The Efficacy of Focused and Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback on EFL Learners' Grammatical Accuracy

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ABSTRACT:

The potential effectiveness of various kinds of written corrective feedback (CF) has been the focus of CF investigations that did not reach firm conclusions about which methods of correction can more successfully facilitate students' grammatical development. A good majority of the studies investigated an unfocused approach to CF while a focused approach has received far less attention. In line with this argument, the current study employed a pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test design and set out to investigate the potential efficacy of unfocused and focused written CF in L2 accuracy development. The study incorporated 86 EFL students allocated to one control group and two experimental groups. Students in the focused group were corrected on irregular and regular past tense, while students in the unfocused group were corrected on a greater range of grammatical categories including irregular and regular past tense as well and learners in the control group received no written CF. Results of two-way repeated measures ANOVA and a set of ANOVAs with post-hoc evaluations revealed that in the short-term duration both treatment groups increased their accuracy but the efficacy of the focused CF found to be resilient.

Keywords: EFL**,** focused CF, unfocused CF, written corrective feedback, written accuracy

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of written CF has been a controversial issue for both researchers and instructors alike. Truscott (1996, 1999) strongly argued that error correction in writing courses must be discarded and the reason for its abandonment to him (lack of efficacy) was related to the nature of the treatment process that contrasts with the nature of acquiring a language and second language acquisition (SLA) findings. He claimed that the evidence (Lalande, 1982; Semke, 1984; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Kepner, 1991: Sheppard, 1992)

shows that it is futile to correct students' errors and CF diverts teacher-student focus away from the practical and productive dimensions in L2 writing classes. He argued that CF makes learners anxious to commit the same error in future writing, thereby making them avoid the same error in a new written task which, in turn, results in simplified written communication.

Truscott discussed both theoretical and practical problems with providing CF. On a theoretical basis, opponents of CF argue that fluent communication results from picking up the implicit knowledge and not from the explicit knowledge gained from error correction. This debate is paramount regarding the efficacy of CF as error correction contestants (Krashen, 1982; Truscott, 1996) claimed that it tends to facilitate L2 writing only in an explicit way (Van Beuningen, 2010). Other theoretical problems Truscott considered in providing CF include: interlanguage, the role of metalinguistic knowledge vs. L2 intuition, and orders of acquisition, (for more details see Truscott, 1996). Truscott's practical problems with providing CF pertain to the teacher's ability and willingness in the provision of regular and consistent feedback and also the students' tendency and ability to understand the teacher's explanations. Even if, teachers can explain and students can comprehend, they may miss the information or may be unable to apply that knowledge in a new piece of writing. However, the error correction literature witnessed to demonstrate the positive role of error treatment in writing classes (Ferris, 1999; Sheen, 2007; Shintani et al., 2014; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Aliakbari & Toni, 2009; Ellis, 2009: Rassaei, 2014; Mao & Lee, 2020). As an example, Ferris (1999) disputed Truscott's claim and argued that his study had conflicting results and it was an overgeneralization in terms of inadequacy in design and instructional methods.

2. Literature review

The study of written CF types has borne much fruit in the educational realm and written CF types have come to be recognized as the focus of many studies (Janqueria & Payant, 2015; Kang & Han, 2015; Han & Hyland, 2015; Aliakbari & Toni, 2009; Aliakbari & Salek, 2011; Ferris, 2010; Sampson, 2012; Ferris et al., 2013; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Karim & Nassaji, 2018). The lingering concern of these studies has been to discover the most efficacious ways of written CF for improving students' accuracy development.

2.1. Direct and Indirect CF

What has received the most attention to date is the dichotomy between indirect and direct CF to investigate the extent to which they facilitate accuracy development. Van Beuningen (2010) considered the "learners' involvement in the correction process" (p. 11) as the

main factor distinguishing direct from indirect CF, in that in direct CF teachers indicate an error and write it correctly, while in indirect CF they only inform the occurrence of an error without actively fixing it, thereby requiring the learner to recognize and correct it. To Ellis et al., (2008) on a pedagogical basis, indirect and direct CF controversy makes sense, but from the standpoint of second language learning, it seems problematic. Direct CF facilitates the internalization of a new linguistic form, however, in indirect CF it is assumed that learners already know the linguistic form to self-correct themselves in response to the given feedback. In doing so, the new forms of language cannot be learnt. Ellis et al., claimed that indirect CF can assist in "the increase in control of a linguistic form that has already been partially internalised" (p. 355). They concluded that the current level of students' linguistic knowledge determines the efficacy of these two types of CF. However, it is not certain whether teachers are sufficiently aware of the current level of the learners' interlanguages to decide whether to correct students' grammatical errors directly or indirectly.

There are some predictions in terms of the effectiveness of direct and indirect CF. Proponents of Indirect CF prefer it to direct CF in that it guides the learners in the process of learning and facilitates problem-solving activities (Lalande, 1982), engages learners in a deeper form of language processing when editing the earlier drafts of writing (Ferris, 1995), and prompts learners to reflect about grammatical points (Ellis, 2009). To Bitchener (2012) direct CF may be preferable to indirect CF, especially for lower proficiency levels with a more limited linguistic knowledge in several processes. It reduces students' confusion if they cannot understand, resolves complex writing errors like idiomatic expressions and syntactic structures, gives more explicit feedback when learners test hypotheses, and is more immediate than indirect CF. It seems that most of these studies consider indirect CF more proper for more advanced learners in composition classes, while direct CF may be suitable for low-proficient learners with a more limited linguistic knowledge. As low-intermediate EFL students with limited linguistic knowledge were the participants in the current research, a direct approach was employed in addition to either unfocused or focused written CF for treating learners' errors.

