

The Effect of Direct and Indirect Corrective Feedback on Students' Spelling Errors

El efecto de la retroalimentación directa e indirecta sobre los errores de ortografía de los estudiantes

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The study presented here is an attempt to examine the role of indirect feedback in promoting junior high school students' spelling accuracy in English. It compares the effect of direct feedback with indirect feedback on students' written work dictated by their teacher from their textbooks. Two classes were selected from the Zanjanrood District in Iran. Forty-four male students in two groups, one from School A (the direct feedback group) and the other from School B (the indirect feedback group) were treated differently regarding their spelling errors for six weeks. The results obtained revealed that indirect feedback is a more effective tool than direct feedback in rectifying students' spelling errors.

Keywords: Direct feedback, dictation, indirect feedback, spelling errors.

El estudio que aquí se reporta busca examinar el papel de la retroalimentación indirecta, en la promoción de la precisión en la escritura en inglés, de estudiantes de educación secundaria. Se comparan los efectos de la retroalimentación directa e indirecta en los trabajos escritos de los estudiantes, provenientes de los libros de texto y de dictados hechos por el profesor. Se seleccionaron dos grupos del Distrito Zanjanrood en Irán a los que se les dio, durante seis semanas, un tratamiento distinto respecto a sus errores de ortografía. En total, eran cuarenta y cinco estudiantes de sexo masculino, distribuidos en dos grupos: uno de la Escuela A (el grupo que recibió retroalimentación directa) y otro de la de la Escuela B (el grupo que recibió retroalimentación indirecta). Los resultados mostraron que la retroalimentación indirecta es una herramienta más efectiva que la directa, cuando se trata de rectificar los errores de ortografía de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: dictado, errores de ortografía, retroalimentación directa, retroalimentación indirecta.

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Introduction

English has its own unique orthographic rules and system, which challenge even those whose first language uses a version of the Roman alphabet. Students and teachers often complain about not finding any reliable rule for English orthography. In fact, English has a very systematic set of sound-spelling correspondences (Chomsky & Halle, 1968; Schane, 1970; Venezky, 1970). These sound-spelling correspondences allow English teachers to combine the teaching of phonetic units with graphemic units. After having been taught the mentioned combinations, it is often up to the students to master this spelling system. In the course of their learning, we, as teachers, witness some inconsistencies or, simply put, some spelling errors in their written work. However, these errors are signs of learning along the road toward improvement.

After presentation of new words, most often schoolteachers expect an immediate mastery on the students' part, which is not feasible considering the complex cognitive processes at work. Instructors can help their learners by providing them with constructive feedback that will test their hypotheses about new word spellings. For example, learners may tend to look for one-to-one letter-sound correspondence and then discover that they get into a lot of trouble. Extricating themselves from this situation calls for a tactful way of giving feedback.

Schoolteachers often measure their learners' spelling ability by dictating words and sentences from students' textbooks. This dictation, however, differs from conventional dictation in which a teacher reads the text three times: once at a normal speed then chunk by chunk with pauses in between and for the third time at a normal speed. Dictation at state schools in general and at junior high schools in particular aims at measuring spelling errors and for that reason teachers repeat words and sentences

as many times as possible at a slow speed to make sure that students have written them down.

It goes without saying that dictation is not the only way for measuring spelling; there are other alternatives such as multiple-choice, matching and writing the missing letters. Having taught English at state schools for many years, the second researcher's curiosity was raised when seeing learners making those spelling errors which had been corrected in their previous written work. He then decided to sort out this problem with spelling errors committed by learners during dictation. He thought that students did not pay attention to his corrective feedbacks. Therefore, he decided that this kind of feedback would not work.

The second researcher attempted to see students' contribution in correction because when everything was spoon-fed to them (all the errors were corrected and ready at their disposal), students would take it for granted and did not ponder over them. Therefore, he concluded that instead of providing them with correct forms we should push them to correct and produce. Allwright (1975), Hendrickson (1978), and Vigil and Oller (1976) proposed that pushing learners in their output, rather than providing them with correct forms, could benefit their interlanguage development. That is why this researcher wondered if he could get them to correct their own errors in such a way that could lead them to discovery learning. This kind of reflection was an impetus to having the researchers conduct this study.

The significance of this study can be justified on the grounds that appropriate spelling is a sign of literacy; moreover, it can set the stage for similar studies even in the first or the second language context in Iran. We wonder whether or not the same results are obtainable in Farsi, most Iranian students' mother tongue.

