

# Study of the Effects of Direct Focused Versus Direct Unfocused Written Corrective Feedback on the Accuracy of Prepositions in English Writing of High School Students

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the effects of direct focused written feedback and direct unfocused written feedback on preposition acquisition in high school students' writing. Preposition acquisition can be difficult for second language learners, so it is important to improve students' acquisition in this area. At the same time, the effects of different forms of feedback vary for different levels of students. This study aims to answer three questions: (1) What is the effect of direct focused feedback on high school students' acquisition of prepositions in English writing? (2) What is the effect of direct unfocused feedback on high school students' acquisition of English writing prepositions? (3) What is the most effective feedback for students of different levels (high, medium, and low subgroups)? This experimental study included a pre-test, two tasks, an immediate post-test, a delayed post-test, and an interview. In this process, meta-linguistic variables were also added to the direct focused feedback and direct unfocused feedback types because some previous studies claim that meta-linguistic explanations have no positive effect on acquisition.

## Keywords

Directly Focused Written Feedback; Directly Unfocused Written Feedback; High School English Writing; Prepositions.

## 1. Introduction

Among the five basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and reading, writing plays a crucial role in English learning. Therefore, developing students' writing skills is also a part of English teaching that cannot be ignored. The 2017 edition of the revised 2020 English Curriculum Standards for High School clearly states that English writing mainly tests students' writing skills, which include three important aspects of students' fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness of language (Ministry of Education, 2020). This shows that the Ministry of Education has specified the accuracy requirements for students' English writing. As a way of expressing ideas, the accuracy of writing is very important. In order to improve the writing skills of high school students, written corrective feedback is a method used by many teachers to make students aware of their mistakes and correct them.

Written corrective feedback is an important part of the English writing learning process and has been studied extensively by scholars in China and abroad. Feedback usually conforms to the "developmental" model of "diagnosis," "motivation," and "improvement" of value-added educational assessment (see below). Wen, S. and Sun, G., 2022: 71). Previous research has focused on three areas: (1) the effectiveness of written corrective feedback; Truscott (1996, 2007) concluded that teacher feedback had little or no effect on improving students' writing accuracy, and even had a negative effect. Because teachers' error correction is mainly aimed at students' grammatical corrections, students notice the feedback and become resistant to it, which is not conducive to improving their motivation to write. However, some scholars (Ferris, 2001; Sheen, 2007; Ashwell, 2000[4]; Ma, Xiaomei, Liu, Hui, and Tan, 2022) hold the view that

"feedback is effective" and believe that teacher feedback has a positive effect on students' writing. Robb (1986) argued that there is little difference between direct and indirect feedback, while Lalande (1982) and Ferris & Helt (2000) suggested that indirect feedback is more effective. Some studies (Chandler, 2003; Sheen, 2009) have also suggested that direct feedback is more effective. (iii) The effectiveness of different types of feedback for specific grammatical items is explored. For example, English coronals (Sheen et al., 2009), general past tense and adjective and noun phrases (Jiang, Lin, and Chen, Jin, 2013), general past tense, and the moderating effect of working memory on feedback (Su, Jianhong, and Jiang, Anqi, 2020) non-real conditional virtual voice (Chen, 2013), etc. There are relatively few domestic studies on the effectiveness of focused written feedback on English prepositional acquisition, especially for prepositional acquisition during English writing. Organization of the text.

## 2. Literature References

There have been few studies on corrective feedback. Based on the previous studies, this paper will summarize and explain the relevant studies in four aspects: (1) the effectiveness of written corrective feedback; (2) the types of written corrective feedback.

### 2.1. Effectiveness of Written Corrective Feedback

In recent years, "corrective feedback" has become an essential part of foreign language teaching. Literally, corrective feedback "is used to provide learners with correct information for their discourse and correct forms for their errors" (Abdollahzadeh, 2016). In fact, different scholars hold different views on the concept of "corrective feedback" and there is no clear definition so far.

Polio (2006) suggests that feedback in second language acquisition is a direct response to linguistic errors, and Keh (1990) further explains that feedback provided by readers in second language teaching is an input that provides corrective information to the writer, while Lightbown and Spada (1999) consider corrective feedback as any instruction or response that makes learners aware that they have incorrectly. Sheen and Ellis (2008) consider corrective feedback as a form of feedback on errors made by second language learners in spoken or written expressions.

In summary, this study uses Sheen and Ellis's (2008) definition of corrective feedback as a form of feedback from the teacher on the errors made by learners during the second language learning process, either through oral or written expressions, which is significant for improving the accuracy of second language learners. In terms of feedback, there are two types of corrective feedback, namely, oral corrective feedback and written corrective feedback. Since this study focuses on written corrective feedback, it will be discussed next in a focused manner.

