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WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK AND THE CORRECT USE OF DEFINITE/INDEFINITE ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of written corrective feedback–explicit/implicit, on increasing the correct use of definite/indefinite articles. To this end, sixty Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners were randomly assigned to two experimental groups, receiving explicit and implicit feedback, respectively; and one control group receiving no feedback. Each group included twenty participants (N=20). The homogeneity test of KET preceded the treatment. Prior to the treatment, a pre-test was administered to gain insight into the participants' current command of English articles. After the treatment, the same set of tests was administered as post-test to assess the probable increase in the correct use of definite/indefinite articles for the experimental groups compared to the control group. Analysis of the results through two separate ANOVAs revealed that the experimental group 1 who received explicit corrective feedback significantly outperformed the experimental group 2 and the control group in terms of the correct use of indefinite articles. In terms of definite articles, there were no statistically significant differences among the three groups. The results of this study indicate that language learners benefit from teacher-provided feedback in improving their grammatical accuracy in writing. Furthermore, more research is merited as there is a lot to be investigated in this field.

Key Words: Corrective feedback, Explicit, Implicit, Noticing hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

According to Erel and Bulut (2007), "Research on foreign and second language writing has mostly been based on why and how to respond to student writing" (p. 2). Most EFL and ESL teachers are of the opinion that responding to students' writing through appropriate corrective feedback (CF) is an inseparable part of any writing course and students require teacher feedback on their errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Feedback in writing is also considered as an important aspect to the development of students' language perception so that they can perform effectively in producing the language.

With regard to the ever-increasing interest in teacher provided CF and its pedagogical benefits, a growing body of research has investigated the potential efficacy of written CF (WCF) and the way student errors are treated in language learning environments. This error treatment, according to Chaudron (1988) can be viewed as "any teacher behavior following an error that minimally attempts to inform the learner of the fact of error" (p. 150). Lightbown and Spada (1999) define CF as "Any indication to the learners that their use of the target language is incorrect; this includes various responses that the learners receive" (p. 171-172). This feedback encompasses the gap between what the learner has learned and his/her competence and the attempts made to bridge these gaps (Furnborough & Truman, 2009).

The effectiveness of WCF has been controversial regarding whether error correction is beneficial to the learning process or not. On the one hand, CF has proved to be effective in promoting language learning (Sheen, 2007; Lee, 1997); yet on the other hand, as Truscott (1996) claimed, it could be obstructive or even detrimental. In an extreme view on CF, Truscott argued that the application of CF on the learners' writing should be totally avoided as it hinders and harms writing development. According to Truscott, "grammar

correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (p. 328). In line with Truscott, Kepner (1991) also found that error feedback is not effective for developing accuracy in L2 student writing.

More recent studies support the positive contributions of CF to language learning and in particular writing skills (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Sheen, 2007). Gass (1997) also stated that CF enables learners to notice the "gap" between their interlanguage and the target language resulting in more focused and accurate learning. Additionally, in accordance with general research on language learning, CF studies have specifically focused on the ways CF can alter and promote "learning processes" and "linguistic competence" (Sheen, 2010b: 204). Soori and Abd. Samad (2011) also cite Yates and Kenkel (2002) and mention that the main concern nowadays is not to whether provide CF for the learners but rather "when and how to provide feedback on the students' errors" (p. 349). As cited in Rezaei, Mozaffari, and Hatef (2011), Schmidt's (1990, 1995, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis suggests that "noticing is a prerequisite of learning, continuing that conscious attention must be paid to input in order for L2 learning to proceed." (p. 22). Thus, CF provides learners with clues indicating what is wrong and draws their attention to erroneous forms.

Grammar accuracy and writing improvement have also been shown to benefit from feedback. CF on learners' writing will help them avoid the possibility of future errors and promote accuracy of their writing with more focus on meaning (Ashwell, 2000). According to Ferris (2010), "the studies on written CF … examine whether written CF facilitates long-term acquisition of particular linguistic features and if so, how" (p. 188). Soori and Abd. Samad also refer to Russell and Spada (2006) and state that they "investigated the impacts of corrective feedback on second language grammar learning. The outcomes of this study revealed that corrective feedback was helpful for L2 learning." (p. 350).

