Differential effects of focused and unfocused written correction on the accurate use of grammatical forms by adult ESL learners

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Received 4 January 2009; received in revised form 1 May 2009; accepted 5 May 2009

Abstract

Building on Sheen’s (2007) study of the effects of written corrective feedback (CF) on the acquisition of English articles, this article investigated whether direct focused CF, direct unfocused CF and writing practice alone produced differential effects on the accurate use of grammatical forms by adult ESL learners. Using six intact adult ESL intermediate classes totaling 80 students, four groups were formed: Focused Written CF group (FG, n = 22), Unfocused Written CF group (UG, n = 23), Writing Practice Group (WPG, n = 16) and Control Group (CG, n = 19). A series of ANOVAs with post-hoc comparisons indicated that all three experimental groups (FG, UG and WPG) gained in grammatical accuracy over time in all the posttests. This suggested that doing writing tasks is of value by itself. The FG achieved the highest accuracy gain scores for both articles and the other four grammatical structures (i.e., copular ‘be’, regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition), followed by, in order, the WPG, UG and CG. Overall, these results suggested that unfocused CF is of limited pedagogical value whereas focused CF can contribute to grammatical accuracy in L2 writing.

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Keywords: Written corrective feedback; Feedback in second language writing; Focused error correction

1. Introduction

The question of whether teachers should provide feedback on grammar in the writing assignments of English as a second/foreign language students (ESL/EFL), and if so how, has been a matter of considerable debate in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Some researchers (e.g., Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Truscott, 2007) claim that grammar corrections do not have a positive effect on the development of L2 writing accuracy. According to the most extreme views, such as those of Krashen (1982) and Truscott (2007), corrective feedback (CF), which indicates to learners that there is an error in their linguistic output, is seen as not only ineffective but also potentially harmful. In contrast, other researchers (e.g., Bitchener and Knoch, 2008;
Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002; Sheen, 2007) claim that CF is of value in promoting greater grammatical accuracy. What makes this issue even more controversial is the variety of strategies for carrying out written CF (e.g., direct, indirect, metalinguistic CF). It is not just a question of whether CF is effective but also which type is effective.

The written CF literature (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2005; Polio et al., 1998) indicates that teachers and L2 writing researchers have favored the use of indirect feedback (i.e., where errors are indicated and students are asked to self-correct) and placed the emphasis on the revision process. Relatively few studies have investigated direct feedback (i.e., where learners are given the corrections) by comparing an experimental and a control group that did not receive any feedback. Moreover until recently, few studies had examined the effect of focused written CF (i.e., CF directed at a single linguistic feature).

Most recent written CF studies have utilized the methodology employed in SLA research. They have demonstrated that focused CF is facilitative of learning and thus have provided evidence to refute the critics of written CF (see Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007). More specifically, the findings of Sheen’s (2007) study suggest that written CF works when it is intensive and concentrated on a specific linguistic problem. Her study, in effect, constituted a challenge to the traditional, unfocused approach to correcting written errors in students’ writing.

Sheen (2007) noted that L2 writing research investigating CF has suffered from a number of methodological limitations (e.g., the lack of a control group as in Lalande, 1982; Robb et al., 1986). For this reason, research findings to date have failed to provide clear evidence that written CF helps learners improve linguistic accuracy over time. Thus, in her study, she examined the effects of direct, focused written CF using a methodology adopted from SLA, which attempted to avoid the kinds of methodological problems evident in many written CF studies.

Drawing on Sheen’s study of the effects of focused written CF on the acquisition of English articles, the study reported in this article aims to investigate the relative efficacy of focused and unfocused written CF on the accurate use of grammatical forms by adult ESL learners. Also, to address the claims of Truscott (1996, 2004), it examines whether writing practice without CF leads to gains in grammatical accuracy.

2. Literature review

To date, the written CF literature is replete with studies that have attempted to shed light on the key question researchers and ESL writing teachers have asked: ‘Does written CF help ESL writers to improve their written accuracy in writing over time’? The following section will briefly review the literature on this topic in terms of whether the findings of previous written CF studies constitute evidence for or against CF and in so doing, it will identify and raise some key issues that need to be addressed in order to advance our understanding of the role written CF plays in helping ESL learners/writers.

