

Effect of metalinguistic teacher corrective feedback on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract: This study was set out within the process-oriented framework to identify the extent to which the metalinguistic corrective feedback contributed to writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners better, and also to compare the effectiveness of two types of metalinguistic feedback, error codes feedback and description feedback on students' writing improvement. The participants were 69 female students at a high school in Eghlid, Iran. At the beginning of the course, students were randomly assigned to the control, no-feedback, group and two experimental groups, one receiving error code feedback and one receiving description feedback. During the course, the teacher provided different forms of corrective feedback (explanation, error code, no feedback) on students' writings. All the writings produced throughout the term were scored using the Writing Rating Scale developed by Gassner *et al.* (2007). The first writing assignments were used as the pretest and the last writing assignments were used as the posttest, which were then compared through three paired *t*-tests. Then, to see if the mean difference is significant, ANOVA and a post-hoc Sheffe test were run. An independent *t*-test was also performed between the posttests of the description and error code groups to determine which mode of metalinguistic feedback is more effective. Results showed that the metalinguistic TCF, especially description mode, had a positive influence on the writing improvement of the Iranian EFL students.

Keywords: Description, Error Code, Metalinguistic, Teacher Corrective Feedback (TCF)

1. Introduction

Error correction of both oral and written mistakes has a noticeable place in English Language Teaching (ELT) literature and continues to be a troublesome issue due to the conflicting views that exist towards it. Whereas it is regarded as disadvantageous in the past methodologies such as Audio-Lingual method and great attempts were made to prevent it, a group of researchers gradually started to consider it as an indicator of learning or, more precisely, the learner's experience with language, or a method of testing out a new language hypothesis or progressing.

The ways teachers correct second language (L2) students' writing is a topic that has attracted enormous interest among researchers and teachers during the recent decades. However, a recent review of feedback on L2 students' writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006) shows that despite all research, there are still no clear answers to the questions researchers have addressed. In this regard, Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue

that "While feedback is a central aspect of L2 writing programs across the world, the research literature is not positive about the role of feedback in L2 development" (p.83), probably due to the failure to design systematic corrective feedback (CF) studies that investigate different kinds of written CF (Guenette, 2007). One solution might be for teachers and researchers to identify the various options available for correcting students' writing (Ellis, 2008). These options include numerous feedback types from no feedback to very detailed feedback.

Feedback has particular characteristics which makes it worthy of application. As Ryan (1997) believes, feedback provided is effective and can alert students about their current writing skills and how the feedback can further develop their writing. Also, self confidence in writing and motivation is an important feature of feedback in the concept of active learning (Butler, 1988). The constructive feedback also causes students to better revise drafts which consequently increases their self-confidence in their writing (Goldstein,

2004). It also increases self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) which occurs when students receive feedback on a draft from the lecturer and are required to revise and make the relevant repairs based on the written feedback provided. The written feedback gives them new ideas and makes them understand what the lecturer wants. Above all, feedback offers a sense of direction to the writer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). When students receive directed feedback, they are able to comprehend the feedback and obtain their writing goal which is to make an improved version of their essays. It can be concluded that written feedback provided has a great effect on the students' writings and also on their attitude towards writing (Leki, 1990).

This study aims at comparing the effectiveness of two types of metalinguistic feedback, error codes feedback and description feedback on students' writing performances and drawing some conclusions about the extent to which these two feedback methods contribute to writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners better. The findings of this study, hopefully, deepens our understanding of the influence of these two forms of metalinguistic feedback which are less studied as it adds more information to this area of study. This study particularly attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1 Does metalinguistic feedback significantly help Iranian EFL learners with their writing achievement?
- 2 What type of metalinguistic feedback, error codes or grammatical description, contributes more to the writing performance of the Iranians EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing Skill

Writing is one of the most important skills, the learning of which is one of the essential needs of language learners for both their academic practice, and later on, in their professional life. That is why a good deal of research has addressed teaching writing that covers various aspects in a broad instructional contexts. Writing is not only specific to the classroom, but also, it serves many purposes such as, among other things, the need for writing a formal letter to an advisor, a casual letter to a relative, a poem or a story.