Furthermore, Erel and Bulut (2007) refer to various studies (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001) for "motivating" and "encouraging" effects of WCF on learners and state that, "it is believed ... that if a teacher indicates a written grammatical error on a student's paper and provides the correct form in one or another way, the student will realize the error and will not repeat it in his/her future writings"; consequently, "the ability of writing accurately will be improved" (p. 398). Additionally, Ferris and Roberts's (2001) experiment with different types of WCF substantiated the efficacy of CF on improving learners' structural accuracy.

As stated by Erel and Bulut (2007), numerous studies (e.g., Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Leki, 1991; Chandler, 2003) show the effectiveness of CF in promoting lerners' writing skills as well as grammatical accuracy:

Teachers believe that correcting the grammar of student writers' work will help them improve the accuracy of subsequent writing. Research evidence on error correction in L2 writing classes shows that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time. There is also research evidence which proves that students want error feedback and think that it helps them improve their writing skill in the target language. (p. 398).

Similarly, Leki (1991) and Zhang (1995) in their studies found out that the learners themselves greatly appreciate teacher-provided CF; this clearly shows that "L2 students have positive attitudes towards written feedback" (Kaweera & Usaha, 2008: 86). Ferris (1997) also found that CF provided by teachers led to the development of learners' writing skills. It is also noteworthy that, "many scholars and researchers agree that feedback is essential and has a positive effect on students' writing. Thus, feedback on writing can be selected as a means of helping students to make revision and can help students improve their writing skills" (Kaweera & Usaha, 2008:. 85).

According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), different types of CF have been identified including explicit, metalinguistic, elicitation, repetition, recast, translation, and clarification requests (see Appendix A for brief definitions and examples of CF strategies proposed by Lyster and Ranta, 1997 as cited in Sauro, 2009: 99). According to Rezaei et al. (2011), "all of these techniques are placed in an explicit-implicit continuum." (p. 22).

Findings on Written Corrective Feedback

In order to further explore the issue of CF in writing development, numerous researchers have focused on the effectiveness of different types of CF in dealing with learners' errors (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Bitchener, 2008). These studies have focused on the continuum ranging from explicit (direct) to implicit (indirect) CF. Ferris (2002) defined explicit feedback as one "when an instructor provides the correct linguistic form for students (word, morpheme, phrase, rewritten sentence, deleted word[s] or morpheme[s]" (p.19). implicit feedback, on the other hand, "occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the student writer to solve the problem and correct the error" (p.19). Sheen, Wright, Moldawa (2009) support direct and indirect CF and their contributions to writing development by stating that "…CF may enhance learning by helping learners to (1) notice their errors in their written work, (2) engage in hypotheses testing in a systematic way and (3) monitor the accuracy of their writing by tapping into their existing explicit grammatical knowledge" (p. 567).

According to Ellis's (2009) and Bitchener's (2008) findings, explicit CF provides learners with direct information as to what has gone wrong especially if learners are not proficient enough to come up with a solution to the problem. Explicit CF has also proved to enhance acquisition of certain grammatical structures (Sheen, 2007). As opposed to explicit CF, indirect CF does not provide learners with overt indicators to erroneous parts, nor does it provide the corrected structures. Instead, some clues or hints attract their attention to the problematic areas (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). It has also been argued that explicit CF, by nature, does not involve learners in deep internal processing as it is the case in implicit CF. Therefore, indirect CF is more probable to result in long-term learning than direct CF (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Ferris (2002) argues that direct CF is more preferable to indirect CF when dealing with lower-level learners as they have not yet acquired enough grammatical knowledge to self-correct their errors.

Recent studies on CF also support the positive contribution of feedback to writing improvement (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Bitchener, 2008). In an earlier study, Lalande (1982) showed that indirect CF had better results than direct CF in learning. As opposed to Lalande's (1982) findings, Chandler (2003) investigated different types of WCF, including direct and indirect types. She concluded that, direct CF had significant effects on the improvement of learners' writing grammar accuracy. Liang (2008) conducted an experiment with different groups of participants receiving different types of WCF as well. Results of this study showed that, both direct and indirect CF helped learners promote certain aspects of their writing.