2.1. Research evidence against CF

Several researchers have argued that written CF does not have a positive effect on the development of students’ L2 writing accuracy (e.g., Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 2007; Sheppard, 1992). For example, Sheppard (1992) analyzed the effects of two types of CF (indirect error coding CF vs. holistic comments in the margins) on the development of L2 students’ accurate use of verb tense, punctuation, and subordination. His students wrote seven essays which then were analyzed for accuracy with regard to the targeted linguistic features. He reported that the group that received holistic comments outperformed the group that received CF and further noted that the CF group regressed over time by avoiding the use of the complex structures as a result of the CF. This led him to conclude that grammar error correction had a negative effect. Similarly, Kepner (1991) compared error corrections and message-related comments on American university learners’ written Spanish. Some of the journal entries collected over the period of 12 weeks were analyzed. The results of his study showed that grammar error correction did not lead to significant improvement in accuracy. Kepner concluded that corrective feedback which focuses on grammar has little value.

Apart from some problematic methodological issues in these two studies (for a discussion of these see DeKeyser, 1993 and Sheen, 2007), both studies investigated the effect of unfocused CF on the written accuracy
of ESL learners in that the correction in their studies targeted a range of errors. Critics of written CF make their case based on the traditional unfocused approach to correcting students’ written work. However, where grammatical accuracy is concerned, the utility of written CF might eventually lie in the intensity and focus of the correction teachers provide to L2 writers.

2.2. Research evidence for written CF

Previous written CF research has had only limited success in showing that written CF can have a positive effect on the development of L2 writing accuracy (e.g., Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Robb et al., 1986). The fact that these studies measured the effectiveness of written CF in different ways makes it very difficult to compare results and reach any conclusions. Some researchers evaluated students’ improvement in accuracy based on an analysis of the revisions which the students made in their subsequent drafts (e.g., Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris and Roberts, 2001); others looked at improvement in new pieces of writing (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Robb et al., 1986).

These studies are also vulnerable to criticism. For example, Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Ferris and Roberts (2001) contend that their studies show that indirect written CF has a positive effect on the development of L2 writing accuracy but critics such as Truscott (1999, 2004, 2007) have challenged this claim on the grounds that the measures of progress used in the studies (i.e., revisions of previous texts rather than new pieces of writing) are inadequate. As Sheen (2007) pointed out, “[to] claim that error correction results in learning, one must examine whether the improvement in revisions carries over to a new piece of writing or if the improvement is manifested on a posttest or delayed posttest” (p. 258). In other words, it can be argued that students’ ability to edit marked errors in their papers is not a valid indication of learning.

However, more recently, a few studies have examined the value of written CF by measuring progress in new pieces of writing (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007). Bitchener et al. (2005), for example, investigated the extent to which different types of CF (direct CF with and without oral conferencing) influence the accuracy in new pieces of writing. Bitchener et al. limited the provision of written CF to only errors involving past tense, definite article (‘the’), and prepositions. They found that both types of direct CF had a significant impact on accuracy in new pieces of writing but that this was only evident for the definite article and past tense. The same type of feedback did not have a significant positive effect on accurate use of prepositions. The authors explained their findings by referring to Ferris’s (2002) argument that if a grammatical feature is clearly rule-based (e.g., definite article and past-tense), it is more treatable than when a feature is item-based (as with many prepositions). Consequently, the authors suggested that direct CF might be effective in treating some but not all errors, and that teachers should be selective with regard to the errors they address in students’ writing.

Whereas Bitchener et al. compared two direct types of CF, Chandler (2003) investigated the effects of direct and indirect types of CF. Her participants were asked to write five chapters of an autobiographical text over a period of time. The effect of written CF was measured on the new chapters as well as on their revised texts. This study showed that direct written CF (where all errors were corrected and the type of error described) led to the greatest improvement in students’ accuracy both in immediate revisions and in subsequent writing. This led Chandler to conclude that direct written CF has the largest impact on the development of students’ accuracy providing that the students incorporate the corrections in their revisions. However, Chandler did not include a control group that did not receive any feedback. The inclusion of a control group that simply wrote the five series of autobiographical texts without any corrections would have enabled her to see whether writing practice by itself was sufficient to produce improvements in grammatical accuracy over time. This is another design problem that has been pointed out in the past (see Truscott, 2007).