2.2. Focused and Unfocused CF

A rising number of recent research has explored the dichotomy between focused and unfocused CF (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a, 2010b; Van Beuningen et al., 2008, 2012; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009; Lee, 2020). In unfocused CF teachers fix all or a subset of the learners' errors, while in focused CF

teachers select a very limited range of students' errors to correct (e.g. articles).

In Unfocused CF as students should attend to a broad range of errors, processing corrections is probably more difficult so learners cannot reflect sufficiently on each error. On the other hand, as in focused CF students practice many corrections of the same error, it is more probable to learn the correct form (Ellis, 2009). Some researchers (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009) claimed that the inconclusiveness of the efficacy of CF on written accuracy development may simply be that students in CF studies were given feedback on a broad range of errors and such comprehensive feedback overwhelmed them. Instead, they claimed that focused CF targeting a specific linguistic error is assumed to be more satisfactory.

To Bitchener (2012) focused CF facilitates L2 accuracy development for lower proficiency levels as it draws students' attention to only one or a few grammatical errors at a time. For more advanced learners it is expected that an unfocused approach to CF might work better in case they can attend to a broader range of error categories. There is nowadays a mounting research base studying the relative efficacy of focused and comprehensive CF. These can be classified into three categories: those examining the potential efficacy of focused CF, those evaluating the effectiveness of unfocused CF, and those drawing a comparison between the relative efficacy of unfocused and focused CF.

2.3. Research on the Effectiveness of Focused and Unfocused CF

A few studies have compared the relative efficacy of focused and unfocused CF. Few studies addressed this issue (Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009). In one study, Ellis et al. (2008) evaluated the relative effectiveness of focused and unfocused written CF on the proper usage of indefinite and definite articles and discovered that focused written CF was just as efficient as complete written CF. However, one methodological drawback of this research was that there was not sufficient distinction between focused and comprehensive CF as articles were strongly corrected in both. Another drawback as stated by Sheen et al., (2009) was due to the measure of learning that included just the acquisition of articles and did not evaluate the efficacy of focused and comprehensive CF on a broader range of error categories. In another study, Sheen et al., (2009) repeated the same study with a little change and distinguished the incorporation of unfocused and focused CF more explicitly than in Ellis et al.'s study. They found that focused CF targeting indefinite and definite articles outperformed unfocused CF addressing a variety of grammatical irregularities in either short or long-term duration.

However, one methodological drawback of this study was that the correction in the unfocused group was not consistent in nature. Some errors were ignored, while others were corrected. This way of correcting errors might have a negative effect on the efficacy of comprehensive CF. Considering focused/unfocused CF studies as a whole, it is still difficult to infer a firm conclusion regarding the potential effectiveness of unfocused or focused CF for improving learners' written accuracy development. Further research should continue addressing this issue.

Although written CF has been the focus of some studies in recent years, it still seems that the following methodological drawbacks remain and need to be considered in conducting future written CF studies.

Most of the studies did not explore the efficacy of written CF on a new piece of writing (for exceptions see Bitchener et al., 2005; Sheen, 2007: Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009). In this category of studies, only text revisions rather than new written tasks were investigated. It should be noted that learners' ability to edit text revisions is not assumed to be a genuine indication of accuracy development. Investigating how written CF promotes L2 accuracy development in a written text instead of text revisions has received less attention.

Among the numerous studies investigating various kinds of written CF, few, if any, have contrasted focused with unfocused written CF (for exceptions see Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009). This comparison needs further study- that is the major aim of the current work.

The overwhelming majority of the research on written CF has been conducted in ESL contexts (e.g., Sheen, 2007; Sheen et al., 2009; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009), leaving EFL contexts an under-researched area. Research shows that repeated exposure to the target language and the opportunity to practice it are key to the development of learners' grammatical accuracy (See, e.g., Ferris, 1999; Reid, 1998). There is a consensus that students' exposure to the target language in EFL contexts is inordinately less than in ESL contexts. This situation inevitably necessitates more attention being paid to the provision of written CF in EFL contexts initially on students' grammatical errors than on their content knowledge development. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994) made a distinction between EFL and ESL students in terms of their learning motivations as well as the pedagogical context in which their English language writing is developed. They argued that EFL learners seem to be less motivated than ESL learners with regard to acting upon written CF because the former group's main drive is to obtain a degree or certificate rather than becoming an

active member of the target language community. In sum, considering both the limited exposure to the foreign language and the learners' demotivation to perceive the teacher's CF necessitates a significant demand for new studies in EFL contexts.

Some researchers have not included control groups (Lalande, 1982; Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2006; Chandler, 2003), instead they only looked at gains made by groups receiving treatment. As Truscott (2007) noted, in a study which lacks a control group, it is not clear whether improvement results from CF or other factors.

This work is also different from other written CF studies in that it has been focused on a different specific range of grammatical structures (irregular past tense, regular past tense) for the correction of the focused written CF group. Few, if any, studies have addressed these grammatical structures.

3. Significance of the Study

The present study, while attempting to overcome some of the methodological problems mentioned above, attempts to evaluate the potential efficacy of unfocused and focused written CF on EFL students' accuracy development. The major motive behind the present study was to understand how focused written CF as an innovative approach to CF functions in the Iranian EFL context in contrast with its more traditional counterpart, that is, the unfocused CF which is assumed to be more feasible by most EFL teachers. Nonetheless, adopting an unfocused approach to CF could be one of the main reasons for the unsatisfactory results obtained in correcting EFL learners' grammatical errors (Kepner, 1991; Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984). Considering the limitations of L2 acquisition model (Schmidt, 2001; Robinson, 2003), a focused approach to providing CF on the grammatical errors of low-intermediate EFL learners with limited language proficiency seems to hold the promise of producing more satisfactory outcomes compared to the comprehensive (traditional) approach.