As stated by Campillo (2003), Lightbown and Spada (1990) examined and "analysed the effect of explicit corrective feedback in an intensive communicative classroom. … Their results corroborated the hypothesis that the teaching of formal aspects … contribute to the learners' linguistic accuracy" (p. 210). Spada and Lightbown (1993) later conducted another study similar to their previous study demonstrating that "explicit corrective feedback increased linguistic accuracy" (Campillo, 2003: 211). Another study was undertaken by White, Spada, Lightbown, and Ranta (1991) comparing "the performance of explicit corrective feedback learners with those who didn't receive the treatment. … Again, the groups exposed to explicit teaching and explicit corrective feedback showed a higher level of linguistic accuracy than in control groups". Likewise, alongside with explicit CF, "implicit corrective feedback has also been widely investigated and can be implemented in different ways" (Campillo, 2003: 211).

Kim and Mathes (2001) examined the effectiveness of explicit and implicit CF; their findings revealed that the both types were quite effective in diminishing the chances of error repetition in the future. In a survey conducted by Ancker (2000), it was concluded that most of the surveyed learners supported the teacher-provided CF, whereas teachers indicated that it is not necessary to correct errors all the time as it might hinder negotiation of meaning. Nabel and Swain (2002) also investigated the degree of learners' awareness towards CF provided by the teacher.

Numerous studies (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Panova & Lyster, 2002) have revealed that recasts are the most frequently used type of CF. Lyster and Ranta (1997) also conclude that recasts are beneficial as they reduce the

possibility of interruption in the flow of communication of meaning. Campillo (1993) also argues that, "nevertheless, not all corrective feedback techniques have been regarded as equally effective" (p. 212). He also refers to some recent studies (e.g., Lyster, 1998) and states the need "to explore the effect of combinations of corrective feedback, as opposed to isolated techniques" (p. 212) in a way that learners "can benefit from different ways of providing corrective focus on form" (Guenette, 2007: 47).

In conclusion, the literature on WCF indicates some inconsistencies in the research and studies so far. Zamel (1985) refers to Hendrikson in the early 1980s and says that "current research tells us very little about ESL teachers' responses to student writing. We know that teachers respond imprecisely and inconsistently to errors" (p. 84). Later on, Ferris (2004) emphasizes the little progress in this field and states that "we are virtually at Square One, as the existing research base is incomplete and inconsistent, and it would certainly be premature to formulate any conclusions about this topic" (p. 49). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to gain further insight into the preferences of Iranian EFL learners for error correction techniques and the effectiveness these techniques on increasing the correct use of articles in their writing.

The Present Study

The present brief survey of the related literature reveals that most investigation in this field have so far primarily dealt with the impact of recasts and meta-linguistic types of corrective feedback in ESL contexts (e.g., Kim & Mathes, 2001; Loewen, 2002; Lyster, 2004). In addition, Dabaghi Varnosfadrani (2006) refers to various researches (e.g., Havranek & Cesnik, 2003; Muranoi, 2000) and states that not enough studies "have investigated the effectiveness of error correction in EFL contexts" (p. 35). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the extent to which written CF such as explicit and repetition implicit might be effective in promoting Iranian EFL learners' correct use of English articles which, according to Faghih (1997), are among the most difficult and troublesome features of EFL for learners and the following research questions were proposed:

Q1. Does written corrective feedback have any significant effect on increasing Iranian EFL learners' correct use of *definite* article?

Q2. Does written corrective feedback have any significant effect on increasing Iranian EFL learners' correct use of *indefinite* articles?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of adult pre-intermediate EFL learners from the Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Tehran aged 16 or more whose mean age was 22. The reason for selecting pre-intermediate learners was that it was assumed that since they were post beginners, they were already familiar with the basics of EFL syntax. In order to make sure of the learners' homogeneity, Key English Test (KET, 2009), developed by Cambridge University, was administered prior to the treatment. Out of the subject pool, sixty participants (N=60) were randomly identified as two experimental groups and one control group, i.e., each group consisted of twenty participants (N=20). The experimental group 1 received explicit corrective feedback, the experimental group 2 received implicit repetition corrective feedback, and the control group received placebo feedback.

