

## **The Comparative Effect of Direct-only Correction and Direct Metalinguistic Correction on the Improvement of EFL Learners' Writing Ability**

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**Received: November 20, 2011**

**Accepted: February 2, 2012**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aimed at comparing the impact of two types of teacher feedback on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability and their verb tense consistency in L2 writing. Following the administration of a standardized language proficiency test (Preliminary English Test), sixty-two participants were selected and were randomly assigned to the control (direct-only correction) and experimental (direct metalinguistic correction) groups. The comparison of the groups on the pre-test observation confirmed the homogeneity of the subjects before the instruction. During the study, the control group (direct-only correction) received some feedback on the location of errors along with the correct form of errors. The experimental group (direct metalinguistic correction), however, received the same type of feedback plus metalinguistic comments explaining the reason behind the errors. After the treatment, both groups took a post and a delayed post-test. The results of the study showed that direct metalinguistic correction was more effective than direct-only correction in improving EFL learners' writing ability. The study also showed that the effect of instruction lasted over time.

**Keywords:** direct-only correction, direct metalinguistic correction, writing ability, verb tense consistency

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Writing, as one of the most important language skills, plays a major role in the process of language instruction. In fact, writing is one of the most widely used systems of communication (Brown, 2007). Writing is a creative process by which the writer creates a text for the readers. In order to write appropriately, students should be educated and encouraged to write on different topics during their education (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Despite this inherent importance, the teaching of writing has long been neglected in ELT programs. It had been assumed that anyone who had the knowledge of spelling and grammar would be able to write (Silva & Matsuda, 2001). It is only recently that research into writing has offered thought-provoking ideas about what good writers do. Logically, in the absence of a well-established model of writing, teachers tend to have miscellaneous ideas about the role of writing as a skill in classroom.

One reason for this neglect is the difficulty involved in the writing process. Producing meaning through writing requires more efforts than recognising meaning through reading or listening. In fact, this skill embraces simultaneous activation of different abilities and engages multiple processes of thinking, composing, and encoding language into the text (Cumming, 1998). In addition to these difficulties, second language learners also need to concentrate on planning, spelling, punctuation, and word choice (Richards & Renandya, 2002). These acts entail interactions that are social in nature (Rogers, 2005, p.7).

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Like other aspects of language instruction, the teaching of writing skill has witnessed fundamental changes, and due to its complicated nature, this skill has always been the subject of controversy in the field. An issue that has attracted many researchers and language teachers in the field is dealing with students' writing errors. There is no doubt that providing feedback, as a valuable pedagogical tool, is one of the major responsibilities of most EFL/ESL instructors (Ferris, 1997). Moreover, the success or failure of the instruction rests on the type of feedback that the students receive and the structure of the class they attend. (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Lockhardt & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992).

Fortunately, most language teachers are well aware of the positive role of feedback. (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Therefore, there is a positive attitude towards the role of feedback in writing instruction. However, finding the best method for providing feedback has turned to a key domain of research in ESL/EFL writing instruction. Out of various methods of error correction, corrective feedback has recently gained prominence in second language acquisition research (Panova & Lyster, 2002). Interestingly, research in ESL writing has shown that learners value and prefer teachers who provide feedback in their classes (Ferris, 1995; Nelson & Carson, 1998). However, a key issue concerning the efficacy of teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) was provided by Ferris (2004) who pointed to the fact by raising the following question: "Does written corrective feedback (CF) help students to improve in written accuracy over time?" (p. 56). Surprisingly, second language acquisition research has failed to provide unambiguous evidence on the effectiveness of WCF (Sheen, 2007). In fact after Truscott's (1996) claims about the ineffectiveness of error correction, substantial amount of studies focused on the effect of CF on students' performance (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Liu, 2008; Tennant, 2001). Bitchener and Knoch (2008), for instance, conducted an experimental study that investigated the extent to which different WCF types help students to improve their accuracy in the use of two articles (referential indefinite "a" and referential definite "the"). The study found that learners who received WCF outperformed those who did not receive such feedback. In another study, Bitchener (2008) assigned 75 lower intermediate students to five groups. The experimental groups received different types of CF while the control group received no feedback. The results indicated that the CF improved students' ability of article use ("a" and "the") in the post and delayed post-tests.

