

## **SELF CORRECTION WORKS BETTER THAN TEACHER CORRECTION IN EFL SETTING<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Learning a foreign language takes place step by step, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. EFL learners are usually afraid of making mistakes which prevents them from being receptive and responsive. Overcoming fear of mistakes depends on the way mistakes are rectified. It is believed that autonomy and learner-centeredness suggest that in some settings learner's self-correction of mistakes might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction. This assumption has been the subject of debates for some time. Some researchers believe that correction whether that of teacher's or on behalf of learners is effective in showing them how their current interlanguage differs from the target (Long & Robinson, 1998). Others suggest that correcting the students whether directly or through recasts are ambiguous and may be perceived by the learner as confirmation of meaning rather than feedback on form (Lyster, 1998a). This study is intended to investigate the effects of correction on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing composition in Payam Noor University. For this purpose, 90 English majoring students, studying at Isfahan Payam Noor University were invited to participate at the experiment. They all received a sample of TOFEL test and a total number of 60 participants whose scores were within the range of one standard deviation below and above the mean were divided into two equal groups; experimental and control. The experimental group went through some correction during the experiment while the control group remained intact and the ordinary processes of teaching went on. Each group received twelve sessions of two hour classes every week on advanced writing course in which some activities of Modern English (II) were selected. Then after the treatment both groups received an immediate test as post-test and the experimental group took the second post-test as the delayed recall test with the same design as the pre-test. In order to see whether there is a significant difference between the participants' attitudes toward correction before and after the treatment, an attitude questionnaire was administered to the experimental group and the subjects were asked to fill it. The result indicates that there is a significant difference between the groups and the participants in experimental group outperformed those in the control group.

**Keywords:** recast, writing composition, feedback, linguistic competence, interlanguage.

### **Introduction**

The recent development of English in educational context in Iran has called for more investigation on different skills, including reading and writing. In traditional instruction environments, since the focus of classroom instruction was on accuracy, errors were frequently corrected and both the teachers and the students were anxious about error correction whether by the students' self correction or teachers' monitoring. Traditional methods of teaching and learning in Iran generally required teachers to correct erroneous forms despite the fact that it was boring and tiresome. Although the Chomskian revolution changed the old procedures of language teaching and learning, the treatment approaches used in Iran, had been proved neither efficient nor efficacious, particularly in treating the fossilized errors. Nevertheless, with the popularity of communicative language teaching in ESL contexts as well as understanding the concept "interlanguage", Error correction has begun to undergo a considerable change. Errors are considered natural products in language learning and, in fact, they reflect the patterns of students' developing interlanguage. It is advocated that errors should be treated with care and in a humanistic manner. The recent development of English in nonnative context (NNC) has called for more attention and there

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are a number of studies that investigated corrective feedback and learner uptake in the oral classroom. Lyster and Ranta (1997) suggest the following types of feedback used by language teachers:

- 1-Explicit instruction
- 2-Recasts
- 3-Clarification
- 4-Meta linguistic feedback
- 5-Elicitation
- 6-Repetition

As the language teaching approaches developed, it was suggested that emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy might be more useful and especially in some EFL settings learner's self-correction of errors might be more beneficial for language learning than teacher's correction.

This paper is an attempt to provide an accurate and comprehensive overview of learners' perceptions of teacher's correction vs. learners' self-correction in decreasing the learners' fear of mistakes and facilitating processes of learning by developing language awareness. The central issues was introduced by the most outstanding and prominent researchers in the field, and they applied them to the Iranian Intermediate EFL learning setting. The findings of this research may give some insights into the role of correction and self-correction in decreasing or even eradicating learner fear of mistakes, facilitating process of learning by developing language awareness and encouraging learner autonomy in learning English.

#### *Theoretical Background*

While doing remedial work in writing course, the teacher may notice a lot of erroneous forms needed to be corrected and s/he tries to take the necessary steps in correcting them. S/he spends a lot of time in doing that and reminds the students' faults and the students take part in the process voluntarily and they willfully cooperate with the teacher to tackle the task but in a spontaneous speech or written production, they wrongly produce the discussed forms, which causes both the teacher and the students a lot of annoyance. An important factor in language learning and indeed in any subject teaching, as Burns (1984), Dobson (1984) and Gross (1989) put it, is that what is learned is registered in the brain, can be kept in the brain and can also be retrieved from the brain when it is needed. Since the teachers feel their own responsibility to correct their students' errors, they try to do their best to do the task although they may be faced with lots of considerable difficulty especially at the very early stages of EFL learning. According to Lado (1975) and Selinker (1972) the relative failure in this respect is partly due to the students' mother tongue interference, i.e., intralanguage interference. Lado (1964), Rivers (1968) and Corder (1973) believe that inadequate teaching would result in such erroneous forms. They believe that if the teacher taught the objectives of the unit well, the students would not have opportunities to shape those wrong forms. Lack of students' attention can also be considered as a crucial factor in making such systematic errors. Finocchiaro (1964) believes that if the students were attentive enough, these errors would be eradicated. Allwright (1975) suggested that learner errors should be classroom corrected if learners cannot correct themselves, and that teachers need coherent policies for correction and clear classroom strategies in order to avoid confusion in their learners. Hendrickson (1978), in an overview of the research available at that time, concluded that error correction does improve the proficiency of EFL/ESL learners, if they are errors that inhibit communication, stigmatize