The efficacy of written CF over time is another main aim of this research. Another aim is to discuss Truscott's arguments against CF linked to the current study's findings. Although finding a 'one-size-fits-all' prescription for correcting students' errors in the still ongoing debate on CF may not be the best route to take, it is hoped to find one which can best meet low-intermediate EFL learners' requirements.

4. Research Question

This study aims to contribute to the continuing CF controversy by attempting to remedy some of the serious flaws of prior studies (as indicated in the preceding section) and to answer the following key research question:

To what extent does exposing Iranian EFL learners to direct focused / unfocused written CF significantly enhance their grammatical accuracy?

5. Method

5.1 Design

Due to the problems related to the conduct of a true-experimental study such as not selecting students randomly and instead of using 'already existing intact groups' (Brown & Rodgers, 2002), this study adopted a quasi-experimental design. It involved specific classes functioning as one control group and two experimental groups. The first experimental group was subjected to direct focused written CF (i.e. correcting regular and irregular past tense errors), while the second experimental group received direct unfocused written CF (correcting a large variety of grammatical errors including irregular and regular past tense errors, too), and the control group received no written CF. All three groups received a pre-test, an immediate post-test, and a delayed post-test. In this study, grammatical accuracy is considered the dependent variable. The type of CF (unfocused written CF, focused written CF, and no written CF) and time (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) are considered as independent variables.

5.2 Participants

Unlike most CF studies which focused on advanced students in the universities, the participants in the current study consisted of 86 low-intermediate EFL students selected from three intact classes. Having used the quasi-experimental method, they were assigned into three groups: (N=28, unfocused written CF group), (N=30, focused written CF group), and (N=28, no written CF or control group). They were taught English as a foreign language in the third grade in a junior high school in Ilam (Iran). They enrolled (2 years ago) in junior high school based on the scores of the entrance examination test. All participants were male and their age range was 13 to 14.

5.3 Research Instruments and Scoring Scheme

This study implemented a pre-test (appendix A), an immediate post-test (appendix B), and a delayed post-test (appendix C) to obtain the necessary data on participants' knowledge of grammar. These tests were mainly made up of various patterns such as transformational sentences, gapped sentences, error recognition, productive items, picture description, matching, and multiple-choice that aimed at assessing grammatical knowledge that is both receptive and productive. In the transformation of a sentence, as an example, a sentence with present tense was given to the students and they were required to change the sentence into regular or irregular past tense based on the kind of verb used in the sentence. They were required to

make grammatically correct sentences. Error correction tests consisted of some sentences each containing a single error that the learners had to recognize and fix. Errors were only related to the targeted grammatical features which were the focus of the current study. In picture description, each picture sheet included four pictures describing an event and the pictures were used to elicit the grammatically correct sentences from the students. In gap-filling sentences, learners were asked to replace words missing from the sentences. The removed words were chosen to specify targeted grammatical features which were the focus of the current study. Students were free to answer the questions i.e. no negative mark was considered for errors, and students' scores were their number of correct answers (Aliakbari & Toni, 2009). Scores for the tests (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) were obtained by one of the researchers.

5.4 Material

The material to be used was the English textbook developed by the ministry of education for third grade students (Birjandi & Soheili, 2005). It includes nine lessons, the first five of which are to be taught during the first semester and the final four of which are to be covered during the second semester.

5.5 Procedure

The quasi-experimental method was adopted in this study. Based on the pre-test, three groups of students were chosen and assigned as two treatment groups and one control group: direct unfocused written CF group, direct focused written CF group, and control group. To measure language proficiency, prior to the research a language proficiency test (pre-test) was administered to three groups of participants to ensure that they are homogeneous in terms of language competency depending on the results of the test. Three different techniques of error correction were used over the course of treatment: the learners in the first experimental group received direct focused written CF i.e. correction directed exclusively at a very limited range of grammatical errors (irregular past tense, regular past tense). In this group, the instructor jotted down the right answer in response to these two error categories. Students in the second experimental group received direct unfocused written CF i.e. correction directed at a variety of linguistic errors (regular past tense, irregular past tense, articles (a, the), past continuous, and modal verbs (can, may, should). In this group, the teacher jotted down the correct answers in response to the above-mentioned error categories. The control group received no written CF. The number of corrections in the unfocused group for each error category was shallow compared to that of the number of corrections for each error category in the

focused written CF group i.e. the number of corrections was sufficiently distinguished in focused and unfocused groups. In other words, while the unfocused group received corrections on each error category two or three times a session, there was no limitation for the focused group.

Throughout the interval between the pre-test and the immediate post-test, 10 treatment quizzes were administered in ten sessions, with a nearly two-week time lapse between every two quizzes. The teacher provided written CF on the students' tests, which were returned to the students the following week. The students were given time to think about the criticism they received, but they were not asked to rework the same piece of writing. Instead, the teacher insisted that the learners have to draw on the knowledge gained from the correction and apply it in the subsequent writing tests so as not to commit the same error in a new piece of writing (typically seven days later). The treatment quizzes (appendix D) were designed to develop learners' ability to write grammatically correct sentences in the new writing tests.

To determine the effectiveness of unfocused/focused written CF on EFL students' accuracy development, an immediate post-test was administered to the students. Six weeks later, to evaluate students' grammatical accuracy in the long-term duration, a delayed post-test was also administered to them. During the time period between the immediate post-test and the delayed post-test, all three groups received no written CF. After the required data (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) were collected, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run to evaluate the efficacy of focused and unfocused written CF on students' grammatical accuracy over time. Then, Tukey's post-hoc comparisons were computed to identify substantial variations across groups.