Instruments

The participants of this study were presented with their regular coursebooks developed by the ILI. Pre-intermediate coursebooks at the ILI comprise of eight units and each unit is further divided into two sections and every section is covered in one session lasting for an hour and forty-five minutes. Session one covers conversation, grammar, and vocabulary. Session two covers reading, grammar, and listening. Classes are held twice a week. The total of twenty-one sessions covers the whole term for each of the three pre-intermediate levels at the ILI. Prior to the treatment, the participants received the pre-test of articles. Then, they received the written treatment. At the end of the treatment, the same set of tests was administered as post-test. Pre-test and post-test items were as follows:

1. Definite/indefinite articles:

1.1. Twenty-two independent sentences to be filled with appropriate articles including thirty-six gaps for *the*, twenty gaps for *a*, and seven gaps for *an* (Neylor & Murphy, 1996; Vince & Emmerson, 2003; Murphy, Altman, & Rutherford, 1989).
1.2. Twenty-seven independent sentences to be filled with appropriate articles or no article (Walker & Elsworth, 2000).

Procedure

Prior to the treatment, the participants were presented with the pre-test to provide the researcher with clear picture of their current level of proficiency on articles. Then, they were told that they were supposed to write at least one paragraph or maximum two consisting of 150 to 200 words at the beginning of each session. From the second session on, they were required to write on a topic in line with their regular coursebook contents provided by the researcher in the classroom. All the participants in the three groups received the same topic every session. The total of twenty writing topics was provided for the participants during the experiment. The experimental group 1 received explicit corrective feedback, i.e., the instructor indicated that an error had been made, identified the error and provided the correction, to which repetition was required by the participants as modified output.

The experimental group 2 received implicit repetition corrective feedback, i.e. the instructor utilized emphatic stress by underlining the erroneous part(s), to which reformulation by the participants was required as modified output. It is worth mentioning that the role of the emphatic stress was thoroughly explained to the participants because it required the participants to grammatically correct the underlined parts by adding, deleting, changing, and modifying the surrounding or within words. It was also emphasized that the underlined words had nothing to do with spelling mistakes.

In order to make sure of noticing the teacher-provided CF, the participants of the experimental groups were obliged to provide their modified output as an independent piece of writing after having written on the next topic.

The control group received placebo feedback, i.e., “topic relevant response that does not contain the target form in the same context”, for example: “student: In Sweden the global warming is a problem. Native speaker: Many people believe it's a problem everywhere” (Sauro, 2009: 104) to which no modified output was required.

Teacher-provided CF for the experimental groups mainly focused on the correct use of definite/indefinite articles. Other grammatical deviations were not brought to their attention. At the end of the treatment, the participants of the three groups were presented with the same sets of tests as the post-test assessing the extent to which the treatment was successful in enhancing the experimental groups’ ability over the control group’s to correctly apply the articles. This study was conducted within the period of 10 weeks in the spring semester of 1393(2014) at the ILI in Tehran.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having collected the required data, two one-way ANOVAs were calculated to investigate the effectiveness of the treatment in increasing learners’ correct use of definite/indefinite articles. Differences among the experimental and control groups’ means were considered significant at the p=.05 level of significance.

Analysis of the Results on the Pre-Test of Articles

In order to investigate the relationship among the participants’ scores on the pre-test of definite and indefinite articles before the treatment, two separate one-way ANOVAs were run. The results of the one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant difference at the p=.05 level of significance for the three groups in terms of the correct use of definite article: $F(2, 57) = .954$, $p = .391$. The descriptive statistics on definite article are shown in the following table.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on definite article

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum score	Maximum score
Experimental 1 (Explicit)	20	29.30	2.296	.514	26	34
Experimental 2 (Implicit)	20	30.00	2.938	.657	23	36
Control	20	30.45	2.685	.600	24	35

With regard to indefinite articles, the results of the one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant difference at the *p*=.05 level of significance for the three groups: F (2, 57) =2.623, *p* = .081. The descriptive statistics on indefinite articles are shown in the following table.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on indefinite articles

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum score	Maximum score
Experimental 1 (Explicit)	20	20.95	2.350	.526	16	25
Experimental 2 (Implicit)	20	22.60	2.371	.530	18	27
Control	20	21.50	2.236	.500	18	26

The differences between the groups' mean scores on definite/indefinite articles prior to the treatment are presented in the following figure.