Compared to students writing in their native language (L1), students writing in their L2 requires proficiency in the use of the language knowing writing strategies, techniques and skills. According to Hedge (1998), effective writing requires a number of things including "a high degree of development in the organization of ideas, a high degree of accuracy so there is no ambiguity of meaning, the use of complex grammatical devices for emphasis, and careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers" (p. 5). Adequate vocabulary and motivation besides the time allocated to the classroom writing activities are among the other factors contributing to the English writing skill.

Nevertheless, writing remains a complex and challenging

task and students still find difficulties in writing in English in spite of their teachers' attempt to do their best to help them to achieve good results. It is suggested that writing needs to be taught in L2 like the other skills such as speaking.

In the history of language teaching, there have been several approaches to the writing instruction. Traditionally, most writing teachers influenced by structural linguistics and behaviorists usually treated writing as a product and often put strong focus on "linguistic knowledge, vocabulary choices, and syntactic patterns that are essential for the formation of written texts as a product (Hyland, 2003, p. 3). However, instructors following the process approach have this possibility to intervene in the students' writing process at any stage they are involved in. Students will pay more attention to their topic, maintain more information, and their insights become more when they are asked to spend more time on their writing. Then the effective intervention results in better products (Trupe, 2001).

2.2. Teacher Corrective Feedback (TCF) and its Types

Providing effective written feedback is one of the most important tasks for English writing teachers (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). According to Keh (1990) and Hedgcock and Leftkowitz (1996), while providing written feedback to students, a teacher can take four roles. First, teacher as a reader or as a respondent who responds to the content and may show agreement about an idea or content of the text. Second, as a writing teacher or as a guide may show concern about certain points or confusing or illogical ideas in students' text. Third, as a grammarian writes comments or corrective feedback with reference to grammatical mistakes and relevant grammatical rules. Fourth, as an evaluator or judge whose main role is to evaluate the quality of students' writing as an end product of a writing process (Arndt, 1992) and grade students' writing based on their evaluation.

Anson (1989) suggested that teachers usually respond to students' writing in one of following three ways. First, dualistic responders concentrate mainly on surface features and take the tone of a critical judge of standards. Second, relativistic responders focus restrictly on ideational aspects of the writing, often ignoring significant linguistic and rhetorical problems. Third, reflective responders respond to both ideas and structure and try not to be dictatorial in their strategy.

From Brookhart's (2010) viewpoint, "positive feedback is considered as positive reinforcement while negative feedback is considered punishment" (p. 11). Hence, teachers should be polite and mitigate their written feedback and for the development of L2 learners' thinking and writing they should be aware of the importance of providing effective feedback. "Feedback can encourage and advance student learning if it concentrates on 'growth rather than grading'" (Sadler, 1983, p. 60). It is clear, however, that while responding to student writing is an important component of the teacher's role, it is also a practice that carries potential dangers and needs careful consideration.

Among the different kinds of feedback, students prefer

teacher written responses because they contain a great value in improving their writing proficiency. Generally, there are two types of teacher response, written feedback and oral feedback. Both give writers opportunities to develop the quality of future drafts.

Also, the type of teacher feedback will influence their student approaches to writing process, feedback, and revisions make to their writing (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Lockhardt & Ng, 1995). Hence, in order to give effective written feedback, teachers should take into account the needs and desires of their students when considering whether and how to give written corrective CF (Ferris, 2006; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Teachers can also encourage learners to discuss, analyze, and evaluate feedback, discuss why it is given, and how it is aimed to influence their writing. Another strategy to increase the effectiveness of feedback is to use tools such as revision and editing checklists to help students develop self-

correction and self-revision strategies (Ashwell, 2000; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

Teachers provide different types of feedback which help students to go through different stages of the writing process (Hyland, 2010). The strategies and forms of corrective feedback they employ including *direct* vs. *indirect*, *explicit* and *implicit*, *focused* vs. *unfocused*, *form-focused* vs. *content-focused* and *metalinguistic* are identified. Research shows that providing feedback on the form of language which results in the improvement of the accuracy of students' writing (Ferris, 2006; Lee, 2008; Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Rahimi, 2009) is more frequent than provision of content-based feedback (Kepner, 1991; Magno & Amarles, 2011).