5.6 Choice of Target Structures

As stated above, the current study selected the irregular past tense and the regular past tense for the treatment tests administered to the focused written CF group. The choice of these target structures was due to the reason that low-intermediate EFL learners experience high levels of difficulty in the use of irregular and regular past tenses (Ellis et al., 2006). Moreover, EFL teachers in teacher discussion groups, contend that their students experience considerable challenges in deciding to use the correct forms of these two structures. To Ellis et al., (2006) even intermediate or advanced students experience difficulty in the correct use of regular and irregular past tenses. The regular past tense is rule-based: the infinitive form of the verb + -ed morpheme. The irregular past tense, on the other hand, follows no such general rules, which is categorized as item based. Both the rule-based and predictable characteristics of the regular past tense and the

unpredictable and complex nature of the irregular past tense, therefore, make the acquisition processes of these two structures highly variable, which then pose a considerable challenge to their internalization (Ellis, 2005a).

The unfocused written CF in this study addressed the following five grammatical structures: irregular past tense, regular past tense, past continuous, modal verbs (can, may, should), and articles (a, the); [A] for referring to something mentioned the first time and [the] for referring to something that has already been mentioned. To avoid the cognitive overload, other practical uses of the indefinite and definite articles were not the focal point of this research. The selection of the targeted structures for the unfocused group was also based on both our preliminary consults with experienced EFL teachers and our own experiences of teaching. As an example, learning articles due to their complex nature seems challenging; that is, they can be driven by both pragmatic and linguistic factors (for more details see Butler, 2002).

5.7 Data Analysis and Reliability

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) database (version 21) was used for descriptive and inferential statistics. First, to determine if there were any statistically significant differences in the three groups of students' scores on the pre-test, a one-way ANOVA was run. Then, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run to determine interactions between factors as well as the effects of individual factors. In this two-way repeated measures ANOVA, total scores was considered as the dependent variable, furthermore, time (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) and types of written CF (focused written CF, unfocused written CF, and no written CF) were considered as independent variables. Moreover, if there were a statistical significance, Tukey's post-hoc comparisons were conducted to evaluate differences among score means.

To examine the intra-rater and inter-rater reliability of the scoring of the treatment tests, ten percent of the data was randomly re-scored by another teacher. This ten percent sample came equally from the pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) for the two sets of scores was .94. Ten percent of the data was also re-scored by the same teacher two months after the initial scoring. (R) for the two sets of scores was .99.

6. Results

The research question tackled the relative efficacy of focused and unfocused written CF. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for mean scores and standard deviations by group type over the three testing periods: pre-test, post-test 1 (immediate post-test), and post-test 2 (delayed post-test). A one-way ANOVA showed no statistically

significant differences among the three groups on pre-test, F (2, 83) = .65, P = .52, ηp^2= .01 (with an alpha level of .05).

Table 1: Comparison of test score means and standard deviations by group type

Treatment	Pre-test		Immediate Post-test		Delayed Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Focused (n = 30)	23.95	6.52	36	3.69	32.05	4.02
Unfocused (n = 28)	23.20	8.32	32. 16	3.92	26.31	6.96
Control (n = 28)	25.40	7.04	25.16	7.61	27.31	6.75

A series of one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed that treatment groups manifested significant gains over a long time (six weeks after the immediate post-test): F(1, 29) = 63.04, p< .001 for focused CF group, F(1, 27) = 15.95, p< .001 for unfocused CF group. However, the control group showed no significant longitudinal gain, F (1, 27) = 3.41, p= .048.

To examine if the differences across the group scores over a long time were statistically significant, a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run with total scores as the dependent variable along with the time (pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test) and types of written CF (focused, unfocused, and control) as independent variables. Table 2 below represents the results of the analysis. The two-way repeated measures ANOVA showed that there was a significant interaction effect between time and written CF types, F(4,83) = 8.36, p < .001, ηp^2= .16. This indicates that the groups performed differently from each other over time.

There were also a statistically significant effect for time, F (2, 83) = 43.5, p < .001, ηp^2= .34 and types of written CF, F (2, 83) = 7.37, p = .001, ηp^2= .15. Using the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988): .01 = small effect, .06 = moderate effect, .14 = large effect, these results suggest large effect sizes. One-way ANOVAs showed significant differences among groups in both post-test 1 (immediate post-test), F (2, 83) = 30.27, p < .001, ηp^2= .42 and post-test 2 (delayed post-test), F (2, 83) = 7.57, p = .001. , ηp^2= .15. These findings also suggest that effect sizes are noteworthy. Tukey's post-hoc pairwise comparisons were computed to detect where the significant differences (with an alpha level of .05) lay among the groups.

In immediate post-test there was a significant difference between focused and unfocused CF (p = .021, Cohen's d = 1.00), focused and control (p < .001, Cohen's d = 1.81), and also between unfocused and control (p < .001, Cohen's d = 1.15). When comparing the sizes of the CF effects to the Cohen's (1988) d value: .2 = small effect, .5 = moderate effect, .8 = large effect, these results suggest large effect sizes. This shows that both treatment groups outperformed the control group and the focused group outperformed both the unfocused and the control group. In delayed post-test there was a significant difference between focused and unfocused CF (p = .001, Cohen's d = 1.00), and focused and control (p = .010, Cohen's d = .85). For both types of comparisons, the d values suggest large effect sizes. However, there was no significant difference between unfocused and control (p = .809, Cohen's d = .00). This also shows the superiority of the focused group over either unfocused or control groups. Table 3 displays a summary of statistically significant differences among the three groups for the immediate and delayed post-tests.