the learner, and appear frequently. Nevertheless, Long (1977) argued that error treatment is not so important, and others have expressed similar doubts about the effectiveness of error correction.

The last probable point in this regard is that linguistically better gifted students may not produce such errors (Rivers, 1967, Selinker, 1972). As it has already been mentioned, learning is a step by step process and making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. According to Harmer (2001) mistakes that occur in the process of learning a foreign language are caused either by the interference of the mother tongue or developmental reasons, and are part of the students' interlanguage. Since mistakes are often a sign of learning and, as a result, must be viewed positively, teachers have to recognize a well known fact that "learnability varies from person to person" and "all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them" (Bartram and Walton, 1991:97). An updated theory on errors, corrective feedback and classroom practice in spoken language is described by Ancker (2000), who claims that "error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession". There are many factors to consider: when, what and how to correct. Correction of oral performance is carried out differently from the correction of written work. It does not matter what kind of error rectification a teacher may conduct, s/he must remember Lewis's message "You never correct a mistake, you always correct a person" (quoted in Bartram and Walton, 1991:93). Moreover, there are three reasons why the active involvement of students in the process of dealing with mistakes is important: it stimulates active learning, induces cooperative atmosphere, and develops independent learners (Bartram and Walton, 1991:81). Error analysis is one of the major topics in the field of EFL as well as in ESL research acquisition. Learner errors are seen as a natural and indispensable part of the learning process. They are also seen as inevitable, since learners are encouraged to explore the target language. What, then, is the teacher's role in relation to error in classroom learning? What kind of corrective feedback is effective? What kind of cues represented by the teacher are the most effective ones in enabling students to correct their own errors in English writing? What is the role of self-correction, and how can it be encouraged'?

Chaudron (1988) asserts that it seems extremely difficult to verify the effect of correction. In spite of this difficulty, most students expect and want their teachers to help them to correct their own errors so that the chance of recurrence is reduced. The issues outlined so far were taken up in a study using:

*Written compositions Teacher cues Student self-correction*

As stated in the foregoing stages, the errors made by learners are part of a natural process of language learning, and simply indicative of a certain stage of their interlanguage activity which will develop naturally into more accurate and appropriate forms. Language teachers, however, are under pressure from the expectations of their students to treat error. They have to consider learning situations, learner types, purposes of lessons, University managers' expectations, and the nature of particular errors. It is clearly a significant issue for the EFL teacher to decide whether to treat errors or not, which errors to treat, and how to approach them most effectively. Long (1977) made a useful distinction between error correction and error feedback. According to his definition, error feedback is error detection, and while it is designed to promote correction it is not correction in itself. He viewed correction as describing the hoped-for result of feedback on errors (Chenoweth, Day, Chun,

and Luppescu, 1983). By correction, in this paper, we refer to teacher cues or hints which are given to learners to encourage self-correction. In the process of language learning, learners sometimes notice some of their errors by themselves, that is, without any cues represented by their teachers, through the strategy of monitoring, and they can also correct some of their errors when other people, such as teachers or peers, give them those cues or hints about them. Learners who are able to correct their own errors can activate their linguistic competence.

Taking the aforementioned purposes into consideration, the present study tries to answer the following research questions:

Q.1. Is there any significant difference between teacher correction and mere self correction in Iranian intermediate EFL context?

Q.2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing ability in immediate and delayed recall tests (considering error correction with or without teacher cues)?

Q.3. Is there any difference between learners' attitude before and after the application of correction procedures?

### *3. Method*

#### *3.1. Participants*

The population from which the participants have been selected for this study included all EFL learners whose first language was Persian and had not yet been to an English speaking country. They had had English since they were thirteen years old. They did not have any exposure with native speakers. Initially a sample of 90 people participated in this study, comprised of 44 male (48.5%) and 46 female (51.5%) whose age ranges between 19 and 24. All of the participants were undergraduate students attending as English major in Isfahan Payam Noor University.

#### *3.2. Instruments*

In this study, the following instruments were applied:

- The bio-data questionnaire: This questionnaire was designed so as to get information about participants' background knowledge; it contained different questions about their age, native language, if they had been to an English speaking country, some questions about the amount of time they spend on writing composition and the kind of materials they choose to write. The rationale behind this questionnaire was to make sure that the participants did not much differ in terms of their background knowledge.