2.3. Recent research evidence for direct CF

Gue´nette’s (2007) insightful and critical review of written CF research identified a number of problematic issues in L2 writing research (e.g., the lack of a control group, the difficulty in controlling various classroom activities that might have an influence on writing development and the incentive factor of student grades). These problems arose as a result of using intact L2 writing classes where students were expected to receive
Sheen (2007) examined the effects of focused CF (targeting only one linguistic feature) 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-metalinguistic group (the researcher indicated errors, provided correct forms, and supplied metalinguistic explanations), and a control group (the researcher administered tests but provided no CF). The effectiveness of the CF was measured on pretests, posttests, and delayed posttests which involved (a) a narrative task (students read and rewrote a story), (b) a speeded dictation (students wrote down several sentences read by the teacher), (c) a writing test (students wrote a story based on a set of pictures), and (d) an error correction test (students corrected erroneous sentences). 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.

Nevertheless, teachers of writing may be sceptical of Sheen’s study on the grounds that the approach to written correction that she adopted does not conform to their understanding of the overall purpose for correcting students’ written work. This clearly entails more than correcting a single grammatical error. Written CF is complex. It addresses different aspects of writing – content, organization/rhetoric and mechanics, as well as linguistic accuracy. The question arises, however, whether written CF should deal with all these aspects at the same time or address different aspects selectively when correcting different pieces of writing. In SLA studies (e.g., Ellis et al., 2006; Han, 2002; Lyster, 2004), oral CF has proved effective precisely because it was focused (i.e., it addressed a specific linguistic feature repeatedly). One reason why previous studies of written CF failed to demonstrate any effect on students’ accuracy in subsequent writing may simply be that the linguistic feedback was not sufficiently focused and intensive. This is evident in the fact that a number of recent written CF studies that investigated focused rather than unfocused CF (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008) have shown CF to be effective.

It is important, then, to distinguish two approaches to correcting students’ written work. The traditional approach is what might be called an unfocused approach. This involves providing correction on a wide range of errors in each piece of students’ written texts. However, as noted in Sheen (2007), this approach runs the risk of overloading students’ attentional capacity. The alternative approach is a focused approach. This can be achieved by selecting a specific grammatical problem that teachers have observed in their students’ writing and directing the CF at just this feature for a limited period of time. The only study to date that has addressed this distinction is Ellis et al. (2008). This study compared the effects of focused and unfocused CF on the accurate use of English definite and indefinite articles and reported that both types of feedback were equally effective in improving accuracy. However, one of the methodological problems with this study, acknowledged by the authors, was that the focused and unfocused CF were not sufficiently distinguished (i.e., article corrections figured strongly in both). Another limitation of this study was that their measure of learning involved just one structure – articles (i.e., they did not examine whether focused CF had any effect, negative or positive, on the accuracy of structures not targeted by the CF). There is an obvious need to investigate what effects the two types of CF have on a broader range of grammatical structures.

The present study sets out to address this issue by taking care to distinguish the implementation of focused and unfocused CF more clearly than in Ellis et al. and also by systematically investigating whether the focused approach benefits ESL learners and whether it proves more effective than an unfocused approach. To that end, this study examines (1) the effects of the focused and unfocused approaches on both a single grammatical target (articles) and on a broader range of grammatical structures (Ashwell, 2000) (i.e., articles, copula ‘be’, regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition), and (2) the extent to which writing practice without any CF can lead to gains in accuracy over time.

It should be noted that unlike the focused approach, the unfocused approach constitutes a relatively unsystematic way of correcting errors. Given that corrective feedback in the classroom is often provided in an ad-hoc way (i.e., sporadically and often inconsistently on a range of grammatical features) there is an obvious need to investigate unfocused CF. Also, it is important to investigate whether focused CF has an effect not only on the structure targeted by the CF but on other structures as it is possible that such CF might sensitize students to the need to pay attention to grammatical accuracy and, therefore, have a general effect on their writing.
3. Research questions

The following three research questions guided the research:

1. Is there any difference in the effect of focused and unfocused error correction on adult ESL learners’ accurate use of English articles?
2. Is there any difference in the effect of focused and unfocused error correction on adult ESL learners’ accurate use of grammatical features other than that which is the focus of the correction?
3. Is there an effect for written narrative tasks without error correction on the accurate use of grammatical features other than that which is the focus of the correction?