Verb system constitutes an important part of the writing system. Logically, learners' awareness of particular tense construction, the expressed meaning, and its appropriate use considerably affect their writing ability. One of the main domains in English verb system that pose problems for second language learners is tense consistency. From morphological point of view, English is not a complex language, but it still includes a large amount of formal complexity. This complexity is evident in the observed morphological variation in English verb system. Tense-consistency is an intersection at which syntax, semantics, and pragmatics meet. In fact, understanding how these dimensions interact in a given language is a difficult task for learners. As a result, among all the grammatical errors that learners of English make, tense errors are the most common and persistent ones (Harley, 1986).

The present study therefore tries to discover the impact of two types of teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) on Iranian EFL learners' writing ability and their verb tense consistency in L2 writing. The two types of feedback utilized in this study included 'direct-only' and 'direct metalinguistic correction'. Direct-only correction is a traditional error correction strategy that constitutes error location identification and correct form provision. Direct metalinguistic correction includes indication of error location, provision of the correct form, and the provision of metalinguistic comments that explain the error. To address these issues the following research questions are formulated:

1. Do direct-only and direct metalinguistic corrections have different impacts on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability?
2. Do direct-only and direct metalinguistic corrections have different impacts on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' ability of verb tense consistency in L2 writing?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

In order to standardize the Preliminary English Test (PET), 34 intermediate students who were similar to the actual participants of the research took the test. The modified version of the PET was administered to 62 intermediate students who had studied English for two years. Then, the participants were divided into two groups, i.e., the experimental and the control group.

### ***Instrumentation***

The PET was used to test the participants' general proficiency in English. The test comes in four different sections: the reading section (35 items), the writing section (eight items), the listening section (25 items), and the speaking section. The writing section of the PET is made up of three sub-sections. The first section of the writing test includes five questions that are scored objectively. However, the other two sub-sections are scored utilizing the PET analytic scale for rating the writing tasks (PET exam package, 2009). It is worth mentioning that each participant's paper was scored by two raters and the inter-rater reliability was computed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient formula.

In order to evaluate the participants' writing ability, the third part of the PET writing section was utilized as the pre-test. The same part was also used for checking students' tense consistency. To discern the writer's intended tense (WIT) in each text, the first three sentences of each text were analysed and their dominant tense showed WIT. After that, the total number of verbs for each text was counted and the researchers categorized them based on their tenses (past and present). Then, in order to obtain a proportion of tense use in text, the number of verbs for each tense was divided by the total number of verbs in that text. The higher proportion showed the dominant tense (DT), which was the same with WIT. As the next step, in order to compute the t-value between the means of the control and experimental groups' scores on tense consistency, the researchers converted the proportion of both tenses to an equivalent number between 0 and 20. Then, the mean of WITs for each group was calculated, which showed the mean of participants' ability of tense consistency. The researchers used the same test and scoring procedure for the post-test and the delayed post-test.

### ***Procedure***

At the outset of the study, the PET was piloted with 34 intermediate students. Once the test was modified following the piloting phase, it was administered to the experimental and control groups. This test was administered in two sessions. The time allocated to the first session (reading, listening, and writing sections) was 120 minutes, while the timing for the second session including speaking section was 10 to 12 minutes for each pair of students. To ensure that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their writing ability, the third part of the PET writing section was used as the pre-test. Here, the students had to write between 80 and 100 words on a topic in 40 minutes. The students' papers were separately scored by two raters. It is worth mentioning that the PET analytic scale was utilized in correcting all errors (syntactic, semantic, organization, and word choice). In each instructional session, participants in both groups produced a piece of writing. The topics were selected from the book, 'interchange (3)'. Then, the researchers collected the papers, and corrected all the errors. Direct metalinguistic correction and direct only correction methods were utilized for the experimental and control groups, respectively. In the next session, the papers were given back to the students and the same procedure was repeated for 10 sessions. At the end of the instruction period, a writing post-test was administered to both groups to detect any possible improvement in their writing ability and their ability of tense consistency. In addition, three weeks after the administration of the writing post-test, the participants took a delayed writing post-test. The administration and scoring procedure of the post and delayed post-tests were like the pre-test.