Provision of various forms of feedback has led researchers to identify and classify the TCF types. Table 2.1 shows the typology adopted from Ellis (2009, pp. 98-99) that summarizes the most common types of corrective feedback and the main studies done in these areas.

Table 2.1. *Typology of Written Corrective Feedback Types*

Type of CF	Description	Studies
1 Direct CF	The teacher provides the student with the correct form.	Lalande (1982), Robb et al.(1986), Sheen (2007)
2 Indirect CF	The teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction.	
a Indicating + locating the error	This takes the form of underlining and use of cursors to show omissions in the student's text.	Ferris and Roberts (2001), Chandler (2003)
b Indication only	This takes the form of an indication in the margin that an error or errors have taken place in a line of text.	Robb et al. (1986)
3 Metalinguistic CF	The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error.	
a Use of error code	Teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g. ww = wrong word; art = article).	Lalande (1982), Ferris and Roberts (2001), Chandler (2003), Ferris (2006), Robb et al. (1986)
b brief grammatical descriptions	Teacher numbers errors in text and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text.	Sheen (2007)
4 The focus of the feedback	This concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the students' errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct. This distinction can be applied to each of the above options.	
a Unfocused CF	Unfocused CF is extensive.	
b Focused CF	Focused CF is intensive.	Chandler (2003), Ferris (2006), Sheen (2007)
5 Electronic feedback	The teacher indicates an error and provides a hyperlink to a concordance file that provides examples of correct usage.	Milton(2006)
6 Reformulation	This consists of a native speaker's reworking of the students' entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.	Sachs and Polio (2007), Cohen (1989)

Of the above types of TCF, metalinguistic category is adopted for the purpose of this study.

2.3. Metalinguistic Feedback

For Ellis (2009), "Metalinguistic CF involves providing learners with some form of explicit comment about the nature of the errors they have made" (p. 100). But it is defined by Lyster and Ranta (1997) as comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the learner's utterance.

As proposed by Ellis (2009), the most common form of explicit comment is the use of error codes which consist of

abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors placed over the location of the error in the text or in the margin. According to Bitchener et al. (2005), coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of error involved is indicated with a code (for example, FT means an error in the use or future tense). Hyland (1998) points that error correction codes allow language teachers to provide implicit feedback and reduce negative and disheartening effects of indicating writing errors without reducing the effects of error correction.

Uncoded feedback refers to instances when the teacher indicates the location of an error by underlining the error, circling the error, or placing the error totally in the margin,

but, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error. This form of feedback is also considered as a form of indirect and metalinguistic feedback.

In another form, the exact location of the error may or may not be shown. If shown, the student has to work out the correction needed from the clue provided; if not shown, the student needs to first locate the error and then work out the correction. This category has two classes as follows:

- Using error codes, i.e. abbreviated labels for different kinds of errors placed over the location of the error in the text or in the margin, e.g., art = article, prep = preposition, sp = spelling, ww = wrong word, t = tense, etc.,
- Brief grammatical explanations of the errors, i.e. teacher numbers errors in text and writes a grammatical description for each numbered error at the end of the text. It is time-consuming and calls for the teacher to be able to write clear and accurate explanations for a variety of errors.

While there is a growing body of literature on the different TCF types, the metalinguistic types have limitedly been addressed in the literature. However, due to their potential effect on writing development, they are the subject of this study. Following this trend, the present study intends to implement a process approach to writing with the purpose of investigating metalinguistic TCF types to discover which type of metalinguistic feedback would be more effective.