- TOEFL test (2007 version): in the earlier stages of the study, all the students were asked to take this test in order to homogenize their grammatical recognition ability.

- The pretest: in order to measure the participants' improvement of writing composition ability, one of the sample test including 30 items, related to Advanced *writing Unit* taken from Modern English (II) were used before the treatment.

- The immediate/delayed post tests: in order to see the probable effects of applying corrective procedures on the participants' writing composition, another sample test with the same design as that of the pretest were used after the experiment.

- The attitude questionnaire was given to the participants before and after the treatment phase to see whether there were differences in participants' attitude before and after the treatment,.

### *3.3. Procedure*

This study concerns the idea that the teacher can provide the learner with the opportunity to try to correct their wrong forms without any further help, that is, without teacher cues. It presupposes that learners are able to apply the rules they have learned in order to correct their own errors. The learners' ability to self-correct was investigated in order to find out how far they could correct their own errors with the help of teacher cues. The participants selected to take part in this study are 60 male and female English major students studying at Isfahan Payam Noor University who voluntarily took part in the experiment. The participants' background knowledge was somehow the same since they, all, had studied English for seven years but they knew nothing except something about the language and because of the class objectives, i.e., final exams, the teachers did not give them enough opportunities to use the language. It was quite popular among Iranian teachers. Most of the class times was devoted to translate from target language into mother tongue. Knowing the aforementioned facts about the participants the participants were asked to take part in TOEFL test to be classified into two homogenized groups, with 30 in each. Each group went through twelve sessions of a ninety-minute writing composition classes. The first group went through teacher monitoring and giving them the cues, i.e., self-correction procedures and the last group went on ordinary processes of teaching and learning without being given any hints about their errors. They all were given some exercises focusing on Iranian students' common errors in seven English grammatical morphemes, i.e., article, regular and irregular past, possessive, regular and irregular plural, present progressive, and third person singular were chosen from Modern English (II). In order for the participants to have the equal chance while answering the questions, the instruction was written at the beginning of each part. The learners' ability to self-correct was investigated in order to find out whether they could distinguish and correct the morphological errors mentioned above with the help of teacher cues or not. So, the answer sheets distributed to the participants were divided into three groups as follows:

1. *The first group, or the control group, took the answer sheets without any teacher cues, that is, with no indication of errors at all. The participants were asked to find the errors as far as possible to correct them by themselves.*

2. *The second group received two kinds of answer sheets in which there were tick marks (/) in front of any ungrammatical sentence. First, the participants were supposed to find the errors and correct them by themselves: it was easier for them to find the errors with teacher cues than the first group who received no cues and then they received the next answer sheet with more teacher cue(s) indicating where the grammatical error(s) had been made (in this case, by underlining). Once again the students had to correct their own errors. After some weeks of practice the participants had to take the post-tests to see how well they could distinguish and correct the errors related to the common grammatical morphemes aforementioned which were as follows:*

Article, regular and irregular past, possessive, regular and irregular plural, present progressive, and third person singular.

### *4. Results*

#### *4.1. Data obtained based on the first research question*

The first research question was:

Q.1. Is there any significant difference between teacher's correction and self-correction in Iranian EFL setting?

According to the data gained, it was clear that the more the detail of the cues to the errors, the more easily the participants would react and the higher the rate of self correction was. I assume that if Iranian EFL learners are given some help, i.e., provide them with some indirect processes of finding their errors; they may be able to correct the errors by themselves. In other words, they have to activate their linguistic competence to some extent.

4.2. Data obtained based on the second research question

The second research question was:

Q1: The relationship between error correction (with or without teacher cues) and writing ability needs to be explained (it has to do with the notion of transfer). In this study the authors deal with the capacity of students to identify and correct grammar mistakes, but they do not measure the improvement in writing skills of the students before / after the error correction study.

Q2. Is there significant difference between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing composition in immediate and delayed recall tests?

In order to see if there is any difference between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' ability to correct their own errors, some copies were distributed among the participants and they were asked to find their own errors on the sheets, and try to correct them by themselves without teacher cues and then a paired samples t-test was run to make a comparison between the mean scores of experimental group in the two different cases (i.e. immediate and delayed recall tests). (Table 4.1)

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Immediate	26.1500	30	2.68083	.59945
	Delayed	26.0000	30	2.86540	.64072

Table 4-1: Descriptive Statistics of immediate and delayed post-tests

Table 4.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the participants' mean scores across on the control and experimental groups. It can be seen in the above table that the difference between mean scores for the two groups is 1.6 (mean =22 & 23.6) which is not significant.