4. Method

4.1. Setting

The data were collected from six intact language classrooms in a pre-academic non-credit ESL program at a US college in the Washington DC area. The ESL program serves immigrant and international students in one of the most affluent counties in the area and is considered one of the biggest and most reputable ESL programs in the state in which it is located. The program attracts adult students who are motivated and interested in pursuing an academic (either undergraduate or graduate) or a professional career. Some students have MA degrees and also wish to advance to doctoral programs. Prior to beginning the current study, the researcher visited the site several times and met with the program senior director to discuss the research protocols and also with a number of teachers who showed willingness to participate in the study. While the program offered a variety of different classes, all the participating students were taking an intermediate reading/writing course. The classes typically met two or three times a week and lasted about 2 hours each.

4.2. Participants

The participants in the current study were 5 native-English speaking teachers and their 80 intermediate level students enrolled in an ESL Program in a US college. The students varied greatly in terms of age, ethnicity, and linguistic and educational background. Out of a total of 6 intact classrooms, four cluster groups were formed – one control and three experimental groups. The experimental groups consisted of (1) a focused written CF group, (2) an unfocused written CF group and (3) a writing practice group.

4.3. Operationalizations

**Focused written CF** was operationalized as (1) the provision of the correct form in the students’ written texts by underlining the error and writing the target form above it and (2) directing the written corrections at errors in a specific target structure (i.e., English articles).

**Unfocused written CF** was operationalized as (1) the provision of the correct form as in focused direct written CF and (2) directing the written correction at errors in a range of linguistic structures (i.e., articles, copula ‘be’, regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition) as is the normal practice with this approach to CF.

4.4. Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-treatment–posttest-delayed posttest design, using intact ESL classes as shown in Table 1. There were three experimental groups and one control group. The treatment, the independent variable in the current study, consisted of two different types of written CF (focused and unfocused correction) and writing practice without CF. The grammatical target for the focused CF group was the use of English definite and indefinite articles whereas the target for the unfocused CF group included the following five grammatical features: articles, copula ‘be’, regular past tense, irregular past tense and preposition.
Prior to the pretests, all students completed a general questionnaire eliciting background information relating to gender, L1, number of years spent in an English speaking environment, and number of years of instruction in English.

Over a two week period, the two experimental CF groups completed two written tasks each of which was followed by a CF treatment session in the following class. In the case of the Unfocused CF group, five different types of errors produced in a written composition were corrected (up to 8 errors). In the case of Focused CF group, only the errors involving English articles were targeted. The other experimental group (Written Practice group) completed the two written tasks without receiving any CF to allow the researchers to investigate the effect of writing practice alone. Finally, the Control Group received neither the tasks nor the CF treatments. All four groups completed the pretest, posttest and delayed posttest.

4.5. Choice of target structures

Drawing on Sheen (2007), which investigated the learning of English articles (the indefinite article ‘a’ as first mention and the definite article ‘the’ as second mention), the current study chose the same target structure for the focused CF treatment. The unfocused CF treatment in this study targeted the following five linguistic features: (1) English articles, (2) copula ‘be’, (3) regular past tense ‘ed’, (4) irregular past tense, and (5) temporal and locative prepositions (e.g., at, in, on). These were chosen because it is predicted that (1) all intermediate (or even advanced) learners, irrespective of their L1, make errors in the use of these grammatical features, and (2) errors in these structures can be reliably identified from the written narrative context.

4.6. Written narrative tasks, CF treatment and procedures

For both written CF treatment groups, students completed two written narrative tasks separately. One of the narrative tasks (based on Aesop’s fable, ‘The fox and the crow’) used in the current study is provided below.

There was once a crow who stole a piece of cheese from a kitchen window. She flew off with the cheese to a nearby tree. A fox saw what the crow had done, and he walked over to the tree. “Oh, Mistress Crow, you have such lovely black feathers, such little feet, such a beautiful yellow beak, and such fine black eyes! You must have a beautiful voice. Would you please sing for me?” The crow felt very proud. She opened her beak and sang CAW-CAW-CAW-CAW. Of course the cheese fell down, and the fox ate the piece of cheese.

The specific procedures for the treatment were as follows:

1. First, the teacher handed out a short fable/parable with an empty writing sheet attached to it and told the students that they were going to read the story and then rewrite the story.
2. Students were asked to read the short fable/parable silently.
3. The teacher explained key words and discussed the moral of the story with the class.
4. The teacher then collected the stories by asking the students to tear off the story part and keep the writing sheet only.