2.4. Review of Empirical Studies on Metalinguistic TCF

This section reviews the few studies conducted on different types of TCF, particularly on metalinguistic ones and their subsequent effect on students' writing improvement.

Lalande (1982) conducted an experiment to evaluate the efficacy of techniques of comprehensive error correction on combined grammatical and orthographic correctness of compositions written by 60 intermediate-level German foreign language learners. Direct correction was done in a traditional manner by providing correct forms to be incorporated by students into their written text, and indirect correction in the form of guided learning strategies by providing students with systematic marking using an error correction code. A group of learners that received correction using error codes improved in accuracy in subsequent writing whereas a group receiving direct correction made more errors. However, the difference between them was not statistically significant. In addition, systematic scoring of compositions, teachers' policy of total correction of written errors, and allowing students to receive instructional feedback on essays were found as the factors favorably affecting the writing skill development.

Lee (1997) studied EFL college students in Hong Kong and found that students were significantly more able to correct errors that were underlined than errors that were either not marked or only indicated by a check in the margin. She explains that students fail to correct errors not because they lack grammatical knowledge but because they cannot detect the errors. They can correct more errors when direct

clues are provided.

In a similar vein, Ferris and Roberts (2001) studied ESL students from a U.S. university. The participants were placed in three groups, two groups receiving corrective feedback either on type of error or on location, and one group with no feedback. According to the findings, the two feedback groups significantly outperformed the no feedback group (control) on the self-editing task and error codes helped learners to self-edit their writing but no more so than indirect feedback. However, no significant differences were observed between the two experimental groups.

Lee (2004) investigated the error correction practices of 206 writing teachers in secondary classrooms in Hong Kong by means of a teacher survey, a follow-up interview, and a teacher error correction task in order to determine teachers' accuracy in error correction. She found that both teachers and students "preferred comprehensive error feedback" and that the "teachers used a limited range of error feedback strategies" (p. 285)

In a similar study, Bitchener, *et al.* (2005) examined the effectiveness of different types of direct corrective feedback. They compared three groups: the control group which received no feedback and two experimental groups, one received only direct error correction and the other one received direct error correction in combination with both oral and written metalinguistic feedback. The findings of the study showed significant improvement for the group which received the three types of direct feedback. This finding confirms that using metalinguistic explanation can help the reduction of errors.

Ellis *et al.* (2006) studied the effectiveness of providing explicit corrective comments. The participants were 34 ESL students in New Zealand, in two types of corrective feedback groups, explicit feedback in the form of metalinguistic explanation and implicit feedback in the form recast, and a control group receiving no feedback. Results of their study showed that the explicit feedback with metalinguistic information had a clear advantage suggested that learning took place. Findings of this study reinforced Bitchener *et al.*'s (2005) findings. It is concluded that the provision of full, explicit written corrective, with conference feedback, contributes to greater accuracy in the use of some grammatical areas.

Sheen (2007) addressed the effects of focused CF on the development of 91 adult ESL learners' accuracy in the use of two types of articles, *the* and *a*. The participants were placed in a direct only group (the researcher indicated errors and provided correct forms), a direct-metalinguistic group (the researcher indicated errors, provided correct forms, and supplied metalinguistic explanations), and a control group receiving no form of error correction. Pretests, posttests, and delayed posttests were used to assess the effectiveness of the CF. The findings showed that both direct CF types were effective in increasing the accuracy of using the articles in subsequent writing completed immediately after the written corrective feedback treatment and both direct CF groups outperformed the control group. However, the metalinguistic

written corrective feedback was proved as more effective than the direct written corrective feedback in the long term, i.e. in a new piece of writing completed two weeks after the treatment

Likewise, the study by Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) was conducted in Iran and involved 56 EFL students. Results revealed that providing explicit corrective feedback with metalinguistic information was more effective in raising grammatical awareness than implicit feedback resulting in a better performance on the target structures.