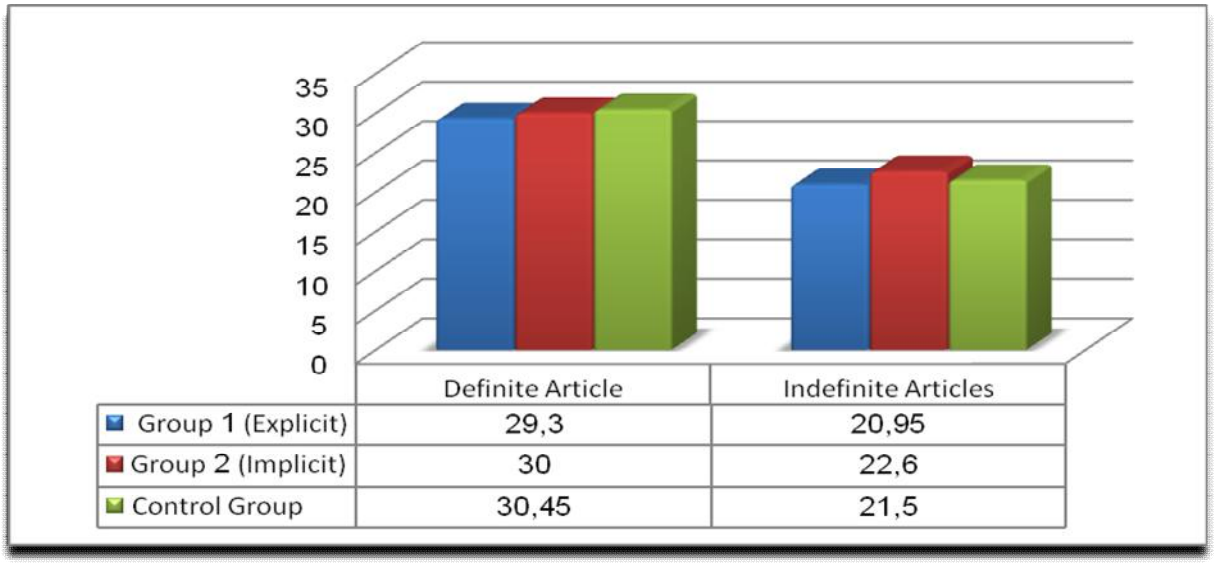


Figure 1: Group means on definite and indefinite articles

With regard to the analysis of the results, it became apparent that there was no statistically significant difference among the participants of the three groups in terms of their current proficiency in articles prior to the treatment at the p=.05 level of significance and therefore, their homogeneity was guaranteed.

Analysis of the Results on the Post-Test of Articles

In order to investigate the relationship among the participants' scores on the post-test of definite and indefinite articles after the treatment, two separate one-way ANOVAs were run. The results of the one-way ANOVA showed no statistically significant difference at the *p*=.05 level of significance for the three groups in terms of the correct use of definite article: F (2, 57) =2.487, *p* = .092. The descriptive statistics on definite article are shown in the following table.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics on definite article

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum score	Maximum score
Experimental 1 (Explicit)	20	31.80	1.963	.439	28	36
Experimental 2 (Implicit)	20	33.40	3.844	.860	27	40
Control	20	31.15	3.703	.828	24	37

With regard to indefinite articles, the results of the one-way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences at the *p*=.05 level of significance for the three groups after the treatment: F (2, 57) =25.162, *p* = .000 < .05. The descriptive statistics on indefinite articles are shown in the following table.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics on indefinite articles

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum score	Maximum score
Experimental 1 (Explicit)	20	25.90	1.944	.435	23	31
Experimental 2 (Implicit)	20	22.90	2.125	.475	18	27
Control	20	21.65	1.755	.393	19	26