Table 1
Design of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Focused CF (n = 22)</th>
<th>Unfocused CF (n = 23)</th>
<th>Writing practice (n = 16)</th>
<th>Control (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pretest: written narrative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>Written Task 1</td>
<td>Written Task 1 on Task 1 + Written Task 2</td>
<td>Written Task 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>Written CF on Task 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>Immediate posttest: written narrative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8–9</td>
<td>Delayed posttest: written narrative + Exit questionnaire</td>
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</table>
5. Before asking the students to write the story, the teacher read the story aloud just once to refresh their memory.

6. Then the students were asked to write the story as closely as they could remember.

7. The teacher collected the students’ written narratives which were then handed to one of the researchers.

8. In the case of focused written direct CF, the researcher corrected the narratives focusing on article errors only based on the correction guidelines described below. In the case of unfocused written direct CF, she corrected the narratives targeting five different grammatical features.

9. In the following class (typically two or four days later), the students received their narratives with corrections.

10. The students were asked to look over their errors and the corrections carefully for a few minutes. However, the teacher did not provide any further comments on their errors or give any additional explanation.

11. The students were then asked to revise their narratives on a new piece of paper that was provided and the teacher collected the revised stories.

4.6.1. Written correction guidelines

For logistical and methodological reasons, it was decided that the main researcher would serve as the corrector. In the case of focused CF, the researcher corrected all the article errors relating to the use of ‘a’ for first mention and ‘the’ for subsequent mention in the learners’ narratives. There were between 2 and 8 errors in the learners’ narratives. In the case of unfocused CF, she corrected the errors involving the five targeted forms including English articles but to avoid swamping the learners with corrections only a maximum of two errors per linguistic feature were corrected (Bitchener, 2008). On average there were 10 grammatical errors in the Unfocused CF group’ texts but the correction was provided on not more than 8 errors. It should be noted therefore that in the Unfocused CF group, sometimes not all errors involving the five grammatical forms were corrected. However, if learners made errors in any of these forms they were corrected at least once.

4.7. Testing instrument and scoring guidelines

4.7.1. Narrative writing test (criterion measure)

A narrative writing test adapted from Sheen (2007) was used to measure acquisition in this study. The test was administered over three testing sessions (i.e., pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest). Three versions of the tests were developed and counterbalanced at each time of administration.

The test consisted of four sequential pictures and the students were asked to write a coherent story based on them. Word prompts next to each picture were included to elicit as many phrases as possible within a given time (15–20 min).

In scoring the written narrative test results, two separate scores for all four groups were calculated: (1) an individual test score for the accurate use of English articles only, and (2) an individual test score for the accurate use of the five grammatical forms targeted in the Unfocused group (including articles) (Bitchener and Knoch, 2008).

In the case of English articles, the accuracy score was calculated as follows:

(1) The total number of correct and incorrect uses of articles for first and second mention was counted.
(2) The total number of correct article uses was tallied.
(3) The total for (2) was then divided by the total for (1) for each student.

The same formula was applied to calculating an overall accuracy score for the five grammatical features targeted in the Unfocused CF group. That is, the researcher counted the total number of correct and incorrect grammatical forms involving English articles, copula ‘be’, regular past tense ‘ed’, irregular past tense, preposition as well as the total number of the correct grammatical forms of those. Then the latter was divided by the former to generate the accuracy score for each student in the form of a ratio of the correct to incorrect use of each grammatical feature (Bitchener et al., 2005).
4.8. Data analysis

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) datasets were used for descriptive and inferential statistics. In order to answer the three research questions posted in this study, one way ANOVAs, two-way repeated measures ANOVAs, and Tukey’s post-hoc comparison tests were performed. 15% of the data was scored by a second researcher to ensure consistency in coding the data from the pretests, posttests and delayed posttests with agreement percentages of 92, 98, 95, respectively.

5. Results

Results will be presented first for the effects of the CF treatments on accuracy in the use of articles and second, for the effects on accuracy in the use of the five structures targeted in the Unfocused CF group.

5.1. Effects on article accuracy

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for mean scores on the narrative writing test that measured the accuracy of English articles over the three testing periods – pretest, posttest 1 (immediate posttest), and posttest 2 (delayed posttest) – for the four groups of (1) Focused CF (receiving correction on article errors only), (2) Unfocused CF (receiving correction on a few different types of errors including ones involving articles), (3) Writing Practice (receiving written narrative tasks with no correction), and (4) Control (receiving neither the tasks nor correction).