In a study involving 52 low-intermediate ESL students, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) reported that all treatment groups receiving different strategies of direct feedback with explicit metalinguistic comments outperformed the control group on all post-tests in terms of grammatical accuracy in using the target structures.

Similarly, another study was conducted by Rassaei and Moinzadeh (2011) involving 134 Iranian EFL students trying to explore the effectiveness of explicit corrective comments. It was found that corrective feedback with metalinguistic explanations were effective in improving students' accuracy in using target structures in both immediate and delayed post-tests. In summary, according to the studies discussed here, provision of teacher corrective feedback with explicit corrective comments seems more advantageous than implicit or no corrective feedback.

Ferdouse (2011) conducted a study in Stamford University Bangladesh. The participants were the students taking an English composition course. The objectives of the course were to help students fully develop their abilities in writing in English. The students of group A were provided with correction symbols so that they could understand their mistakes easily and corrected them properly. On the other hand, the students of group B did not receive any sort of correction symbols or clues from their teacher. The teacher just underlined the mistakes and asked them to correct them. With the help of correction symbols provided by the teacher, students of Group A became more skilled in writing effective paragraphs. This study also showed that the students benefit more from having coded feedback over non-coded feedback. The obtained results have given an evidence of the effectiveness of correction symbols in enhancing self-correction.

In a more recent study, Sampson (2012) conducted a small-scale study to examine the effects of uncoded correction, or writing the correct forms above each error, and coded annotations, or writing symbols that encourage learners to self-correct. The data included written work of Colombian university-level EFL learners. According to the results, both coded annotations and uncoded correction were proved as helpful in recognizing and correcting errors in their current and subsequent written works, with coded feedback being more effective. The increased cognitive engagement and social interaction was the potential influence that the coded feedback afforded.

More specifically, most of the feedback studies reviewed in review of literature section, had addressed the

effectiveness of each type of metalinguistic feedback on error correction, but there is a new trend which, instead, attempts to examine different forms of metalinguistic feedback. Following this trend, the present study intends to implement a process approach to writing with the purpose of investigating both the effect of metalinguistic feedback types and identifying the one which contributes more to the writing performance of the Iranians EFL learners.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted in the Iranian educational context. The participants were 69 female students studying at Shahed high school, Eghlid, Iran. They were at the pre-university level and within 18-19 age span. The participants were all native speakers of Farsi and were selected based on availability sampling.

3.2. Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study, namely, KET, Writing pretest and Writing posttest. The KET (Key English Test) was administered at the beginning of the term to see if students in the experimental and control groups were at the same level of language proficiency. KET is a basic level qualification test which shows if students can have a good start in learning English. However, it is used in this study as a proficiency test as it is found suitable for the high school students.

The pretest and posttests of writing used in this study were to assess students' progress in writing accuracy across time. In both pretest and posttest, the students were required to write a paragraph on assigned topics. The reliability of both tests was approved through intra-rater reliability, and the topic and content of the tests were consulted with two colleagues.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

In this study, the data collection procedure took place as follows:

- a) At the beginning of the course, students were randomly assigned to the control or no-feedback group and two experimental groups, one receiving error code feedback and one receiving description feedback. Each group contained 23 students. Then, KET was administered to all groups to ascertain all groups were at the same proficiency level.
- b) In this English course which took 3 months, the students were presented with the skill of writing as a part of the general English book they studied. On the first session of the course, the experimental groups were introduced different CF and specifically the metalinguistic CF types (codes and description). The experimental explanation group were presented with the explanation of each CF, and the experimental error code group were clarified what each code refers to. Each

session, a topic was introduced and students were required to write a paragraph on it and submit it to the teacher the following session. The teacher did not simply score the writings as the final product. She, rather, provided different forms of corrective feedback (explanation, error code, no feedback) on students' writings depending on the group the students were attending and returned them to the students the following session. To elaborate, the error code group were provided with correction codes in the margin so that they could understand their mistakes easily and corrected them properly. On the other hand, the description group did not receive any sort of correction symbols or clues. Instead, the teacher numbered errors in text and wrote a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the text.