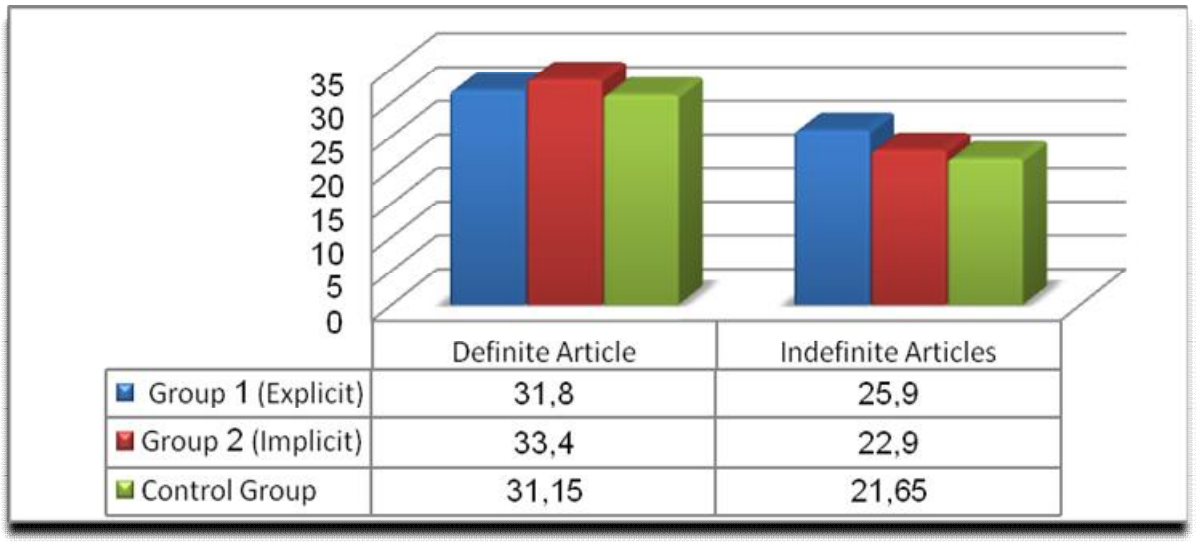
Additionally, to find out where the difference(s) lie regarding the mean scores of the three groups, post-hoc comparisons through the Tukey HSD tests were carried out. The following table summarizes the results of post-hoc tests.

Table 5: Post-hoc tests results on indefinite articles

Groups	Groups	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Experimental 1 (Explicit)	Experimental 2 (Implicit)	3.000*	.616	.000
	Control	4.250*	.616	.000
Experimental 2 (Implicit)	Experimental 1 (Explicit)	-3.000*	.616	.000
	Control	1.250	.616	.114
Control	Experimental 1 (Explicit)	-4.250*	.616	.000
	Experimental 2 (Implicit)	-1.250	.616	.114

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

Table 5 shows that the mean differences between the experimental group 1 (M=25.90, SD=1.944) and the experimental group 2 (M=22.90, SD=2.125), and the experimental group 1 and the control group (M=21.65, SD=1.755) were statistically significant with the significance levels of .000 < .05. There was no statistically significant difference between the experimental group 2 and the control group since the level of significance was .114 > .05. The differences between the groups' mean scores on definite and indefinite articles are presented in the following figure.



	Definite Article	Indefinite Articles
Group 1 (Explicit)	31,8	25,9
Group 2 (Implicit)	33,4	22,9
Control Group	31,15	21,65

Figure 2: Group means on definite and indefinite articles

Given this limited range of studies, the present study sought to expand the base by investigating the effect of different types of CF on the accuracy performance of the targeted linguistic error categories in learners' pieces of writing. Although most studies support the efficacy of feedback on improving structural accuracy (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Campillo, 2003), the results of the present study both negate and support this tenet. In this respect, it can be stated that whereas Ferris et al. (2000) found no reduction in article errors, Ferris and Roberts (2001) reported some increase in the accurate use of articles. This difference in findings of the previous studies is not altogether surprising when one considers the complex rule structure associated with the correct usage of definite/ indefinite articles in different linguistic environments (Master, 1995).