## **Results and Discussion**

At first, the PET was piloted with 34 intermediate English learners. Then, NRT item analysis, including item facility and item discrimination was conducted for each item. After omitting nine

malfunctioning items, the reliability of the test was estimated using the KR-21 formula ( $r = 0.87$ ). Table 1 presents the inter-rater reliability for the writing section of the PET.

**Table 1.** *Inter-rater Reliability of the Language Proficiency Test*

<b>Writing</b>	<b>Speaking</b>
Pearson Correlation	Pearson Correlation
0.81	0.78

In the next stage of the study, a group of 62 intermediate students took the modified version of the PET. The following table shows the descriptive statistics.

**Table 2.** *Descriptive Statistics of the Language Proficiency Test*

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Total Items</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Skewness</b>	<b>Standard Error of Skewness</b>	<b>The Significant Value</b>
Control	31	56	64.38	14.66	0.210	0.421	0.49
Experimental	31	56	66.38	13.98	0.193	0.421	0.45

As illustrated in Table 2, the significant value for both groups fell within the range of -1.96 and +1.96 which proved the normality of distributions. Then, a t-test was run to make sure that the two groups did not differ significantly in terms of their language proficiency at the outset of the study. As indicated in Table 3, the two groups were homogenous in terms of their variances [ $F(1, 60) = 0.09, \rho = 0.76 > 0.05$ , two-tailed]. Moreover, the results of the t-test indicated that there was no statically significant difference between the means of the two groups [ $t(60) = 0.68, \rho = 0.49 > 0.05$ , two-tailed]

**Table 3.** *Comparison between Means of the Groups on the Language Proficiency Test*

	<b>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</b>		<b>T-test for Equality of Means</b>			
	<b>F observed</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>T observed</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>
Equal variances assumed	0.09	0.76	0.68	0.49	60	2.50

In the next phase, the scores of the students on the writing pre-test were analysed to ascertain that the participants of the two groups had no significant difference in terms of their writing ability and ability of tense consistency before the treatment. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of the writing pre-test.

**Table 4.** *Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-test observation*

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Skewness</b>	<b>Standard Error of Skewness</b>	<b>The Significant Value</b>
Control	31	9.20	2.86	0.07	0.421	0.186
Experimental	31	8.45	2.66	0.23	0.421	0.546

As demonstrated in Table 4, both distributions were normal; therefore, a t-test was used to capture the differences between the groups. To check the degree of consistency between the raters, the inter-rater reliability was calculated (Table 5).

**Table 5.** *Inter-rater Reliability of the between Groups on the Pre-test Observation*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Raters</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>Pearson Product Moment Correlation</b>
Control	Rater 1	9.38	3.16	10.04	0.82
	Rater 2	9.03	2.82	7.96	
Experimental	Rater 1	8.48	2.86	8.17	0.87
	Rater 2	8.41	2.79	7.78	

As illustrated in Table 6, with the variances assumed equal [ $F(1, 60) = 0.45$ ,  $\rho = 0.50 > 0.05$ , two-tailed], the t-test result [ $t(60) = 1.07$ ,  $\rho = 0.28 > 0.05$ , two-tailed] indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test and they belonged to the same population before the treatment.

**Table 6.** Comparison between Variances and Means of the Groups on the Pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.45	0.50	1.07	0.28	60	0.75

As mentioned earlier, the third part of the PET writing section was used for checking tense consistency. The following table shows the descriptive statistics for tense consistency.