Table 2: Repeated measures ANOVA of the test scores across the three treatment types and the three testing periods

Source	df	F	P
Between Subjects			
CF Treatment	2	7.37	.001
Error	83	(70.4)	
Within Subjects			
Time	2	43.5	<.001
Time × CF Treatment	4	8.36	<.001
Error	83	(18.8)	

Source	df	F	P
Between Subjects			
CF Treatment	2	7.37	.001
Error	83	(70.4)	
Within Subjects			
Time	2	43.5	<.001
Time × CF Treatment	4	8.36	<.001
Error	83	(18.8)	

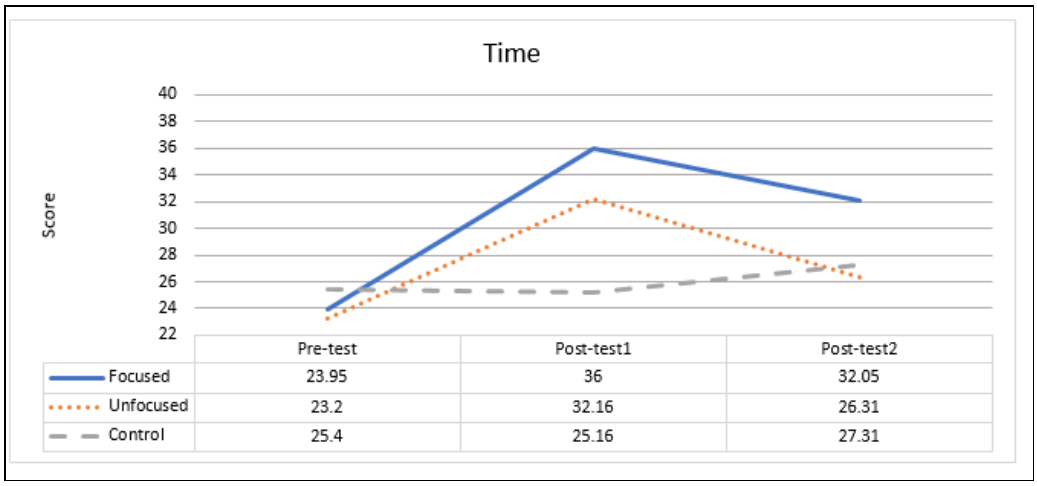
Table 3: Summary of statistically significant group differences in test scores

Time	Test Scores
Immediate Post-test	Focused > Control*
	Focused > Unfocused*
	Unfocused > Control*
Delayed post-test	Focused > Control*
	Focused > Unfocused*

Time	Test Scores
Immediate Post-test	Focused > Control*
	Focused > Unfocused*
	Unfocused > Control*
Delayed post-test	Focused > Control*
	Focused > Unfocused*

Note: The asterisk demonstrates that $p < .05$, and the symbol > means better than.

Figure 1(below) displays a visual representation of the mean scores for focused, unfocused, and control groups over the three testing periods. As can be seen, while all three groups were the same at the beginning and started at almost the same pre-test point, both treatment groups significantly increased their grammatical accuracy in post-test 1 (immediate post-test), but the control group showed no substantial improvement. However, the graph indicates that in delayed post-test only the focused group increased consistently over time, while in the unfocused group accuracy decreased from immediate post-test to delayed post-test. However, the control group showed no substantial improvement. The pattern of all three groups in this graph indicates that while the focused CF group continued to increase accuracy in delayed post-test in the long-term duration, the unfocused CF group did not and stopped its gains in the short-term duration i.e. the efficacy of the focused written CF proved longer lasting than the unfocused written CF.



	Pre-test	Post-test1	Post-test2
Focused	23.95	36	32.05
Unfocused	23.2	32.16	26.31
Control	25.4	25.16	27.31

Figure 1: Effectiveness of written CF types over time

7. Discussion

The research question posed in this study concerned the relative efficacy of unfocused and focused written CF on EFL learners' accuracy development. The results showed that the focused written CF group (Mean/M=36, Standard Deviation/SD=3.69) outperformed both control (M=25.16, SD=7.61) and unfocused (M=32.16, SD=3.92) groups in the immediate post-test. Unfocused CF (M=32.16, SD=3.92) although not as effective as focused CF (M=36, SD=3.69), outperformed the control group (M=25.16, SD=7.61) in the immediate post-test. In other words, in the short-term duration, focused written CF directed at regular and irregular past tense led to greater accuracy development than both unfocused written CF (directed at a broader range of error categories) and the control group which received no written CF.

In the long-term duration (after administering delayed post-test), findings indicated that the focused group (M=32.05, SD=4.02) outperformed both unfocused (M=26.31, SD=6.96) and control (M=27.31, SD=6.75) groups. However, there was not a significant difference between the unfocused (M=26.31, SD=6.96) and control (M=27.31, SD=6.75) groups. The findings suggest that focused written CF is more effective than unfocused written CF in helping EFL students further improve their grammatical accuracy in either short or long-term duration.

These findings were expected given the results of Sheen et al.'s (2009) study which also concluded that focused written CF directed at definite and indefinite articles promised more accuracy development than unfocused written CF directed at an array of error categories. The current study and Sheen et al. both concluded the short-term efficacy of focused written CF over comprehensive written CF and this efficacy also proved to be durable in the long term. By comparing the findings of the two studies, it can also be concluded that in Sheen et

al.'s study, there was not a significant difference between unfocused and control groups in either short or long-term duration, while in the current study unfocused written CF promised more accuracy development than the control group in the short-term duration, but this was not the case in the long-term duration as both of them were equally effective.

Considering the superiority of focused written CF over unfocused written CF, these results differ from those of Ellis et al., (2008). The present research showed that focused CF is more effective than unfocused CF in either short or long-term duration, but Ellis et al.'s findings showed that focused CF was equally effective as unfocused CF in either short-term (performance on revised texts in the immediate post-test) or long-term duration (performance on a new piece of writing in delayed post-test). In other words, they failed to find significant differences among unfocused and focused written CF, while both proved to be more effective than the control group. One possible explanation of the equal efficacy of unfocused and focused written CF in improving students' accuracy development may be due to the methodological design in their study that unfocused and focused written CF strategies were not sufficiently distinguished for treating students' errors as article corrections found strongly in both. In the current study (as elucidated in the method section) the distinction between unfocused and focused corrections was much clearer than Ellis et al.'s study.