Research question 1 dealt with the investigation of whether the teacher-provided CF could increase the correct use of definite article, i.e., *the*. The results revealed no statistically significant improvement for the experimental groups over the control group.

Research question 2 dealt with the investigation of whether the teacher-provided CF could increase the correct use of indefinite articles, i.e., *a* and *an*. The results showed that the experimental group 1 who received explicit CF significantly outperformed both the experimental group 2 who received implicit repetition CF and the control group. But the experimental group 2 did not show any significant improvement over the control group.
The findings of the first research question proved to be controversial compared to the current view on the effectiveness of CF as no significant results were found regarding increasing the correct use of definite article for the experimental groups over the control group. Apparently, the findings are in line with an earlier view held by Truscott (1996) claiming that "grammar correction has no place in writing courses and should be abandoned" (p. 328). Fazio (2001) also did not find support for the effectiveness of CF on accuracy. Regarding Iranian learners, Faghih (1997) noted that articles are among the most difficult and troublesome features of EFL for all learners. In support of the present study, Adams, as early as 1962, maintained that "Persians tend to omit *the*, although they do use it unexpectedly" (p.57). Additionally, Faghih and Hosseini (2012) conducted a study on the effectiveness of online CF on the correct use of definite article and no significant results were reported. However, in contrast, by looking at a variety of studies in the field (e.g., Lee, 1997; Sheen, 2007; Faghih & Hosseini, 2012; Hosseni, 2012; Hosseini, 2013) and also the findings of the second research question, it would be wrong to generalize these findings to all aspects of language learning and CF as there is ample evidence confirming the applicability and efficacy of CF on grammar improvement.

Findings of the first research question can be accounted for if we look at Persian and English contrastively. Generally, Iranian EFL learners are already familiar with indefinite articles. For example:

Persian: /man yek ketab va yek sib daram. ketab ra doost daram. /
Transliteration: (I a book and an apple have. Ø book like I.)
English translation: (I have a book and an apple. I like the book.)

By looking at these examples, it becomes apparent that indefinite articles are already present in Iranians' interlanguage and they can positively transfer them into their target language thus, benefiting from the CF explicitly provided by the teacher. In contrast, English definite article is not present in Persian, as it is shown in the aforementioned example by the sign Ø. Thus, learners might have negatively transferred incorrect structures into their target language. Accordingly, following reasons may as well account for the results. First, definite article might require deeper levels of processing than indefinite articles as it should be acquired after indefinite ones and it is not present in learners' interlanguage. Second, the treatment that both of the experimental groups received might have not been effective in enabling them to apply the correct use of definite article in different testing instruments. Third, since by answering the items of indefinite articles, the definite article items automatically revealed themselves, the control group might have successfully drawn on their previous knowledge on indefinite articles to answer definite article instruments. Fourth, the participant of this study might have had previous experiences in learning EFL affecting the testing results. Fifth, psychological factors might have affected their performance on the test, since reminding learners of their mistakes might act as psychological barriers to their uptaking of the teacher-provided feedback resulting in the inefficacy of the treatment. On the other hand, the control group might have interpreted their writings as perfect, since they didn't receive any feedback.

Explicit CF proved effective in drawing learners' attention to the differences between their output and target norm. Therefore, the findings of the second research question support Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis in enabling learners to notice the gap resulting in the improvement of grammar accuracy. Fathman and Whalley (1990) also found that students who received CF made fewer errors. Accordingly, superiority of explicit corrective feedback in increasing the correct use of indefinite articles by Iranian EFL learners further supports St. John and Cash (1995) findings on the efficacy of CF on the structural accuracy of learners' written output. Bitchener et al. (2005) found out that explicit written feedback increases the correct use of articles and is quite effective when the grammatical error is rule governed, such as articles and present tenses. Similarly, Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, and Takashima (2008) supported the efficacy of feedback on increasing the correct use of articles. The results of the present study are also in line with the findings of Bitchener (2008), Bitchener and Knoch (2009), and Ellis et al. (2008), confirming the effectiveness of explicit corrective feedback on indefinite articles. In a series of recent studies conducted by Faghih and Hosseini (2012) and Hosseini (2012, 2013), it was found that WCF can improve low-level English learners grammatical structures such as indefinite articles, prepositions, and tenses. This superiority can be due to various factors. First, Iranian EFL learners generally tend to rely on their teachers to provide them with correct structures when they make mistakes. In this sense, they are most responsive when teachers locate the error, correct it, and require them to modify their language. Second, they tend to overlook teacher-provided CF especially on their writings when the incorrect structure is indirectly brought to their attention. Third, they tend to use erroneous structures less frequently for which teachers provide some clues and they fail to apply them correctly.