The effectiveness of written corrective feedback has been debated for a long time, and different perspectives on errors have led to different views on error-correcting feedback. From a behaviorist perspective, teachers should avoid error correction and are advised to give students enough opportunities to practice correct language patterns for a sufficient amount of time. There are also studies that include error correction feedback, which include the reasons behind error correction, which errors should be corrected, when they should be corrected, how they should be corrected and by whom. From a cognitive perspective, this can be well explained by the information processing model and the Pinelman model, in which instructional and corrective feedback can facilitate the process of transforming declarative knowledge into automated procedural knowledge. From a sociocultural perspective, interaction plays a very important role and corrective feedback is effective in spoken English. Truscott (1999) argues that the acquisition of grammatical structures is a gradual process rather than an abrupt one that occurs as in the case of direct error correction. He even points out that corrective feedback

may negatively affect English language learners for the following reasons: first, mediated language is a continuous process and immediate feedback does not promote students' acquisition of knowledge. Second, teachers and students may not be prepared to receive corrective feedback. Following Truscott's study, Ferris (2001, 2010) and other researchers (Bitchener et al., 2005) did a series of experiments to demonstrate the effectiveness of corrective feedback. Among the studies that focused on the effectiveness of corrective feedback, Eills et al. (2008) and Sheen (2007) focused on the effect of error correction feedback on the use of specific English coronals. The results of the study showed that subjects who received feedback, regardless of the type of feedback, performed better than those who did not receive error-correcting feedback.

## **2.2. Types of Written Corrective Feedback**

Over the past 30 years, research on the effectiveness of providing different types of written corrective feedback to learners has attempted to distinguish the different effects of direct and indirect written corrective feedback. However, more recent research has included subcategories such as focused and unfocused written corrective feedback. Ellis et al. (2009) classified corrections into six types, namely, direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, meta-linguistic corrective feedback, focused corrective feedback, unfocused corrective feedback, and paraphrasing. Direct corrective feedback points out and corrects students' errors, whereas indirect corrective feedback does not provide formal corrections for students. Focused corrective feedback focuses on a specific grammatical item, while unfocused corrective feedback seeks to identify all errors in a text. Corrective feedback in meta-linguistics provides students with grammatical terms. Paraphrasing, on the other hand, provides students with a piece of composition from a native speaker. Direct and indirect corrective feedback as well as focused and unfocused corrective feedback will be discussed in detail.

### **2.2.1. Direct Written Corrective Feedback Vs. Indirect Written Corrective Feedback**

As Ferris and Roberts (2001) point out, direct correction can take many different forms of feedback, such as crossing out unnecessary words, phrases or morphemes, or inserting some missing words or morphemes and writing the correct form near the top or bottom of the incorrect form. Meanwhile, Ferris et al. argue that direct feedback shows learners how to correct errors and that it is more effective in facilitating learning than indirect feedback for low-level learners, but not in the long term. Ellis (2009) gives examples of forms of direct corrective feedback.

Ellis (2009) considers indirect written correction as pointing out errors but not giving feedback in the correct form, either by underlining the error or using a symbol to mark the missing part of the student's text, or by putting a cross in the margin next to the error, and gives examples of forms of indirect corrective feedback. Indirect feedback is more effective than direct feedback because it guides students' learning and helps them to solve their difficulties (Lalande, 1982), and Ferris and Roberts (2001) argue that indirect feedback encourages students to reflect on language forms and has better long-term effects than direct feedback.

### **2.2.2. Focused Written Error Correction Versus Unfocused Written Error Correction**

Ellis (2009) defined focused written corrective feedback and unfocused written corrective feedback. Focused written corrective feedback is when the teacher selects only one or two types of errors to correct. Unfocused written corrective feedback, on the other hand, means that the teacher selects only one or two types of errors to correct, whereas unfocused written corrective feedback means that whereas unfocused written corrective feedback involves all types of errors in the text. He conducted an experiment on the accurate use of English texts. The results showed that the group with written corrective feedback had more corrective feedback than the group without written corrective feedback. As for the written corrective feedback with and without focus, there seemed to be no significant effect. Kassim & Lee (2014) came to the same conclusion

in their experiment. They came to the same conclusion in their experiment on preposition acquisition in text.

However, Sheen et al. (2009) found that focused written corrective feedback was more effective than unfocused written corrective feedback when it came to the accuracy of English texts. Chen et al. (2013) conducted an experiment that focused on the accurate use of subjective emotions among non-majors college students. There were five groups in total, and all four experimental groups outperformed the control group on the immediate test. Focused written corrective feedback was more effective than unfocused corrective feedback. And focused corrective feedback showed greater validity in the delayed posttest.

### 3. Study Design

This chapter will discuss the research methodology. The whole chapter is divided into two parts: the research design and the research steps. The research design includes the research questions, research subjects. Data collection and data analysis will be discussed in the research steps.

#### 3.1. Research Questions

- (1) What is the effect of direct focused written corrective feedback on the accuracy of the selected prepositions (to, in, for, at)?
- (2) What is the effect of direct unfocused written corrective feedback on the accuracy of the selected prepositions (to, in, for, at)?
- (3) What are the different effects of these two types of feedback on high, medium, and low scoring students?

#### 3.2. Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were 50 students from a senior high school in the southwest region. The author consulted their class teachers as well as their English teachers and got a preliminary understanding of their English level. Compared with other students in their school, they were at an intermediate level. The students were divided into five groups based on pretests and their previous test scores at school, and each student received the same amount of class time during the testing period. The pretest consisted of 16 error correction tasks. In addition, the students' scores on the first two tests of the semester were taken into account. This ensures that each group of students is at a similar level.

#### 3.3. Research Method

This study mainly used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, direct focused error correction, direct unfocused written error correction, indirect focused written error correction, and indirect unfocused written error correction for each of the four experimental groups. The control group used the traditional English writing correction method (scoring only without feedback). The data were collected and analyzed using SPSS 22.0 and Excel statistical software to determine the subjects' writing error rates. After the experiment, 10 students from the experimental group were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews to further validate the experimental data through qualitative analysis and to understand the students' attitudes and perceptions toward the teachers' feedback.

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