A question that is a lingering concern for the researchers is the reason why students in the focused written CF who were treated on just a few error categories improved their accuracy on a broader range of linguistic features, while the learners in the unfocused written CF who were treated on a broader range of grammatical features did not. This question is also challenging considering the findings of the current study as focused CF outperformed unfocused CF in either short or long-term duration. As Sheen et al., (2009) noted one possible justification is that when the learners are treated on a diversity of grammatical traits, they probably cannot effectively receive the feedback on such various corrections effectively, and even if they attend to treatments, it is more likely that they are unable to work out why they have been treated. They also questioned the methodology the treatment was provided with both focused and unfocused strategies for correcting learners' errors, in that the focused CF receives corrections in a systematic way i.e. all the focused grammatical features are often corrected, whereas the unfocused CF often receives treatments in a less systematic way than focused CF. In other words, some errors are treated while others may be ignored. The best possible explanation can be Han's (2002, cited in Sheen et al.,

2009) argument that one of the key conditions for ensuring the efficacy of recasts on acquisition is focusing consistently on one aspect of L2 use. Thus, it can be concluded that the efficacy of unfocused CF tends not to be durable, and a probable potential for its short-term efficacy is not a valid indication of learning. This is an issue that deserves further research.

Surprisingly focused CF yielded accuracy development and this proved to be durable, even though the manner of learners' corrections was focused on a few grammatical features. It can be reasoned that adopting a systematic and clear manner for correcting errors in a focused approach can help learners attend to form in general and this also helps them to benefit from accuracy in the use of focused as well as unfocused grammatical structures. In other words, the systematicity of correcting errors in a focused approach helps the learners to attend to form in general (Sheen et al., 2009).

Truscott (1996, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2020) has consistently claimed that CF is pointless, unproductive, and even destructive. He argued that it must be abandoned in writing classes and it diverts the interest of teacher/students from the more fruitful components of writing instruction like further writing practice. To answer Truscott's claim, investigating all of his arguments against the efficacy of CF is out of the scope of the current study, but to partly explore this controversial claim, this study in addition to two experimental groups has also selected a control group that received no written CF to investigate whether practicing writing without teacher's feedback also facilitates learners' written accuracy development. As results showed both experimental groups outperformed the control group in the short-term duration. This may suggest that exposing learners to written CF has a great pedagogical value in a short time. Results also showed that in the long-term duration, focused CF was superior to both unfocused CF and control group. These findings suggest that writing practice itself without CF is not as effective as focused CF in the long-term duration.

These results corroborate Ferris's (1999) argument in favor of CF and against Truscott's argument. She argued that in L2 writing classes there are more or less effective ways to treat students' errors and poorly done CF is not beneficial and may even mislead the learners. She went on to say that effective CF "which is selective, prioritized, and clear –can and does help at least some student writers…thus in discussing whether or not grammar correction is "effective" it is crucially important to know what sort of error correction we are discussing" (p. 4). In sum, the results of the current study suggest that when a focused (selective) approach to CF is adopted, it is more likely to improve students' accuracy development

in either short or long-term duration. Thus, it can be reasoned that CF tends not to be ineffective and harmful, instead the efficacy of error correction as Ferris noted depends on the way errors are treated. This shows that Truscott's argument against the efficacy of CF is assumed to be premature and too strong to be accepted by writing teachers.

To continue the critical examination of Truscott's argument, his strong claim that research findings indicate that error correction is ineffective may be justified up to that time, because studies conducted before 1996 and even later reached controversial results regarding the efficacy of error correction. One major methodological problem that probably led them to inconclusive results was the unfocused approach they adopted for treating errors. As Truscott himself claimed, a highly focused approach to CF may promise accuracy development. The most recent researches (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a, 2010b; Sheen et al., 2009; Lee, 2019) have adopted a focused approach to CF targeting only a few error categories at a time and gained more satisfactory results than the earlier ones (Kepner, 1991; Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984).

Truscott's strong claim questioning the place of error correction in writing classes is mainly based on the lack of empirical evidence showing the efficacy of CF over time. Such evidence (Ellis et al., 2008; Sheen et al., 2009; Lee, 2020) is now available. The current study indicated that written CF generally and focused written CF specifically can foster EFL learners' grammatical accuracy and this again proved to be durable.

8. Conclusions and Limitations

The main aim of this research was to investigate the potential efficacy of focused and unfocused written CF on EFL students' grammatical accuracy. The results showed that although both unfocused and focused written CF significantly improved EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in the short-term duration, only the efficacy of focused CF proved to be durable.

In sum, while the current research failed to prove that unfocused written CF is effective in the long-term duration, there was a consistent potential for focused CF. While earlier studies on CF (Kepner, 1991; Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984), due to adopting a comprehensive approach to CF, has somewhat produced inconclusive results, recent CF research (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010a, 2010b; Sheen et al., 2009; Lee, 2020), that adopted a focused or at least a less comprehensive approach to CF, has produced more promising results in favor of CF. However, as Ellis et al., (2008) noted the degree to which correction must be focused to be effective remains controversial and it mainly depends on the teacher's judgment whether to adopt a highly focused CF targeting a single error category

(e.g. prepositions) or a less focused approach targeting a limited number of error categories (prepositions, articles, past tense). The degree of focusing may constitute an important concern among writing teachers. Another genuine concern teachers may deal with is the number of corrections used for each error category. It is typically germane to the level of the learners. For example, for advanced learners, one correction on one error category may suffice, while for intermediate learners if one or two corrections are insufficient, three or four corrections may be required.

Even though the insights from the current study contribute to the error correction literature, this study is limited in some ways. While this research suggests adopting a focused approach to written CF, it can be emphasized that the evidence is provided from a certain population and in the use of a few grammatical structures. Future studies can investigate the efficacy of error correction on accuracy development in the use of different grammatical features and with students from intermediate or advanced levels.