Additionally, with respect to the aforementioned reasons, the experimental group 2 who received implicit corrective feedback showed no significant improvement over the control group. This could be due to the fact that the participants had low proficiency levels and implicitly requiring them to correct their errors might have demanded deeper levels of processing than correcting explicitly which they might lack at this stage (Roper, 1977). In other words, the learner's "proficiency level was not high enough to understand why they made such errors. If the learners didn't know about the rules of definite/indefinite articles, it may have caused confusion when they were using articles" (Lu, 2010: 97–98).

CONCLUSION

In this study, the impact of written corrective feedback on increasing the correct use of indefinite/definite articles was investigated. On the basis of the results, it became evident that explicit CF had a significant effect on increasing the correct use of indefinite articles but failed to increase the correct use of definite article. In the same sense, implicit CF didn't have any significant effects on increasing the correct use of definite and indefinite articles over both the experimental group 1 and the control group. Regarding appropriate feedback, Researchers have long since sought to provide evidence and plausible answers to the questions proposed by Hendrickson (1978) but so far, have not been successful in drawing a clear picture of different aspects of CF. These five questions on CF have been the basis for most of the ongoing studies in this field. According to Hendrickson (1978), CF generally should aim at answering the following questions:

"1. Should learner errors be corrected?
2. If so, when should learner errors be corrected?
3. Which learner errors should be corrected?
4. How should learner errors be corrected?
5. Who should correct learner errors?" (p. 389)

The findings of the present study also provide further implications as to the positive contributions of written CF to second and foreign language learning. In conclusion, it is believed that the findings of this study are motivating since the way teachers react to learners' language production errors play a vital role in their future learning. Interested researchers are also encouraged to experiment on different aspects of the language using various or combinations of feedback techniques as there is still plenty of room for further research in this field.

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Appendix A

Characteristics of Lyster & Ranta's (1997) categories of corrective feedback

Corrective Feedback Type	Definition	Example(s)	Nature of Error Indicated	Target-like Reformulation Provided	Elicited Output
Explicit Error Correction	Explicit provision of the target-like reformulation	You should say visited.	Yes	Provided directly	None or repetition
Metalinguistic Feedback	Comments, information or questions (that may or may not contain metalanguage but do not include the reformulation) related to the ill-formedness of the utterance	There's a mistake.	No	No	Identification of error and/or reformulation
		It's past tense.	Yes	Provided indirectly through metalinguistic hint at correct reformulation	Reformulation
		Did you use the past tense?	Yes	Provided indirectly through metalinguistic question concerning rule governing reformulation	Metalinguistic response, yes/no response, or reformulation
Elicitations	A prompt for the learner to reformulate	Try that again.	No	No	Reformulation
		How do we say that in the past tense?	Yes	No	Reformulation
		Yesterday we ...	Sometimes	No	Reformulation
Repetitions	Repetition of all or part of the utterance containing the error, often accompanied by a change in intonation	Yesterday we visit my aunt.	Sometimes	No	None or repetition
Recasts	Implicit reformulation of all or part of the learner's utterance	Yesterday we visited my aunt.	Yes	Reformulation provided	Repetition
		I visited my aunt last week.	Yes	Reformulation provided	Repetition
Translations	Target language translation of unsolicited use of the L1.	***	Yes	Reformulation provided	Repetition
Clarification Requests	An utterance indicating a problem in comprehension, accuracy or both.	Pardon?	No	No	Repetition, reformulation, or meaning elaboration