The students were required to study the comments and apply them in their subsequent writings. All the writings produced throughout the term were collected and the researcher made a copy of them for data analysis. All the writings produced throughout the term included 151 writings

on seven topics which were collected for data analysis.

- c) The writings collected were scored using the Writing Rating Scale developed by Gassner *et al* (2007). This scale rates students' writings across four categories, namely, task achievement, coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary. The scoring is ranged from 0 for no task achievement and not enough assessable language to 7 for complete task achievement, cohesive and coherent text, and good range of structures and vocabulary.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Effect of Metalinguistic Feedback on Iranian EFL learners' Writing Achievement

In this section, the results of the first research question is provided. Table 4.1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the scores of the pretest and posttest of the control and experimental groups.

Table 4.1. Descriptive Statistics for the pretest and posttest of the Control and Experimental Groups

Group	Mean pretest	Meanposttest	SD pretest	SD Posttest
Control	1.86	2.17	0.62	0.71
Experimental(error code)	1.91	3.00	0.59	0.83
Experimental(description)	1.95	3.73	0.70	1.01

As can be seen, in all the three groups, the mean of the pretest is lower than the mean of the posttest. To elaborate, in the control group, the mean of the pretest is 1.86 compared to the mean of the posttest which is 2.17. Similarly, the mean of the error code and description groups is almost the same, i.e., 1.91 and 1.95, respectively in the pretest which has improved to 2.82 and 3.73, respectively in the posttest.

To see if the mean difference between the pretest and posttests of writing of each group is significant, three paired *t*-tests were run, the results of which are presented in Table 4.2.

As the above table shows, the mean difference between the pretest and posttests of writing of the control group (-.30) is not significant ($p < .05$). On the other hand, the mean difference of both the error code group (-.91), and the description group (-1.78) were significant (.000) at .05 level.

Table 4.2. Paired *t*-test for Comparing the Pretest and the Posttest Scores in Each Group

Group	Mean Difference	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	-.30	.822	-1.77	22	.090
Experimental (error code)	-1.08	.51	-10.13	22	.000
Experimental (description)	-1.78	.90	-9.47	22	.000

$P > .05$

The results shows that both types of metalinguistic TCF resulted in writing improvement of the Iranian EFL students whereas the no-feedback group's writing improvement

remained insignificant.

Then, to see if the difference between the three feedback groups, performance in the tests is significant, an ANOVA test was performed. At first, the three groups' performance in the pretests were compared. Table 4.3 indicates the results of this analysis.

Table 4.3. ANOVA for Comparing the Control and Experimental Groups' Performance in the Pretest

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.087	2	.043	.105	.901
Within Groups	27.391	66	.415		
Total	27.478	68			

As the ANOVA (.901) shows, the difference between the mean of the three groups in the pretest is not significant ($p < .05$). This suggests that all the groups were at the same level of writing ability prior to the study before the treatment is applied to the experimental groups.

Table 4.4. ANOVA for Comparing the Control and Experimental Groups' Performance in the Posttest

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	25.246	2	12.623	16.491	.000
Within Groups	50.522	66	.765		
Total	75.768	68			

Then, to see if the difference between the three feedback groups in the posttest of writing was significant, another ANOVA test was run. Table 4.4 above indicates the results of

this analysis.

As the result of ANOVA test (Table 4.4) shows, the difference between the mean of the three groups in the posttest is significant ($p > .05$). This suggests that the groups were not at the same level of writing ability at the end of the

course, with the experimental groups outperforming the control group.