The current study investigated the relative efficacy of CF by looking at group performance. A detailed look at how individual learners use CF and how they benefit from it over time is an issue in need of further research. As the learners who participated in the current research, they were limited to the low-intermediate level, furthermore the writing tasks and the test instruments used in this study were often limited to the production of relatively short texts. Future CF studies can design writing tasks that involve longer texts with more advanced learners.

There are still a few studies comparing the relative effectiveness of focused and comprehensive written CF on learners' accuracy development (Ellis et al., 2008: Sheen et al., 2009; Lee, 2020). This has been largely neglected by the recent CF studies and still needs further research. Another issue that future research can consider is comparing the amenability of both treatable and untreatable grammatical features to written CF.

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Appendix A: Pre-test

Pre-test Questions

.....

A: Match the beginnings in column A with the endings in column B. One is extra in column B. (4 points)

A	B
1: Where are you going?	a. No, he doesn't.
2: Does he live in Tehran?	b. at school.
3: Is your father a dentist?	c. last week
4: When were you in Milan?	D. to the library
	e. Yes, he is.

.....

B: Choose the correct choice to complete these sentences. (10 points)

5: I see Nancy's brother here. .....name is Joseph. (His/ Her/ My)
6: Their sister ..... late in the morning. (get up/ gets up/ getting up)
7: ..... mother is she? (Who/ What/ Whose)
8: Who's .....? (call/ calls/ calling)
9: My brother ..... tennis. (liking/ like/ likes)
10: I'm ..... the room now. (clean/ cleans/ cleaning)
11: They have a car. I see ..... car in the street. (their/ our/ his)
12: My teacher ..... in Shiraz last week. (go/ were/ was)
13: Her brothers ..... the house every afternoon. (clean/ cleans/ cleaning)
14: Leila..... to the radio every afternoon. (doesn't listens/ don't listen/ doesn't listen)

.....

C: Complete these sentences with your own knowledge. (4 points)

15: What time ..... Mr. and Mrs. Amini go to work?
16: Jane and Kate ..... absent. They were at home.
17: She lives .....Azadi street.
18: Ali ..... at school now.

.....

D: Complete these sentences. Use the given words. (3 points)
(Week, classes, face, feel, homework)

19: She does her ..... at 4:30.
20: I don't .....well.
21: There are twelve ..... in our school.

.....

E: Circle the odd word. (2 points)

22: fine/ well/ happy/ hurry
23: sitting/ teaching/ walking/ evening

.....

F: Choose the correct answer. (4 points)

24: He ..... school at 12:30. (reads/ lives/ leaves)
25: It's ..... to five. (minute/ a quarter/ half)
26: Tom ..... to school every day. (works/ walks/ plays)
27: Yesterday was Monday. Tomorrow is ..... (Friday/ Wednesday/ Tuesday)

.....

G: Reading Comprehension
Read this passage and answer the following questions. (7 points)

My name is Mona. I live in Ilam. My mother is an English teacher. She goes to work by her car. My father is a dentist. Today is Friday. We go to park on Fridays. We are in the park now. We are playing ping-pong in the park.
Check T for True and F for False.

28: Mona's mother doesn't teach English. (True☐ False☐)

29: Mona doesn't go to park on Fridays. (True☐ False☐)

Complete this sentence with the correct word.

30: Her father is a ..... (teacher/ nurse/ dentist)

Now answer these questions in complete sentences.

31: What do they do in the park?

32: Do they live in Tehran?

33: What time do they go to the park?

34: What day was yesterday?

.....

H: Change these sentences using the words in parantheses. (3 points)

35: She goes to school at 7:00. (when)

36: My sister listens to the radio every day. (now)

37: She doesn't teach in this school.(Ali and Hassan)

.....

I: Change these sentences into negative form. (3 points)

38: My brother and Ali work in the library.

39: My friend studies English in Tehran.

40: He wakes up early in the mornings.

Appendix B: Immediate Post-test

Appendix 2: Immediate post-test

.....

A: There is an error in each sentence. Find and correct it. (9 points)

1: We need a ball. The teacher give us a ball yesterday.
2: I saw the dog. The dog was eating a bone.
3: Did you come to school with Sarah? Yes, I come with her this morning.
4: This is the desk of the classroom. I see a lot of books on a desk.
5: The boys watch TV last night. Then, they went to bed.
6: They were practiced English yesterday evening. They will have a test tomorrow morning.
7: The students didn't wrote their homework, because they went to the zoo.
8: Should he practices English more? Yes, he should.
9: can he drove a car? No, he can ride a bicycle.

.....

B: Answer these questions in complete sentences using the words in parantheses. (8 points)

10: How was he working? (hard)
.....
11: How did she drive the car? (slow)
.....
12: What did you buy? (dictionary)
.....
13: Where was she going this morning? (park)
.....
14: Can you write French well? (speak)
.....
15: Should they study Arabic now? (practice English)
.....
16: Did the man clean the store? (read a book)
.....
17: Why wasn't she watching TV yesterday evening? (study Persian)
.....

.....

C: Complete these sentences with your own knowledge. (4 points)

18: There are some clouds in the sky. It ..... rain.
19: Yesterday, I went to the zoo with my friends. We ..... a tiger in the zoo.
20: It is a book. ..... book is easy.
21: Did you listen to the news? Yes, I ..... to the news this morning.

.....

D: Match the beginnings in column A with the endings in column B. One is extra in column B. (2 points)

A	B
22: I have an Arabic test.	A: You should study hard.
23: I am too tired.	B: You can eat some cheese.
24: I am hungry.	C: You can rest at your room.
25: I was cooking dinner.	D: You should drink some water.
	E: When you called me.