To establish whether the differences in the four groups’ scores on the pretests were statistically significant, a one way ANOVA was performed. This showed no statistically significant group differences among the four groups, $F(3, 76) = .98$, ns. A series of one way repeated measures ANOVA indicated that all groups manifested significant longitudinal gains: $F(1, 21) = 48.8$, $p < .001$ for Focused CF group, $F(1, 22) = 7.09$, $p = .01$ for Unfocused CF group, $F(1, 15) = 58.9$, $p < .001$ for Writing Practice group, and $F(1, 18) = 9.12$, $p < .01$ for Control group.

In order to examine if the differences across these groups’ scores over time were statistically significant, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was performed with article scores as a dependent variable and with Time (pretest, posttest 1, posttest 2) and CF Treatment as independent variables. Table 3 shows the results of the analysis.

As shown in Table 3, there was a significant Time × Treatment interaction, indicating that the groups performed differently from each other over time. One way ANOVAs revealed significant between-group differences in posttest 1, $F(3, 76) = 3.78$, $p < .05$, and posttest 2, $F(3, 76) = 5.28$, $p < .01$.

In light of these findings, Tukey’s post-hoc pairwise comparisons were computed to isolate where the significant differences lay among the groups (with an alpha level of .05). These analyses revealed that in posttest 1, the Focused CF group performed better than both the Unfocused CF group ($p = .03$) and the Control group ($p = .04$) and in posttest 2, the Focused CF group also outperformed the Control group ($p = .002$). In posttest 2 (but not in posttest 1), the Writing Practice group also performed better than the Control Group ($p = .05$). There were no significant differences between the Unfocused group’s posttest scores and the Control group’s scores. While neither of the comparisons between the Focused CF group and the Writing Practice group reached statistical significance, there was a trend for the former to outperform the latter on posttest 1 ($p = .07$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th></th>
<th>Posttest 1</th>
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<th>Posttest 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused CF ($n = 22$)</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfocused CF ($n = 23$)</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Practice ($n = 16$)</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control ($n = 19$)</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2. Effects on accuracy for the five grammatical structures

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the learners’ accurate use of the five grammatical features targeted in the Unfocused CF Group. It should be noted that these five features included English articles.

A one way ANOVA indicated that in the pretest results, the four groups were equivalent in terms of their written accuracy for the five grammatical features, $F(3, 76) = .50$ ns.

A series of ANOVAs revealed a pattern similar to the article test results reported above. The learners in all three groups who completed the two writing tasks improved their accuracy of the five linguistic features over time as did the Control group: $F(1, 21) = 66.4, p < .001$ for Focused CF group, $F(1, 22) = 49.6, p < .001$ for Unfocused CF group, $F(1, 15) = 49.1, p < .001$ for Writing Practice group, and $F(1, 18) = 15.7, p < .001$ for Control Group.

As can be seen in Table 5, there was a significant Time × Treatment interaction, indicating that the groups performed differently from each other over time. A closer inspection of these group differences through Tukey’s post-hoc comparisons revealed that in posttest 1, both the Focused CF and Writing Practice group outperformed the Control group, $p = .02$ and $p = .04$, respectively. On the other hand, there were no significant differences between the Unfocused and Control groups in either posttest 1 or posttest 2.
Table 6 summarizes the statistically significant differences that emerged from these analyses for both English articles and the five grammatical forms combined.

6. Discussion

The first research question concerned the differential effects of focused and unfocused CF on the learning of English articles. The results indicated that the Focused CF group outperformed not only the Control group but also the Unfocused group in posttest 1. In other words, in the short term, focused written error correction directed at indefinite (first mention) and definite (second mention) article errors resulted in greater accuracy than unfocused correction directed at a range of grammatical errors. Also in the longer term, the Focused CF group outperformed the Control group whereas the Unfocused CF group did not. These results suggest that focused CF is more effective than unfocused CF.

These results differ from those of Ellis et al. (2008). Ellis et al. failed to find significant differences in the effects of focused and unfocused CF, with both proving to be more effective than no correction in a delayed posttest. They suggested that this may have been because the difference between the number of article errors corrected in the focused and unfocused CF was less than they intended with the result that the two approaches were not clearly distinguished. In the current study, the distinction between the focused and unfocused approaches was much clearer Unfocused group received corrections on up to 8 errors involving 5 different grammatical features whereas the learners in the Focused group received corrections on between 2 and 8 errors in articles only.