**Table 7.** Descriptive Statistics of the Tense Consistency Pre-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	12.51	1.72	0.364	0.421	0.86
Experimental	31	11.83	1.29	0.616	0.421	1.46

Since both distributions were normal (Table 7), and variances were equal [ $F(1, 60) = 2.37$ ,  $\rho = 0.12 > 0.05$ , two-tailed] (Table 8), the researchers used a t-test analysis. The results [ $t(60) = 1.74$ ,  $\rho = 0.08 > 0.05$ , two-tailed] proved that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the groups at the outset of the study and both groups belonged to the same population in terms of their ability of tense consistency.

**Table 8.** Comparison between Means of the Groups on the Tense Consistency Pre-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	2.37	0.12	1.74	0.08	60	0.67

Following the 10-session instruction, the third part of the PET writing section was administered to both groups of participants as the post-test. The descriptive statistics of the writing post-test are presented in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Descriptive Statistics on the Post-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	9.14	2.66	0.04	0.421	0.09
Experimental	31	10.43	1.87	0.51	0.421	1.21

Since both distributions were normal, the researchers used a t-test to capture the differences (Table 9). The following table shows the inter-rater reliability of scores on the writing post-test.

**Table 10.** Inter-rater Reliability of the Groups on the Writing Post-test

Group	Raters	Mean	SD	V	Pearson Product Moment Correlation
Control	Rater 1	9.38	2.36	5.57	0.76
	Rater 2	8.87	3.10	9.64	
Experimental	Rater 1	10.82	2.09	4.37	0.72
	Rater 2	10.04	1.97	3.90	

To answer the first research question, the scores of the two groups on the writing post-test were used for the analysis. As demonstrated in Table 11. [ $F(1, 60) = 3.14, \rho = 0.08 > 0.05$ , two-tailed] the two groups were homogenous in terms of their variances. The results of the t-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the means of the two groups [ $t(60) = 2.20, \rho = 0.03 < 0.05$ , two-tailed]. Thus, it was concluded that using direct metalinguistic correction would certainly improve students' writing performance.

**Table 11.** Comparison between Variances and Means of the Groups on the Writing Post-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2- tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	3.14	0.08	2.20	0.03	60	1.29

To answer the second research question, the third part of the PET writing section was also used for checking tense consistency. The scoring procedure was the same as the one used for the pre-test stage.

**Table 12.** Descriptive Statistics on Post-test Tense Consistency

Group	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	12.83	1.79	0.44	0.421	1.04
Experimental	31	13.74	1.48	0.08	0.421	0.19

As it is evident, both distributions were normal (Table 12) and the variances were equal [ $F(1, 60) = 0.47, \rho = 0.49 > 0.05$ , two-tailed]. T-test results indicated that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test tense consistency [ $t(60) = 2.16, \rho = 0.03 < 0.05$ , two-tailed]. Therefore, it could be concluded that the direct metalinguistic correction would effectively improve tense consistency.

**Table 13.** Comparison between the Groups on the Post-test Tense Consistency

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2- tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.47	0.49	2.16	0.03	60	0.99

Three weeks after the administration of the post-test, the participants in both groups took the third part of the PET writing section as the delayed post-test. Table 14. represents the descriptive statistics for this test.

**Table 14.** Descriptive Statistics on the Delayed Post-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	10.43	1.61	-0.73	0.421	-1.73
Experimental	31	11.32	1.67	0.29	0.421	0.12

As demonstrated in Table 14, both distributions were normal and therefore the researchers used a t-test for capturing differences. The following table demonstrates the inter-rater reliability for the control and the experimental groups.

**Table 15.** *Inter-rater Reliability of the Groups on the Writing Delayed Post-test*

Group	Raters	Mean	SD	V	Pearson Product Moment Correlation
Control	Rater 1	10.80	1.77	3.14	0.83
	Rater 2	10.19	1.96	3.87	
Experimental	Rater 1	11.48	1.85	3.45	0.72
	Rater 2	11.16	1.82	3.34	

After checking the equality of variances [ $F(1, 60) = 0.29, p = 0.59 > 0.05$ , two-tailed], another t-test was run and the results [ $t(60) = 2.12, p = 0.03 < 0.05$ , two-tailed] showed that there was a significant difference between the means of two groups on the writing delayed post-test (Table 16). Thus, it was concluded that the direct metalinguistic correction would definitely improve the students' writing performance and this improvement was retained until the administration of the delayed post-test.