To determine the mean of which group differed from each other in the posttest, a Post-Hoc Scheffe test was also performed as indicated in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5. Scheffe Test for Determining the Groups Differed from Each Other in the Posttest

(I) factor	(J) factor	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-.82609*	.25800	.009	-1.4722	-.1800
2	3	-.65217*	.25800	.047	-1.2983	-.0061
3	1	1.47826*	.25800	.000	.8321	2.1244

As the results of Scheffe test shows, significant differences were found between all the groups. To elaborate, the mean difference between Groups 1 and 2, that is, the control and the experimental error code group was (.009), between groups 1 and 3, that is, the control and the description group was (.000), and between groups 2 and 3, that is, the two experimental error code and description groups was (.047); all were significant at .05 level.

4.2. Determining the Type of Metalinguistic Feedback with Higher Effect on Writing Achievement

To determine which type of error metalinguistic feedback resulted in more writing achievement, the mean of the two experimental error code and description groups in the posttest were compared using an independent *t*-test, the result of which is given in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6. Independent *t*-test for Comparing the Posttest Scores in the Two Experimental Groups

Group	Mean Difference	SD Error difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
error and description	-.652	.278	-2.34	44	.024

As the above table shows, the mean difference between the error code and description group is significant (.003). As the mean of the description group is higher than that of the error code group (3.73 vs. 2.82) (Table 4.6), it is concluded that description led to more writing improvement and is considered as a more effective metalinguistic type of corrective feedback.

Generally, the results presented above suggest the positive effect of metalinguistic TCF on writing performance of the Iranian EFL learners with the description type being more effective than the error code type. The next section discusses the results in light of previous studies.

4.3. Discussion

In this section, the findings of the two research questions are discussed. The findings obtained in this study in general are supportive of the positive role of TCF but are contradictory with claims stating that corrective feedback (CF) is not only ineffective but also potentially harmful (Krashen, 1982; Truscott, 1996).

Concerning the first research question, it was found that

the metalinguistic TCF had a positive influence on the writing improvement of the Iranian EFL students. These findings are consistent with those of the other studies. In their studies, some researchers (Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, 2008; Lyster, 2007; Sheen, 2007) indicated that all treatment groups receiving teacher written corrective feedback outperformed non-feedback control groups. The students were also found to benefit more from having coded feedback over non-coded feedback. Carroll and Swain (1993) found that feedback in the form of metalinguistic comment resulted in significantly better learning of dative alternation structures than implicit correction strategies. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) reported that all treatment groups receiving different strategies of direct feedback with explicit metalinguistic comments outperformed the control group on all post-tests in terms of grammatical accuracy in using the target structures. In Ferdouse's (2011) study, providing correction symbols helped students to become more skilled in writing effective paragraphs.

There are several reasons why the provision of metalinguistic feedback implemented in this study resulted in writing improvement. One possible reason can be because of increasing awareness of the language rules and noticing as an essential component of language learning (Schmidt, 1993). It gives learners information about the errors they just made, so that they are prompted to think about the structures they used and consequently take responsibility for their own learning.

Another reason is that the metalinguistic feedback usually includes information on parts of speech such as preposition, verb, and relative pronoun for the purpose of explaining a speech episode. However, teachers should be aware of the learners' area of weakness and provide information on these areas. Elementary students, as the participants of this study, usually have serious problems in language aspect of their work. Schmidt's (2001) noticing hypothesis which emphasizes the importance of attracting the learners' attention to formal aspects of language for achieving linguistic development and metalinguistic feedback is a good way of making learners to overtly identify the gap or mismatch between their interlanguage and the target forms.

However, not all the previous studies confirm the results of the present study. In their studies, Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) did not find any significant differences between the coded and uncoded options. Similarly, investigating the ability of university ESL

students to self-edit their texts across three feedback conditions: (1) errors marked with codes; (2) errors underlined but not otherwise marked or labeled; (3) no feedback at all, Ferris and Roberts (2001) found that both groups who received feedback significantly outperformed the no-feedback group on the self-editing task but no significant differences were found between the *codes* and *no-codes* groups.

