups, $F(2, 85) = 2.09, p = 0.13$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the test scores

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Control	65.1	16.3	49.9	26.2
Indirect only	54.3	23.0	59.4	24.5
Indirect meta	52.3	19.9	65.6	18.0

To answer the research question, a two-way ANOVA test was performed. As regards the within-subjects effects of the treatment, the results showed that there was a significant interaction ($F(2, 85) = 7.17, p = 0.00$), indicating that the groups had significantly different changes from the pre- to the post-test. The results of a paired samples test showed that the group which received oral metalinguistic explanation increased significantly ($p = 0.00$), and that the control group decreased significantly ($p = 0.02$).

5 Discussion

The advantage of oral metalinguistic explanation was not unexpected. In fact, similar results have been reported in oral CF research. Ellis et al. (2006), for example, found from their study that learners who received metalinguistic CF outperformed those who received recasts. They concluded that metalinguistic information serves to develop learners' explicit knowledge and assist acquisition. According to Schmidt (1995), there are two levels of awareness: awareness at the level of noticing and awareness at the level of understanding. While noticing only covers

learners' detection and rehearsal of a linguistic form in the input, understanding involves awareness of abstract rules of language. It may be the case that indirect feedback alone can trigger the former (i.e., noticing the gap between their interlanguage (IL) and the target language (TL)); however, it is the metalinguistic information that can help learners to truly understand why their IL is unacceptable.

6 Conclusion

The results of the present study stress the importance of metalinguistic explanation in helping learners to notice the gap between their IL and the TL not only at the level of noticing but also at the level of understanding. As with all studies, however, the present study is not without limitations. First, the target structures in this study focused only on English definite and indefinite articles; further study is necessary to find out the role of written CF targeting a variety of linguistic forms. Second, only three writing tasks were completed in this study; therefore, further research is required to explore the effects of feedback over longer periods of time.

References

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