The Unfocused CF group did not do better than the Control group where accuracy in English articles was concerned. This, however, is not surprising given that the learners in the Unfocused CF group received only one or two article corrections together with corrections of the other features. It is probable that the learners in this group did not pay sufficient attention to the article corrections to enable improvement to take place. However, it is also important to ask whether the CF received by the Unfocused group led to any improvement in overall accuracy of the five grammatical features, and also whether this group performed better than the Control and Focused CF groups on this measure. This leads to a consideration of the second research question.

To answer the second research question, learners’ overall accuracy in the five targeted grammatical features was computed and compared across the four groups: Focused CF, Unfocused CF, Writing Practice, and Control. The results showed that in the immediate posttest, the Focused CF group, which received only correction on article errors, demonstrated significantly greater accuracy than the Control group whereas the Unfocused CF group, which received corrections on all five structures, did not. In other words, whereas the results point to focused CF having a positive effect on the learning of not just articles but also a range of different grammatical features, they fail to show that the unfocused correction had any significant effect.

This finding is surprising. Why did the learners in the Focused CF group who received correction on just one type of error improve their accuracy on a variety of grammatical features while the Unfocused CF group who received correction on a range of such features did not? One explanation 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. Another explanation might lie in the manner in which the correction was provided. The correction received by the Focused group was systematic in that most and sometimes all the article errors were corrected whereas the correction received by the Unfocused group was much less systematic; that is, some errors were corrected while others were ignored. The literature on CF has shown that teachers’ provision of CF often appears arbitrary, confusing and inconsistent (Long, 1977). Cohen and Robbins (1976) reported that the correction provided by the teachers they investigated was neither consistent nor informative and did not help their learners to avoid errors in their subsequent written work. Some critics of written CF have used findings such as this to argue that written CF is ineffective and may even be harmful. While the results of this study do not demonstrate that the unfocused CF was harmful, they certainly do indicate that it is not beneficial in the learning context in which they occur.

This, then, may explain why the unfocused CF had no overall effect. It also begs for another question: why did the Focused group increase their accuracy in a range of grammatical structures even though they only received correction on articles? There are two possibilities. The first is that they simply benefited from practice in writing, in much the same way as the Writing Practice group (see the discussion of this below). The second is that the focused correction oriented them to attend to form in general, and this benefited not just accuracy in the use of articles but accuracy in other structures as well. In other words, focused correction is clear and systematic and thereby induces learners to pay more attention to form overall. Ellis (2002) argues that targeting explicit knowledge in this way is important in that it serves to “(1) monitor language use and, thereby, to improve accuracy in output, (2) facilitate noticing of new forms and new form-function mappings in the input; and (3) make possible ‘noticing the gap...’” (p. 164). It should be noted, however, that this benefit was not durable – no effect was evident in the delayed posttest. It is possible, however, that a durable effect would have been evident had the learners continued to receive practice in writing narratives with focused correction.

The third research question asked whether there is any effect on accuracy when students engage in writing practice without receiving any corrections. The results show that the Writing Practice group outperformed the Control group in both accuracy of articles (posttest 2) and in accurate use of the five grammatical features (posttest 1). Truscott (1996, 2004, 2007) has consistently argued that learners should be allowed to just practice writing and that CF can negatively affect grammatical accuracy. While the current study does not lend full support to this claim, it does suggest that learners’ accuracy can improve without any corrective feedback as long as the writing task lends itself to a focus on accuracy as in the current study. The narrative task used in this study can be viewed as a kind of noticing task. Like a dictogloss task, it may have promoted pushed output and, as Swain (1995) has shown, such tasks can help learners to improve accuracy.

The crucial question, however, is whether practice + CF is more effective than practice alone. While this study failed to show that this was the case, it does suggest that practice + focused CF (but not practice + unfocused CF) may be more beneficial than practice alone. There was a clear trend for the Focused CF group to outscore the Writing Practice group on article accuracy ($p = .07$). It is worth bearing in mind that feedback was only provided on two writing tasks and thus was quite minimal. It is possible that if there had been more tasks and more sustained feedback, the effect of the focused CF would have been greater allowing the comparison with the Writing Practice group to reach statistical significance.

7. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the differential effects of two different approaches to written correction on ESL learners’ errors. Before discussing the study’s findings, it should be noted that (1) this research expands on Sheen’s (2007) study, which showed that focused correction improved the accuracy of the two basic functions of English articles and (2) therefore, the point of departure in the current study was to compare focused correction (targeting the same grammatical feature, English articles) and unfocused correction (directed at a variety of linguistic features).