Different scholars in the field of SLA place tall orders on the teachers' plates and, as a result, quite versatile models for speech and sentence correction have emerged like those of Vigil and Oller (1976) and Brown (2001), just to name a few. The lack of similar studies focusing specifically on spelling was felt and as a result this paper will explore the gap in the Iranian context in the literature on spelling instruction which had not been dealt with for years. If similar studies on the strategies (circling, underlining and coded error feedback) of giving feedback on spelling errors are carried out and the same results are obtained, autonomous and discovery learning can occupy the place of passive and parrot-like imitation of teachers' modeling in spelling instruction.

In teaching Farsi, school teachers traditionally tended to correct every single spelling error and students were supposed to write the correct form of these words in one or more lines for the next dictation. This tradition has been transferred to teaching foreign languages at schools. Although it is not without its merits, to make it work more efficiently, the way teachers provide their students with feedback should change. There is a great potential in giving feedback that sometimes may transcend the benefits of even the very act of the teaching. We think teaching along with no feedback or inappropriate feedback would in most cases result in disappointment on the part of both students and teachers. Therefore, it is worth mentioning the studies carried out so far on giving feedback.

Review of the Literature

The usefulness of teacher feedback, be it in writing or oral, is a subject of heated discussion and debate. Even a cursory reading of the literature on feedback will reveal that it is widely used as an equivalent to error correction. As Lee (1997) has noted,

Attitudes towards error correction have evolved from the strict avoidance of errors and hence quick and direct error correction before the 1960s, to the condemnation of error correction as harmful and unnecessary in the late 1960s, and to a more critical view of the need and value of error correction in the 1970s and 1980s. The controversy over the topic of error correction, however, remains unresolved in the 1990s. (p. 465)

Research on foreign language writing has mostly been based on how to respond to student writing through teacher corrective feedback and student writers' desire for teacher feedback on their written errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Ferris, Pezone, Tade, and Tinti (1997) stated that response to student writing was the teachers' most crucial task and regarded its role as one way, among others, to motivate and encourage students. It is our belief that if teachers in our context indicate a written grammatical error on a student's paper and provide the correct form in one way or another, the student will realize the error and will not repeat it in his or her future writings.

Since spelling is the mechanics of writing, the second researcher was eager to draw on the techniques applied in the field of L2 writing and attempted to focus specifically on spelling ability, which is part of the writing skill. Therefore, the studies done in the area of giving feedback on the written works of learners can be fruitful. These studies are consulted as follows:

Ashwell (2000) indicated that teachers believe that correcting the grammar of student writers' work will help students improve the accuracy of subsequent writing. Research evidence on error correction in L2 writing classes showed that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). There is also research evidence which proves that students are eager to receive error feedback and they think that it helps them improve their

writing skill in the target language (Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Leki, 1990).

In most EFL/ESL settings the question has more to do with how to provide error correction rather than whether or not to give feedback (Brown, 2001). So many techniques and strategies have been utilized by teachers. For instance, correction may be partial; that is, marking only some major patterns of errors on a student paper rather than marking all types of errors in a text. Partial or selective error feedback has been favored by some researchers for it helps students to focus on their more serious problems in writing. On the contrary, traditional or direct correction would cause them to become bored with every error on a paper (Ferris, 1995; Hendrickson, 1978). Lalande (1982), who welcomes comprehensive error feedback, argued that students need detailed feedback; otherwise, they may be misled by selective error feedback because students may mistakenly think that the rest of their writing is completely right.

As Lee (2004) asserted, error correction can be operationalized in terms of direct and indirect correction. In direct correction the instructor provides the correct forms in students' faulty sentences. Therefore, both detection and correction are entirely the responsibility of the teachers. Indirect correction, on the contrary, refers to prompting students about the location of errors line-per-line (Hyland, 1990).