.....

E: Complete these sentences using the correct form of (buy). (3 points)

26: They ..... an English dictionary yesterday evening. It helps them very much.
27: Did they ..... some milk this morning?
28: Mina didn't ..... a good car last year. She wants to buy a new car.

.....

F: Choose the correct answer. (5 points)

29: I gave my comb to Reza last night. I ..... not comb my hair this morning.
do □ does □ did □
30: I have a cat. ..... cat is very nice.
the □ a □ an □
31: He works very hard. He should ..... some water every day.
Drank □ drinks □ drink □
32: She ..... the new clothes, because they were dirty.
wash □ was washing □ washes □
33: Was she ..... lunch yesterday? No, she was sick.

Appendix C: Delayed Post-Test

Delayed Post-test

A: There is an error in each sentence. Find and correct it. (9 points)
1: My father bought me a ball. A ball is very beautiful.
2: On the way home they goed to the baker's. They bought 3 loaves of bread.
3: They arrived at school at 8. The door of a classroom was not open.
4: You see the bicycle near them. The bicycle is small.
5: Why was Mina had breakfast at 6? Because she was hungry.
6: They have a lot of free time. They can visiting their relatives and friends.
7: Can a fat man ran fast? I don't think so.
8: There is a football match at Azadi stadium. We are going to a stadium this afternoon.
9: The exam is not easy. You can study hard.

B: Answer these questions in complete sentences using the words in parentheses. (8 points)
10: How was Hossein swimming? (fast)
11: How did she drive her car? (slow)
12: What did they do? (clean the room)
13: Where was she going this morning? (park)
14: Can you come at 6 o'clock? (call)
15: Should she listen to the radio? (help her mother)
16: Is he in Paris now? (go to London yesterday)
17: Why weren't they playing football yesterday evening? (practice English)

helping □ help □ helped □
33: ..... I leave the room? Of course.
should □ must □ may □
34: I went to the mosque and ..... there.
pray □ prayed □ praying □
35: My mother put the meat on the plate .....
a few minutes ago □ now □ every day □
36: Sarah ..... some cheese this morning before she went to school.
eats □ is eating □ ate □
37: She looked at us and ..... goodbye before leaving.
says □ said □ saying □

G: Read the following passage and correct the underlined mistakes by writing the correct forms. (6 points)

Last Sunday, I **get up** late and **do** my homework. After that, I met some friends. Then, I **goed** shopping in the afternoon. But this Saturday is different. This morning, I **wake up** early ,because I had a Physics exam. **A** exam was difficult. After that, I **come back** home..

38: get up : .....
39: do: .....
40: goed: .....
41: wake up .....
42: A: .....
43: come back : .....

H: Picture description.
These pictures show what you did last Monday. What happened in each picture for you. (4 points)

C: Complete these sentences with your own knowledge. (4 points)
18: Were Ali and Reza washing the car yesterday? Yes, ...
19: I saw a cat. ..... cat was eating meat.
20: The weather is sunny. It ..... not rain today.
21: What did your teacher teach? He ..... the new lesson.

D: Match the beginnings in column A with the endings in column B. One is extra in column B. (2 points)

A	B
22: she was cooking dinner.	A: Because she had some guests.
23: She has a German test.	B: She can rest at this room.
24: She is too tired.	C: She should practice hard.
25: She is very hungry.	D: She may drink some water.
	E: She can have some chips.

E: Complete these sentences using the correct form of (swim). (2 points)
26: My friend ..... in this river a few minutes ago.
27: My brother was ..... before I went there.

F: Choose the correct answer. (5 points)
28: Last night I was at home. I was helping my mother when you ..... me.
call □ calling □ called □
29: When ..... You leave the classroom? I left it at 12 o'clock.
do □ were □ did □
30: She ..... his car, because it was dirty.
wash □ washed □ washes □
31: We have a new car. My father ..... the car yesterday.
Is buying □ bought □ buys □
32: Did you help your brother with his lessons? No, I didn't ..... him.

44: (wake up at 7) 45:(eat breakfast) 46:(go to school) 47:(play football at school)

44: .....
45: .....
46: .....
47: .....

End of document

Appendix D: Treatment Quiz (Sample)

A treatment quiz

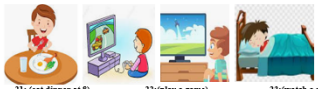
A: There is an error in each sentence. Find and correct it. (6 points)
1: He watched a cartoon. A cartoon was interesting.
2: She walk in the park this morning. The weather was very good.
3: My classmate has the pen. The pen is red.
4: You see the dog. The dog is running.
5: Why is not Sarah playing tennis? Because she may not play it.
6: They have a new car. They may traveled to another city.

B: Answer these questions in complete sentences using the words in parentheses. (7 points)
7: Who was swimming in the lake? (Tom)
8: How did she ride her bicycle? (slow)
9: What did he do? (go to school)
10: Where was she going this morning? (library)
11: Can you come at 6 o'clock? (call)
12: Should she take a rest? (study English)
13: Why weren't they playing football yesterday evening? (practice English)

C: Complete these sentences with your own knowledge. (4 points)
14: Was Reza practicing French? Yes, ...
15: I saw a car. ..... car was very nice.
16: The weather is cloudy. It ..... rain tonight.
17: What did his brother drink? He ..... a cup of coffee.

D: Complete these sentences using the correct form of (eat). (3 points)
18: My father ..... breakfast a few minutes ago.
19: My mother was ..... lunch when I came in.
20: My sister did not ..... dinner, because she was sick.

E: Picture description.
These pictures show what you did last night. What happened in each picture for you. (4 points)



21: (eat dinner at 8) 22:(play a game) 23:(watch a movie) 24:(go to bed at 11)

21: .....
22: .....
23: .....
24: .....

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