**Table 16.** *Comparison between Groups on the Writing Delayed Posttest*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
	Equal variances assumed	0.29	0.59	2.12	0.03	60

The same tests were used for checking tense consistency. The scoring procedure was the same as the one followed in the pre and the post-tests. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 17.

**Table 17.** *Descriptive Statistics on Tense Consistency Delayed Post-test*

Group	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	11.93	2.08	-0.33	0.421	-0.78
Experimental	31	13.0	2.07	0.09	0.421	0.27

Prior to running a t-test, the normality of distributions and the equality of variances were checked. With the significant value falling in the acceptable range (Table 17), and the variances being homogenous [ $F(1, 60) = 0.30, p = 0.95 > 0.05$ , two-tailed] (Table 18), a t-test was subsequently run. As Table 18 illustrates, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on tense consistency on delayed post-test [ $t(60) = 2.07, p = 0.04 < 0.05$ , two-tailed]. Thus, it could be concluded that using direct metalinguistic correction would certainly improve tense consistency.

**Table 18.** *Comparison between Groups on Tense Consistency on Delayed Post-test*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	Sig.	T observed	Sig. (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
	Equal variances assumed	0.30	0.95	2.07	0.04	60

## Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In this study, the impact of two types of teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) on the improvement of EFL learners' writing ability was investigated. The results indicated that using direct metalinguistic correction enhanced the writing ability of the experimental group to a great extent. This finding is in line with the results of the study conducted by Tennant (2001) who found that explaining grammar points, raising questions concerning the meaning and logical development of the forms, suggesting alternative wording, and reorganising text improve students' writing ability.

The two groups were also compared on tense consistency. The results revealed that the students who received direct metalinguistic correction achieved better scores on tense consistency tests compared to those who received direct-only correction.

Considering the nature of writing, teachers have to motivate learners to improve their writing ability. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by providing students with appropriate amount and type of feedback. In fact, if learners are not given a credit or reward for their efforts, they will lose their intrinsic motivation (Lile, 2002).

Moreover, nowadays more emphasis is placed on student involvement and interaction within the writing process. Consequently, the reader's responses are extremely useful because they provide opportunities for more interaction with 'real' language. This interaction can significantly help to point out errors in composition, and may ultimately assist in creating better texts (Connor, 1996). Teacher written feedback "provides a critical instructional opportunity for students and offers a convenient avenue to achieve one-on-one communication that is rarely possible in the day-to-day operations of a class" (Mi-mi, 2009, p. 60).

It is also worth noting that the abilities gained through direct metalinguistic correction will ultimately assist students in editing their own compositions. Here, student writers compare their new pieces of writing with teacher's metalinguistic comments on previous writings. This encourages learners to become critical readers of their own writing. In addition, direct metalinguistic correction changes the teacher's role from the corrector and scorer to facilitator. Foreign language learners are often anxious about writing and need to be encouraged to see it as a means of learning rather than a cumbersome task. Direct metalinguistic correction provokes a positive attitude towards the writing course and also fosters a higher level of performance by students. This also increases their self-esteem and alleviates their sense of achievement.

Generally, teachers can use direct metalinguistic correction as a useful tool for correcting students' writings. More specifically, this study proved that this technique was effective in improving tense consistency. Using direct metalinguistic correction helps teachers and learners to see errors as the key to understanding. It should be remembered that writing is an individual effort and skill, thus the teacher's role is to offer constructive criticism and clues. Teacher feedback is needed for the students because it helps them understand what they should do in class (Harris, 2001). Therefore, teachers can adapt, modify, or even develop their method of feedback provision to improve the students' writing ability and minimize their errors.

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