The already-mentioned focus of the related literature in this field, which is the main concern of this paper, is the distinction between direct and indirect error correction strategies. These are the two main strategies utilized by teachers to respond, comment on and correct grammatical errors to improve students' accuracy in writing. Direct error feedback or overt correction is provided when the teacher writes the correct form on the student's paper, while indirect error feedback is provided

when the teacher indicates the location of the error on the paper by underlining, highlighting or circling it without providing the correct form (Lee, 2004). Indirect feedback is regarded as "coded error feedback" if the indication of the error is marked with a symbol representing a specific kind of error such as T=verb tense, Sp=spelling (Lee, 2004). If the indication of the error is done by kind of error (spelling, verb tense), it is called "uncoded error feedback" (Lee, 2004). For editing a paper with indirect feedback, the student is required both to identify the type of error and to self-correct the error whereas in direct feedback what the student does is only to transcribe the teacher's corrections onto the paper (Ferris, 2003). There is research evidence suggesting that indirect error feedback is more helpful for students' long-term writing development than direct error feedback (Ferris, 2003; Fratzen, 1995). For example, Chandler (2003) examined two ESL undergraduate groups receiving either direct or indirect error feedback during a 14-week semester. The results indicated that indirect error feedback with student self-editing contributes to accuracy more than direct error feedback.

Similarly, Lalande (1982) compared two groups: one with direct feedback and the other with indirect feedback using correction codes over a semester. It was found that the group which had received indirect coded error feedback had more accuracy in writing by the end of the semester.

The studies carried out by Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Lee (1997) included groups which received no correction at all in their research. There were no significant differences between the groups' ability to edit their papers; what is more, the students who were given corrective feedback outperformed the no feedback group on the self-editing task. Lee (1997) compared EFL college students' writing in Hong-Kong and found that students who received indirect feedback performed

better than the group with no feedback in self-editing. According to Ferris et al (1997), students who primarily received indirect error feedback make fewer errors in subsequent writings than the students who received mostly direct feedback.

There is plenty of research evidence in both L2 and L1 to show that teacher feedback which focuses principally on correcting the errors tends not to produce substantive or even measurable improvement in the quality of students' learning. Therefore, a group of researchers see little, if any, benefit in devoting valuable classroom time to providing feedback to students' errors (Brandl, 1995; Cohen, 1987; Hendrickson, 1978; Leki, 1990).

Research has further revealed that students express preferences for overt correction; that is, they expect their teachers to point out and correct their errors. A growing body of research has accounted for students' preferences about and their views on the utility and instructional value of instructor feedback. Students, regardless of cultural origin, appear to share certain beliefs about the functions of formal education. As Schulz (2001) noted, they see the teacher as an expert "knower" whose role is to explain and provide feedback.

Problems and Relevant Questions

1. Is there any evidence to support that two types of teacher feedback in spelling instruction, including direct correction and indirect correction, provide different results?
2. Is direct/overt correction of spelling errors by the teacher i.e. underlining the errors and providing the correct forms effective in improving the spelling abilities of the students?
3. Is indirect correction i.e. underlining the spelling errors and leaving the correction to students effective in improving students' spelling ability?

A central issue when correcting the spelling errors in written works of the students is deciding how much correction to provide. Coloring in red ink all over the page has the dire consequence of giving not only negative affective feedback but also negative cognitive feedback. Despite the findings of studies, practice lags behind the research. Many teachers still tend to correct errors in a traditional way. They impose themselves as authorities and make comments.

We will explore whether teacher indirect feedback can lead students to think about what they have corrected and then improve their long term spelling ability. Teachers should take the roles of coach, facilitator, mentor and guide instead of insisting only on the roles of examiner, critic, judge, proofreader and copyeditor. Instructor feedback should be viewed as an ongoing conversation between the teacher and the students in which students have their own say. This ongoing conversation between the teacher and the students will be materialized by assigning students the correction of their own errors which in turn would lead to the teachers equipping their students with a range of strategies.

Design

This study includes two independent variables and one dependent variable. The independent variables are two approaches for dealing with errors and the dependent variable is the scores of the participants.

Participants

Two classes from two different villages in the Znanrood District in Iran were selected for this study. Students in both classes whose ages were 14 and 15 and consisting of 22 male students each were third graders of a junior high school. They were randomly assigned to two experimental conditions,

hence School A forming the direct feedback group and School B forming the indirect feedback group.

Procedure

For six weeks the students were treated differently. In each week both groups and classes were supposed to have a dictation. The first dictations were counted as pre-tests and the last ones as post-tests. In the final dictations the second researcher included almost all of those words and sentences which students had found problematic in the previous dictations and had received feedback on them.

The participants in School A received direct correction of their errors. In the case of the second group, School B, the errors were only indicated and underlined, but the actual corrections were left to the students.

In the case of indirect correction, the papers were returned to the students, they were asked to correct their errors and hand the papers in to the teacher. Those spelling errors which had not been corrected by the students were finally corrected by the teacher. All the papers were scored on the basis of the number of spelling errors. For each single erroneous letter 0.25 points were subtracted. As common practice, dictated words and sentences were taken from students' textbook and similar for both groups during treatment. When sentences were dictated they were repeated three times but words were dictated only twice.