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				lower	Upper			
Pair 1 immediate delayed	.15000	1.08942	.24360	-.35987	.65987	.616	19	.545

Table 4.2. Paired Samples test of immediate and delayed posttest

In the paired samples t-test ,the last column called "Sig" , the probability value is .545 which is more than .05 so it can be concluded that the difference between immediate(Mean=26.15,SD=2.68) and delayed (Mean =26,SD=2.86),t(.616),p<.545 was not significant, i.e., there is no significant difference between Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing composition in immediate and delayed recall test .

4.3. Data obtained based on the third research question

Q.3.Is there any significant difference between learners' attitudes before and after the application of correction processes?

In order to test the accuracy of the last question, a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' attitudes toward the procedures correction of before and after the treatment (Table 4-3).

Table 4-3 Descriptive statistics for participants' attitudes

**Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Pair 1	Anxious before	1.5500	20	.51042	.11413
	Anxious after	1.8500	20	.36635	.08192
		1.5000	20	.51299	.11471
Pair 2	Sure before	1.7500	20	.44426	.09934
	Sure after	.65001	20	.48936	.10942
Pair 3	Enjoy before	1.9000	20	.30779	.06882
	Enjoy after	1.7500	20	.44426	.09934
Pair 4 before	Advantage	2.0000	20	.00000	..00000
	Advantage	1.7000	20	.47016	.10513
		1.8000	20	.41039	.09177
after	Advantage	1.8000	20	.41039	.09177
Pair 5 before	Knowledge	1.9500	20	.22361	.05000
	Knowledge	1.7500	20	.44426	.09934
		1.9500	20	.22361	.05000
after	Knowledge	1.5000	20	.51299	.11471
Pair 6 before	Personality	1.6000	20	.50262	.11239
	Personality				
after	Personality				
Pair 7	Ability before				
	Ability after				
Pair 8 before	Reading				
	Reading after				

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	anxiousbefore - anxiousafter	-.30000	.65695	.14690	-.60746	.00746	-2.042	19	.055
Pair 2	surebefore - sureafter	-.25000	.78640	.17584	-.61805	.11805	-1.422	19	.171
Pair 3	enjoybefore - enjoyafter	-.25000	.55012	.12301	-.50746	.00746	-2.032	19	.056
Pair 4	advantagebefore - advantageafter	-.25000	.44426	.09934	-.45792	-.04208	-2.517	19	.021
Pair 5	knowledgebefore - knowledgeafter	-.10000	.55251	.12354	-.35858	.15858	-.809	19	.428
Pair 6	personalitybefore - personalityafter	-.15000	.36635	.08192	-.32146	.02146	-1.831	19	.083
Pair 7	abilitybefore - abilityafter	-.20000	.52315	.11698	-.44484	.04484	-1.710	19	.104
Pair 8	readingbefore - readingafter	-.10000	.71818	.16059	-.43612	.23612	-.623	19	.541

Table 4-4 Statistical analysis of participants' attitudes

Considering all the points and the statistical information represented in the tables above, the third question stating that "Is there any difference between learner's attitudes toward the processes of correction before and after the treatment?", we come to the conclusion that there is no significant difference between the participants' attitudes before and after these processes.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Teacher correction vs. Self correction and Writing Composition

As it was mentioned before, the rate of correction for all the grammatical morphemes listed above shows that the participants were able to monitor and correct their own errors, on the condition that they were provided with the teacher's cues. The findings of this study show that the rate of articles and third person singular are among the most frequent samples of errors in Iranian EFL learners. The inflectional morphemes such as plural, possessive, regular past and irregular past stand the next most frequent errors among Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

Generally speaking, all participants could correct their own errors to some extent, even when they were given no cue. The more detailed cues led to a higher ratio of error correction. Moreover, the teacher's cues of indicating error by underlining had a marked effect on the correction of the inflectional morphemes. That is, the study verified that the given cues made the students use or activate their linguistic competence. Therefore, the answer to the first question of the research is positive.

### 5.2. Students autonomy in language learning

Now in Iran the importance of learning English is valued more than ever and there is a widespread belief in language institutes that the Iranians educational institutes are passing through a transitional period from traditional processes of teaching and learning to a modern approach, where the creative mind is highly appreciated. As (Esaki, 2002) asserts making a successful and safe transition seems to be a decisive factor since being autonomous helps to induce personal motivation, and personal motivation is undoubtedly a key driving force for creative performance. Nowadays emphasis on learner-centeredness

and autonomy suggests that in some settings, here as we saw in Iranian EFL settings, learners' self correction of mistakes and /or errors might be more beneficial for language learning than the teacher's correction. Students' autonomy makes their minds more active and let them make use of their mental capacities in the class activities. The findings of this study revealed that the more the detail of the cues to the errors, the easier the participants will react and the higher the rate of self correction is but there is no significant difference between students' writing ability in immediate and delayed recall tests and between their attitudes before and after correction.

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