Concerning the second research question, it was found that the description mode of metalinguistic TCF had a more positive influence on the writing improvement of the Iranian EFL students compared to the error-code mode. The reason is that, much like explicit error correction, metalinguistic feedback falls at the explicit end of the corrective feedback spectrum which draws the focus of conversation towards rules or features of the target language which are stated directly and more comprehensible for students to follow than the information briefed in form of codes.

The results of this study indicated that explicit feedback containing description metalinguistic information is more effective than implicit feedback containing error codes. The reason for such a result might be partially or wholly due to the explicit nature of these two forms of metalinguistic feedback. In other words, between the two camps in CF studies where either implicit or explicit feedback is favored, the more explicit type of feedback is more favorable in settings like Iran where learners are after explicit rather than implicit CF. Research has also revealed that implicit CFs are usually left unnoticed (e.g. recasts) and hence their corrective effects are less successful compared to more explicit types of feedbacks. In addition, in more implicit types of CF such as error code sometimes the teachers' intent and the learners' interpretation do not match, i.e. the learners usually do not recognize the corrective nature of the error code.

These findings are consistent with the results obtained by Sheen (2007). The study showed that complementation of direct written CF and metalinguistic discussion induced positive effects on writing accuracy, and that direct written CF with metalinguistic discussion was superior to direct CF without such discussion suggesting that the more description is provided to the learners, the more they are able to consider feedback to improve their written works.

In Bitchener's (2008) study, groups one and three which received direct error correction with written metalinguistic explanation and oral metalinguistic explanation and direct error correction outperformed the direct error correction with only written metalinguistic explanation and the no corrective feedback groups.

Likewise, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) revealed clear evidence of the greater effectiveness of direct forms of written CF when measured over time in delayed post-test. They reported that both types of direct written CF (written metalinguistic explanation and written metalinguistic feedback with oral form-focused instruction) were significantly more effective in helping advanced L2 writers retain the accuracy gains they had made in the immediate post-test piece of writing, but those who had received indirect

written CF were unable to retain the gains they had made in the immediate post-test piece of writing.

However, this finding is contradictory with those obtained by Sheen (2007). In her study of intermediate L2 writers, she compared different types of direct feedback and found in her delayed post-test writing task that her L2 writers who received metalinguistic explanation retained the gains they had made in their immediate post-test writing task, but that those who received direct error correction alone did not retain their level of performance.

5. Conclusion

Due to the dominance of product-oriented approaches in the Iranian writing classes that encourage students to mimic a model text than reflecting their own work gives value to a finished product, finding the provision of feedback frustrating, time-consuming and ineffective. Concerning the effects and quality of teacher corrective feedback (TCF) including their legibility and their attendance by the students, this study was set out to implement a process-oriented approach to writing and to provide the metalinguistic teacher corrective feedback, firstly, to see the overall effect of the metalinguistic feedback and secondly, to see which form of metalinguistic feedback, error codes or description, result in more writing progress.

In general, because providing metalinguistic feedback was found as an effective form of feedback provision resulting in significant writing improvement. Of the two metalinguistic modes, the description one lead to more significant improvement compared to the error code one, suggesting that Iranian EFL students particularly at high school level which is rather a low language proficiency level, benefit more from more direct and detailed forms of feedback rather than more indirect and brief ones. There has also been a shift from the most popular way of feedback provision, that is, producing written comments on the student's final draft, to making comments on students' initial drafts, offering suggestions for the future development of the final or the subsequent drafts (Naidu, 2007) as practiced in this study.

The findings of this study, in general, support implementing a process-oriented approach to writing where TCF, specifically the metalinguistic type plays a major role in writing achievement. This study shed more light on the effectiveness of metalinguistic feedback as a meaningful form of input which encourages students to analyze and modify their output (self-repair).

The findings of this study can help instructors to provide their students with the most useful type of feedback to ensure their improvement in writing. Moreover, these findings may lead to the increase in learner's self-awareness of their own improvement in writing. In other words, provision of metalinguistic feedback led to a significantly fewer errors in writing and helped learners to become aware of their own errors and monitor their own learning, become more independent writers, and develop autonomy.

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