Materials

The third grade English textbook was the source of the dictation of the words and sentences. In each session each lesson dialogue and pattern sentences plus ten words from word lists of each lesson were dictated.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the direct feedback group. It is obvious that there is

not a significant difference between the mean scores of pre- and post-tests. This is evidenced by the results obtained through a matched *t*-test $t(21) = 1.93, p = .06$. This suggests that giving students direct feedback on their spelling errors does not significantly improve their subsequent performance on a dictation test.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the direct feedback group

Pair	n	M	SD
Pre-test	22	14.29	.71
Post-test	22	14.29	

Similarly, Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the indirect feedback group. This time the results of the matched *t*-test revealed that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the pre- and post-tests $t(21) = 5.14, p = .001$. This means that indirect feedback is a more successful tool in improving students' dictation than direct feedback.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the indirect feedback group

Pair	n	M	SD
Pre-test	22	15.02	.84
Post-test	22	16.01	

The statistical figures for the indirect feedback group show a drastic change in post-test scores, which suggests they performed better in their final dictation given the fact that the dictated words and sentences were the same for both groups during the treatment. This significant difference observed on students' final performance can be attributed to the indirect feedback with which their errors were dealt with.

Ellis (1994) argues that knowledge of form depends on implicit learning, whereas knowledge

of meaning involves a more conscious processing. Since the ability to spell words is the knowledge of form, this argument by Ellis (1994) seems to account for the second group's achievement and gain on one aspect of the formal knowledge of the words. The second group experienced a kind of implicit feedback that according to the results was conducive to learning. Getting indirect feedback, learners are provided with the opportunity to act on their own initiative in production; however, when getting direct feedback, they are provided with correct forms to copy, leaving the initiative to their teacher. In other words, students in the second group experienced a kind of meaningful exercise in which they compared their own version with the target and correct form which in turn led to discovery learning. Therefore, studies of the error treatment led some researchers such as Allwright (1975), Hendrickson (1978) and Vigil and Oller (1976) to propose that pushing learners in their output, rather than providing them with correct forms, could benefit their interlanguage development (all cited in Lyster, 1998). The mechanism by which this feedback is given to the learners was the focus of some studies which have been touched upon in the review of the related literature. These studies have examined the role of the indirect feedback in students' written work or speech; however, the rarity of the research focusing specifically on the spelling errors was an impetus for the researchers to examine the impact of the indirect feedback on students' spelling improvement.

Conclusion

To round up the results obtained, this study shows a beneficial role of self-correction led by teachers in promoting the accuracy of spelling of EFL junior high school students. The study reveals that receiving direct feedback or mere teacher feedback without the students' engagement in the revision and the correction process is not

effective and desirable in improving the spelling accuracy in such a classroom. As teacher feedback is believed to be the major and vital component of the classroom events in EFL context and is favored by most Iranian students, the outcome of this study does not devalue teacher feedback but suggests its importance and value when and only when it comes in the form of indirect feedback along with students' contribution. Therefore, it is fruitful to design additional classroom activities in which students engage themselves in the process of revision and self-correction. This is possible if teachers find efficient ways of correction and students receive indirect corrective feedback. Furthermore, teachers should determine their own priorities; that is to say, the first priority should be to invite students to correct their own spelling errors because they benefit from correcting their spelling errors in such a way that they become aware of their recurring errors.

Since the study was not conducted in a tightly controlled and manipulated situation, we cannot rigorously generalize it to every situation. However, it could be claimed that the indirect corrective feedback rather than the traditional copy editor kind of feedback on spelling errors will work to the students' advantage at least in the region where the second researcher has been teaching due to the fact that most teachers here use dictation to measure the spelling and coping abilities of their students. Considering the fact that teachers in this region (Zanjanrood) most often use this kind of dictation and direct corrective feedback –and the second researcher himself used to practice the same procedure– he conducted this kind of action research to make sure that indirect corrective feedback on spelling errors would be better than the other way around. Due to the fact that spelling errors on the one hand were the major problems in his class, and correct spelling gives a sense of the literacy of the writer to the reader on the other

hand, he conducted the study around spelling problems. Since teachers of the Farsi language try the same technique for measuring spelling, they need to conduct an action research around this problem to see whether or not self-correction or indirect feedback really works in their classes.

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