It is still important, however, to first establish whether the focused CF and unfocused CF produced a significantly positive effect in comparison to a control group. The results of the study show that although both CF groups (focused and unfocused) significantly improved in the accuracy with which they used a variety of
linguistic features including English articles over time, only the Focused CF group outperformed the Control group. In other words, this study failed to demonstrate any benefit in providing unfocused CF.

While written CF research has produced somewhat inconclusive results, recent research provides some evidence in favor of written CF (e.g., Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen, 2007). This appears to be especially the case when the CF approach is of the focused kind, as in this study. 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.

It is also important to establish whether correcting students’ written work helps to improve accuracy more than just providing them with writing practice. Until this question is addressed, the debate over corrective feedback cannot be settled. A strength of this study is that it included a practice only group as well as a control group that only completed the tests. The results failed to provide definitive evidence that CF (even of the focused kind) was more effective in promoting accuracy than just allowing students to practice writing. However, the Focused CF group did demonstrate greater accuracy in the use of articles than the Writing Practice group, with the difference approaching statistical significance. Clearly, more research is needed to address this crucial question. In particular, it would be helpful to investigate the effects of different amounts of focused CF on accuracy.

The current study, while attempting to overcome some of the shortcomings of the existing written CF research, is limited in several ways. First, both the writing tasks and the writing test instruments involved the production of relatively short texts. Second, only two writing tasks were completed. There is a need to investigate the effects of CF on sustained writing over a longer period of time. Second, as with most of the research on this topic, there is the issue of how to measure the effect that CF has on learning. In the current study, learning gains were measured by calculating the accurate use of five grammatical features as well as singled out articles. But it can be argued that this does not provide a complete picture of the effects of the written CF, both because it is possible that the CF influenced other features (perhaps negatively) that were not investigated and because it may have had a deleterious effect on fluency, as Truscott (1996) has claimed.

We are still facing many unanswered questions. As SLA researchers who have encountered the challenges involved in designing and executing classroom studies that address pedagogically relevant questions, one thing has become very clear to us: research cannot provide language classroom teachers with clear-cut answers regarding what kind of CF to provide or how it should be provided. There are simply too many variables involved (see Guénette, 2007). It is always easy to critique what researchers investigating written CF should and should not have done. The way forward is to try to investigate systematically the variables that are pedagogically relevant (such as the distinction between focused and unfocused CF) and to conduct replication studies. We need, for example, to know just how practical focused CF is in different teaching contexts. Thus, it is important for teachers to engage in practitioner research where they try out proposals emanating from classroom research of the kind illustrated in this article.

8. Notes

1. The choice of these grammatical structures was made after a pilot study, which showed that (1) the learners’ written texts contain a few errors involving these features and (2) the teacher is easily able to provide direct correction on them.

2. An anonymous reviewer of this article has suggested that the learners should have been told that some errors were not corrected. However, this is not normal practice in CF. Teachers frequently do not correct every error and do not inform their students of this. Rather, they assume that students will simply attend to those errors they have corrected. This is, in fact, another way in which unfocused CF is unsystematic.

3. An anonymous reviewer asked why all five grammatical forms were scored and suggested excluding articles from the scoring of the grammatical forms targeted in the Unfocused group. We agree that by including articles, we cannot demonstrate whether the CF led to gains in grammatical structures that were not corrected. However, the focus of the study was systematically to compare the Focused and Unfocused groups
who received correction on either articles only or on the 5 grammatical forms. A follow-up study is under way to investigate the extent to which any ‘incidental learning’ occurred in the Focused group by examining the four uncorrected grammatical features only. The follow-up study will also examine the effects of the focused CF on the four uncorrected grammatical structures individually in order to establish which of these was amenable to incidental learning.

4. This scoring formula was not based on obligatory occasions as there were problems in using obligatory occasion analysis for all five grammatical features. The accuracy score in the current study reflects the ratio of correct to incorrect use of these grammatical structures and the gain scores are interpreted as an improvement in this ratio as a result of the CF the learners have received.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this article was funded by a TIRF grant from the International Research Foundation for English Language Education. The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge the willing participation of the ESL faculty and students at Montgomery College in Maryland and in particular Sherrie Carroll who was instrumental in helping us set up the research site. Additional thanks go to Rod Ellis and three anonymous reviewers who helped improve an earlier version of this article and to the Editor for his support and encouragement.

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